

**EARLY HUMAN SETTLEMENTS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:
THE MEENACHIL RIVER BASIN, KOTTAYAM DISTRICT,
UP TO THE 8TH CENTURY AD.**

*Thesis submitted to the University of Calicut
for the Award of the Degree of*
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
HISTORY

Submitted by
APARNA. K. R

Under the supervision and Guidance of
Dr. RAJESH. K.P.
Associate Professor,
Research & PG Department of History
N.S.S. College Manjeri

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Research & PG Department of History
.../.../2025

Aparna. K.R

CONTENT

Acknowledgement	I
Abbreviation	IV
List of Tables	V
List of Figures	VI

Chapters

Content	Page No:
1. Introduction	1
2. Land Water Life, The Landscape and Early Communities of Meenachil River Valley	26
3. Roots of Society: Early Social Formations in the Meenachil River Valley	44
4. Crossroads of Commerce: Early Historic Social Networks in the Meenachil River Valley	123
5. The Dawn of a New Era: The Presence of Jainism Buddhism in the Meenachil River Valley	182
6. Conclusion	226
Glossery	238
Appendices	
1. Appendix I: List of research papers published and presented by the present Research Scholar	240
2. Appendix II: Figures	241
Bibliography	244

ABBREVIATIONS

- ASI: Archaeological Survey of India.
- BAR: British Archaeological Reports
- GIS: Geographic Information System
- Heritage- Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology Department of Archaeology. University of Kerala.
- IAR: Indian Archaeology A Review.
- IAR: Indian Archaeology A Review.
- ICHR: Indian Council for Historical Research.
- Index: Index to Chera Inscriptions.
- ISDL: International School of Dravidian Linguistics.
- JCRS: Journal of Centre for Research Studies.
- KCHR: Kerala Council for Historical Research.
- SPCS: Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-Operative Society Ltd.
- TAS: Travancore Archaeological Series.
- TGP: Turquoise Glazed Pottery.
- YBP. Year Before Present.

List of Tables

Chapter	Title of Table	Page Number
II. 1	Tribal Communities in the Region.	37
III.2	Distribution of Megalithic Burials.	53
III.3	Temples near the Burial site.	117
IV.4	Routes from Western Coast to Tamilnadu.	152

List of Figures

Chapter	Title of Table	Page Number
1.01	Map- Kottayam District	02
2.01	Map- Study Area	27
2.02	Formation of Study Area.	29
2.03	Kottayam land cover	35
3.01	Map-Meenachil River basin	45
3.02	Kunnoni Neolithic Axe.	47
3.03	Microliths (News Paper Report)	47
3.04	Neolithic celt from Chemplavu	48
3.05	Pannagam Thodu Neolithic Celt	48
3.06	Muthallu, Anangumpadi Muthanallu	49
3.07	Unidentified celt? Melukavu	50
3.08	Map- Locations of Neolithic Celt	51
3.09	Vedavyasagiri Temple	55
3.10	Menhir worshiped as Bheema	55
3.11	Three Menhirs in front of the Temple	56
3.12	Hood Stones I and II	57
3.13	Natural Springs in the Vedagiri Hills	58
3.14	Thevarathumala Menhir	59
3.15	Thevarathumala Capstone?	59
3.16	Thirunakkara Menhir	60
3.17	Muttom Menhir	60
3.18	Vempally Dolmen	62
3.19	Kaalikavu Dolmen.	63
3.20	Chamber fill with soil	63
3.21	Kuzhikkandathil Dolmen	64
3.22	Kurinji Vanadurga Temple	65
3.23	Kurinji Dolmen set 1	66
3.24	Set 2 Scattered orthostats	67

3.25	Set 3 in the interior of Kaavu	67
3.26	Purusha thalappoli	68
3.27	Muthiyarkavu tribal settlement	69
3.28	Kizhathari present View and file image	69
3.29	Chirakkal Kaavu Bagavathy temple Kizhathiri	70
3.30	Marangattupalli Dolmen	71
3.31	Scattered Orthostats in the Thevaramala hill	72
3.32	Newspaper report of Thevaramala Temple	73
3.33	Kayyoor plantation site	73
3.34	Parappilly Urn Burial	74
3.35	Pullarikkunnu Excavated site	75
3.36	Pullarikkunnu Excavated Urn Burial	75
3.37	Kudakkachira Urn Burial	76
3.38	Thellakam Urn Burial	77
3.39	Oliyani Excavation Photos	78
3.40	Oliyani Excavation Materials	79
3.41	Mangattuparambu Cist burial	80
3.42	Payyanithottam Cist Burial	81
3.43	Mattathilpara Cist Burial	82
3.44	Four cist burials in Kurumannu	84
3.45	Inchukavu Transcepted Dolmenoid Cist	85
3.46	Cup marks in Kaalikavu Dolmen	92
3.47	Porthole from Mattathilpara	93
3.48	Inside hooks and outer chain marks in Thellakam Urn Burial	95
3.49	Black Lid and Knob from Neendoor	98
3.50	Oliyani iron tools.	99
3.51	Serpent? iron tools found from Oliyani	100
3.52	Iron Tools from Kadanad Excavation	100
3.53	Iron tool from Pullarikunnu.	101
3.54	Iron tool from Pullarikunnu	101
3.55	Iron tool from Pullarikunnu	102

3.56	Iron tool from Pullarikunnu	102
3.57	Iron tool from Pullarikunnu	102
3.58	Stone Beads from Kadanad	105
3.59	Quarts pendent	106
3.60	Gold Leaf	106
3.61.	Map -Distribution of Megalithic sites	118
4.01	Early historic sites in study area	124
4.02	Illustration of early historic centres	127
4.03	Potsherds- Kadappra Alamthuruth region.	131
4.04	Storage Jar from Kadappra.	131
4.05	Possible two routes via Thodupuzha	153
4.06	Possible route from Purakkad to Madurai via Erattupetta	155
4.07	Possible route from Purakkad-Madurai via Kanjirappilly	156
5.01	Map- Jain etymological Places	195
5.02	Locations of Buddhist idols	198
5.03	Idol Kiliroor Bagavati	201
5.04	Ramapuram Buddha Idol	204
5.05	Vellilapally Buddha Idol	206
5.06	Karumadi Buddha idol and Temple	208
5.07	Mavelikkara Buddha idol and centre	210
5.08	Bharanikkavu Buddha	211
5.09	Kunnathoor Budha Idol	211
5.10	Manadi Budha idol	211
5.11	Maruthurkulangara idol	211
5.12	Chettikkulangara Kettukazcha	217
5.13	Neelamperoor Padayani	218
5.14	Map- Jain and Buddhist Centres in Western Coast	221
6.01	Map- Important Centres in Kottayam	235



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CONTENT

Acknowledgement	I
Abbreviation	IV
List of Tables	V
List of Figures	VI

Chapters

Content	Page No:
1. Introduction	1
2. Land Water Life, The Landscape and Early Communities of Meenachil River Valley	26
3. Roots of Society: Early Social Formations in the Meenachil River Valley	44
4. Crossroads of Commerce: Early Historic Social Networks in the Meenachil River Valley	123
5. The Dawn of a New Era: The Presence of Jainism Buddhism in the Meenachil River Valley	182
6. Conclusion	226

Glossery	238
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Appendices

1. Appendix I: List of research papers published and presented by the present Research Scholar	240
2. Appendix II: Figures	241

Bibliography	244
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The early civilizations formed on the banks of rivers, which pass through varied geographical zones and eco settings, played an important role in human history. Rivers are not just ecological life lines but also the foundation of socio economic and cultural developments. They provided ancient societies with access to trade, not only for products but ideas, including language, writing and technology. Thus, studying a river valley from its basin to delta or origin to mouth provide a kaleidoscopic view on the changing pattern of human settlements through the years. The present study '*Early Human Settlements in Historical Perspective: The Meenachil River Basin, Kottayam District up to the 8th Century AD*' aims to discuss the social formations and its developments in the different historical periods of the Meenachil River basin, covering the present-day regions of Ernakulam, Idukki, Pathanamthitta and Alappuzha district.

Review of Literature

The history of the Kottayam district has been studied through multiple disciplines including historical studies, archaeology, geography, geomorphology and environmental studies. Most of this existing research has primarily focused on the medieval and modern period of Kottayam district or localized histories of the villages of the region. The literature review adopts a thematic approach to examine previous works on the Meenachil River, analysing existing studies and identifying the research gaps in the research area. It is organized chapter wise in a chronological base beginning from geographical settings and extending up to 8th century AD.

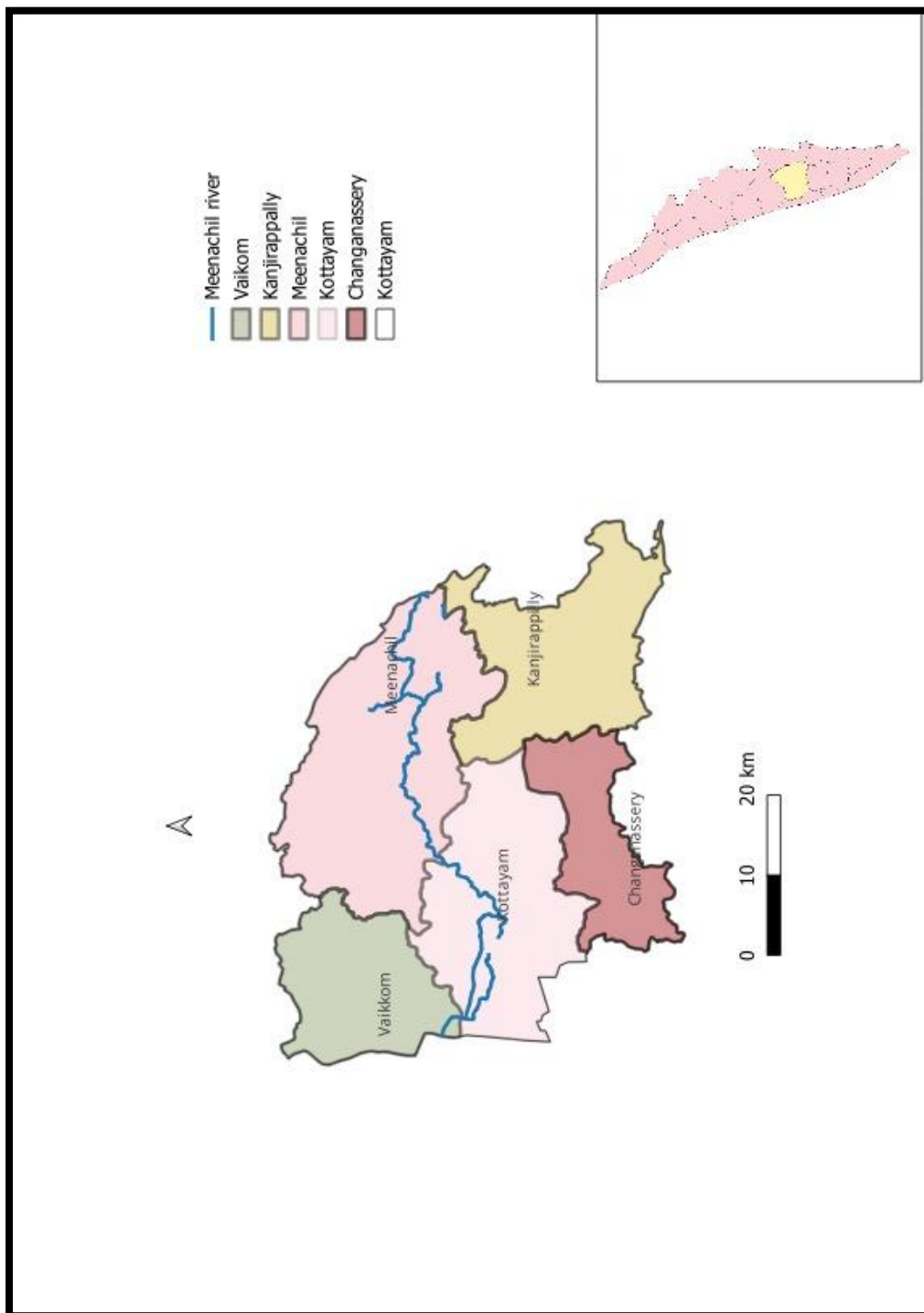


Fig 01: Map Kottayam District (not in scale)

Geological Studies

The study began with the geographical settings of the Meenachil basin to understand its physical landscape, river system, natural vegetation, fauna, soil types, cultivation patterns and irrigation practices. For this information, *The Kerala District Gazetteer*, compiled and edited by A. Sreedhara Menon in 1957¹ was used as a primary reference source. In addition to its physical features, the Gazetteer also provides a brief history of Kottayam district including information on local dynasties, tribal communities and their traditions.

Following the general geographical settings, the formation of Vembanad lake and the Palaeo channels of the Meenachil valley hold particular significance in the present study. A detailed scientific work on the Holocene period of the entire Central Kerala coast, titled “Evolution of Coastal Landforms and Sedimentary Environments of the Late Quaternary Period along Central Kerala, Southwest Coast of India” by A. C. Narayanan and C.P Priju² is especially important in understanding the formation and developments of the landscape, particularly the Vembanad Lake. This study outlines the stages of its formation, subsequent developments and the factors responsible for these changes. It also highlights the characteristic features of the Vembanad Lake and their influence on the region’s landscape as a whole.

The study of Palaeo-channels and changes in the river course is another important aspect of the region. In the doctoral thesis of B. Ajayakumar ‘*Studies on River Sinuosity of Meenachil River with Special reference to its Palaeo Channels using remote sensing*’, 2010 was particularly valuable for analysing the river’s historical courses. His research work shows how the Meenachil river evolved over different periods due to the changes in the

¹ A. Sreedhara Menon. *Kerala District Gazetteers Kottayam*. Kerala Gazetteers Department, Trivandrum. 1975.

² A. C. Narayanan and C.P Priju. “Evolution of Coastal Landforms and Sedimentary Environments of the Late Quaternary Period along Central Kerala, Southwest Coast of India”. *Journal of Coastal Research. Brazil*, Special Issue 39. 2006.pp- 1898-1902.

landscape and also it enhances our understanding of the formation and changes of Vembanad lake³. For more updated data and recent developments, official websites of various government departments such as Geological Survey of India, the Department of Agriculture, The Irrigation Department, The Mining and Geology Department were also consulted.

Iron Age Megalithic Studies

Studies on the prehistoric period of the region are very limited. Only one or two newspaper reports mention the discovery of microliths and neolithic celts. No other attempts have been made so far. The historical references to the Meenachil basin begin with the Iron Age - Megalithic period, based on the findings of C. Chandrasekhara Menon, who conducted explorations under the Archaeological Survey of India. In the *1963-64 Indian Archaeology A Review*, he reported several sites including Thirunakkara, Vedagiri megalithic monuments⁴. Apart from the basic information of location and typology no detailed reports were available. Following works in the region was carried out by P. Rajendran, whose exploration in the Kunnoni region documented several material finds such as microliths, neolithic celts. Unfortunately, these artifacts are not publicly accessible and no further research has been conducted rather than a few newspaper reports. In 2005, he published a report on *Oliyani Cist Burial Excavation*⁵. The report provides valuable data on cist burials, grave goods such as ceramics, iron tools and portholes which were important for a megalithic study. Later, in 2007, M. Nambirajan and C. Kumaran also under the Archaeological Survey of India conducted an excavation at Kadanad⁶. The report remains

³ B. Ajayakumar ‘*Studies on River Sinuosity of Meenachil River with Special reference to its Palaeo Channels using remote sensing*’. Unpublished PhD Thesis. School of Social Science, M.G. University. 2009.

⁴ C. Chandrasekhara Menon. *Indian Archaeological Review-1963-64*. Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi. 1967. p.13.

⁵ P. Rajendran. “Oliyani Cist Burial Excavation Kottayam District”. *Journal for Centre for Heritage Studies II*. 2005. pp. 41-46.

⁶ M. Nambirajan and C. Kumaran. “A Brief Note on Megalithic Excavations conducted at Kadanad District Kottayam”. *Ajith Kumar etd, Recent Trends in Kerala Archaeology*, University of Kerala. 2011. pp. 123-132.

to be published. A preliminary note titled '*A Brief Note on Megalithic Excavations conducted at Kadanad District Kottayam*' was published in 2011 gives some details into three sites and associated goods in the Kadanad region.

Rather than excavations, the field explorations in the region were notably carried out by Nikhil Das, who documented his findings in several works. His initial study '*Dolmen, Cist and Dolmenoid Cist from Kerala: A Case study from Kottayam*' was submitted as an unpublished MA dissertation in 2007⁷. Subsequently, Nikhildas and P.P Joglekar published an article titled '*Recent Megalithic Findings in Palakkad, Idukki and Kottayam District*'⁸ in the bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute Bulletin'. This was followed by another collaborative work with Ajith Kumar, '*Megalithic Discoveries around Neeloor, Kottayam District*' published in Heritage in 2014⁹. All the three studies focused on documenting and analysing the megalithic burials sites within the Kottayam district, significantly helps to understand about more scattered burial sites in the landscape.

In 2013, MA dissertation titled '*Archaeology of Kottayam Taluk, Kerala*' by Renjinimol reported a new site named Muttom menhir near, Nattakom¹⁰. Unfortunately, recent explorations suggest that these structures are naturally formed rocks rather than intentionally placed monuments.

In 2020, Cyriac Jose published two significant articles on the megalithic period. The first, '*Neolithic and Iron Age Megalithic- Findings from the Meenachil River Basin*'¹¹,

⁷ Nikhil Das. *Dolmen, Cist and Dolmenoid Cist from Kerala: A Case study from Kottayam*. Unpublished MA Dissertation. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2007.

⁸ Nikhildas and P.P Joglekar. "Recent Megalithic Findings in Palakkad, Idukki and Kottayam District". *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, Pune. 2007. pp. 45-52.

⁹ Ajith Kumar. "Megalithic Discoveries around Neeloor, Kottayam District". *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2. 2014. pp. 674-685.

¹⁰ Renjinimol. *Archaeology of Kottayam Taluk, Kerala*'. Unpublished MA Dissertation. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2013.

¹¹ Cyriac Jose. "Neolithic and Iron Age Megalithic- Findings from the Meenachil River Basin". *Heritage. Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 8.1. 2020. pp. 448-461.

which reported a few more burial sites with detailed documentation. Marking one of the most comprehensive studies of the region to date. In 2023, he published another notable article ‘*Cupules Found in the Megalithic Site of Kaalikavu in Meenachil Taluk*’ which explores the presence of cup marks and discusses their distribution across the region¹².

In 2021, Sethu Maria George conducted research on Vedagiri and published an article titled ‘*Vedagiri: An Undisclosed Megalithic Site*’¹³. Her work describes the local myths and legends associated with the Vedagiri menhir, offering valuable insights into cultural narratives of the region. In 2023, another study was carried out by Adarsh Shaju for his MA Dissertation which led to the identification of a new site Thevarathumala Menhir¹⁴. His dissertation ‘*Megalithic of Meenachil Taluk, Kottayam*’ documented the distribution of megalithic monuments in Meenachil taluk.

In order to understand the megalithic period in a broader sense, comparative studies from neighbouring valleys have been utilized. The work of Nikhil Das, ‘*Archaeology of Anjunad Valley with Special reference to the Megaliths and Rock Art, Idukki District Kerala*’, which published in 2014, provide important data on megalithic monuments located to the Eastern side of the Meenachil river basin¹⁵. In 2017, Ambili C.S published her doctoral thesis titled ‘*Holocene Archaeology of Pamba Basin*’¹⁶ which explores the megalithic monuments in the southern basin of Meenachil river. Arya. P.N in her doctoral thesis titled ‘*Megalithic and its Cultural Manifestation in Archaeological Record of*

¹² Cyriac Jose. “Cupules Found in the Megalithic Site of Kaalikavu in Meenachil Taluk”. *Man, and Environment. XLVIII Indian Society for Prehistoric and Quaternary Studies*. 2023. pp.29-36.

¹³ Sethu Maria George. “Vedagiri: An Undisclosed Megalithic Site in Kerala”. *Insight. Multilingual Journal for Arts and Humanities, Vol. I. Issues 9*. 2021.pp. 1-18.

¹⁴ Adarsh Shaju. *Megalithic of Meenachil Taluk, Kottayam*. Unpublished MA Dissertation. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2023.

¹⁵ Nikhil Das. *Archaeology of Anjunad Valley with Special reference to the Megaliths and Rock Art, Idukki District Kerala*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Department of Archaeology, Deccan College of Post Graduate Institute, Pune. 2014. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/22701>, Accessed on 25/15/2023.

¹⁶ Ambili C.S. *Holocene Archaeology of Pamba Basin*. Ph. D Thesis. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2017. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/414073>. Accessed on 25/15/2023.

*Thrissur*¹⁷, presents a detailed historiography of megalithic studies in Kerala, offering valuable context for understanding Iron Age megalithic tradition across the State. Additionally, Sandra M.S, in her MA dissertation ‘*Megalithic Vestiges in Udumbanchola Taluk*¹⁸’ explores megalithic monuments in the Western Ghats especially Udumbanchola Taluk. Her work helps to make a comparative analysis of dolmens, cist and urns in the region. Many of these works, occasionally mentioned about the archaeological remains of the Meenachil basin for the comparative discussions of monuments and grave goods, especially from Kadanad excavation.

In addition to these works, for a comprehensive understanding of the Iron Age Megalithic period of the region, the scholar has reviewed both early and recent studies on megaliths. The early works include Babington’s report¹⁹, A Aiyapan’s²⁰ and B.K. Thapar’s²¹ studies as well as later publications such as *Megaliths and their Builders* by L.A Krishna Iyer in 1967²², *Megalithic Culture in South India*²³ by B.K. Gururaja Rao in 1972 and ‘*Megaliths at Machad and Pazhayannur: Thalappilly Taluk: A Report of the excavations conducted 1974*’ by Mehta B.N and K.M George²⁴, *The Megalithic Culture of Kerala* by K.J John in 1991²⁵, *Iron Age in Kerala: A Report of the Mangadu Excavation* by T.

¹⁷ Arya. P.N. *Megalithic and its Cultural Manifestation in Archaeological Record of Thrissur*. Ph.D. Thesis. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2022.

¹⁸ Sandra M.S. *Megalithic Vestiges in Udumbanchola Taluk*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2018.

¹⁹ Babington J. “Description of the Pandoo Coolies in Malabar” *Transactions of the literary Society of Bombay* 3. 324-330. 1823.

²⁰ A. Aiyappan. “Rock-Cut Cave Tombs of Feroke, South Malabar”. *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society*, Vol. XXIII. 1933.pp. 12-29.

²¹ B.K. Thapar. “Porkkalam 1948: Excavations of a Megalithic Urn Burial”. *Ancient India. vol. 8 Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi*. 1952.

²² L.A Krishna Iyer. *Kerala Megalithic and their Builders*. University of Madras, Madras.1967.

²³ B.K. Gururaja Rao. *Megalithic Culture in South India*. Prasarang, University of Mysore.1972.

²⁴ Mehta. B.N and K.M George. *Megaliths at Machad and Pazhayannur: Thalappally Taluk: A Report of the excavations conducted 1974*. M.S. University, Vadodara. 1978.

²⁵ K.J John. “The Megalithic Culture of Kerala, Souvenir” *South Indian History Congress*, Calicut University. 1991.

Sathyamurthi²⁶ in 1992 and V.P. Devadas *Archaeology of Eranad* in 1999²⁷. More recent studies include Jenee Peter, *Dimensions of Megalithic Culture of Kerala in Relation to Peninsular India: An Interdisciplinary Approach*²⁸, and her, *Social Hierarchy and Mortuary Variability: The Iron Age Culture of Peninsular India with Special Reference to Kerala* in 2018²⁹, Manjula Poyil's *Death Funeral and Ancestors: Cult of the Dead and the Malabar Tribes* in 2006³⁰, Abhayan G. S's *Iron Age culture in Kerala. South India An Appraisal*³¹ in 2018 and K.P. Rajesh's ³² *Historiography of Megalithic of Kerala* in 2019.

Early Historic Studies

The study of the Early Historic period in the region largely relies on literary sources such as early Tamil Sangam texts and Greco Roman classical literatures. The studies particularly focusing on the Meenachil region remain scarce but on the other side the Sangam works like *Akananuru* and *Purananuru* along with foreign accounts such as the Strabo's *Geographica*³³, *Periplus Marys Erythrei* of an unknown author³⁴, Pliny's *Natural History*³⁵, Ptolemy's *Geographia*³⁶ were to provide valuable details about the Western Coastal ports including Nelcynda, Bacare and Cottanara. The field research into the region

²⁶ T. Sathyamurthi. *The Iron Age in Kerala: A Report of the Mangadu Excavation*. Department of Archaeology, Thiruvananthapuram. 1992.

²⁷ V.P. Devadas. *Archaeology of Eranad*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Department of History, University of Calicut. 1999.

²⁸ Jenee Peter, *Dimensions of Megalithic Culture of Kerala in Relation to Peninsular India: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Baroda, Vadodara. 2002.

²⁹ Jenee Peter. "Social Hierarchy and Mortuary Variability: The Iron Age Culture of Peninsular India with Special Reference to Kerala". *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 6. 2018. pp. 515-528.

³⁰ Manjula Poyil. *Death Funeral and Ancestors: Cult of the Dead and the Malabar Tribes*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Department of History, University of Calicut. 2006.

³¹ Abayan G.S. "Iron age culture in Kerala. South India An Appraisal". *Iron Age in South Asia. (ed) by Akinori Uesugi. Archaeological Research Institute, Kansai University*. 2018. pp. 145-148.

³² K.P. Rajesh. "Historiography of Megalithic of Kerala". *Human and Heritage: An Archaeological Spectrum of Asiatic Countries. Volume I*. New Bhartiya Book Corporation, Delhi. 2019. pp. 355-366.

³³ H.C Hamilton and W. Falconer (eds) *The Geography of Strabo*. London. 1912.

³⁴ Wilfred H. Schoff. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. Longmans, Green and Co. London. 1912.

³⁵ Pliny's *Natural History*. Vol. I Wernerian Club, Holland. 1847.

³⁶ Edward Luther Stevenson. (translation & etd) *Claudius Ptolemy the Geography*. Dover Publications, New York. 1991.

began with Alex Mathew's paper '*Inching Towards Nelcynda*'³⁷ which proposed Nakada as a probable location for Nelcynda and offered a preliminary framework situating port along the Pamba River basin. In 2008, Ajit Kumar conducted archaeological field work to investigate the Niranam as a possible site to Nelcynda. His work '*A Probe to Locate Kerala's Early Historic Trade Emporium of Nelcynda*'³⁸ reported various types of potsherds and amphora sherds lending support to this identification. Both studies suggested Nakada and Niranam as possible locations and most of the subsequent studies have focused on these two sites. However, Kanakasabhai in his book '*The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*'³⁹ identified Nelcynda with Nirkunnam in Kottayam and Bacare with Vayaskara. More recently, in 2023, Anto George in his book '*The Discovery of Muziris*' proposed yet another location for Nelcynda to far south of Trivandrum⁴⁰, in the Kanyakumari district based only on the etymological connections. Ambili C.S, in her doctoral thesis titled '*Holocene Archaeology of Pamba Basin*' reported observations on several local information about the historical sites and archaeological evidences from the Pamba river basin. Based on the field surveys that she included reference to personal collections of the Roman coins as well as accounts from local antiquity sellers suggesting the number of unrecorded Roman coins and she observed that the Niranam region in the Pamba basin could be a possible location of the Nelcynda.

The Greco Roman literature having references about trade activities in the region during the early historic period. Strabo's *Geography* provides an early reference to the trade between Rome and India, noting that 20 ships sailed annually from Myos Hormos to the Indian Coast, indicating the volume of trade during the first centuries BC. In the early Christian centuries, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (here after *Periplus*) offered detailed

³⁷ Alex Mathew & Raju. "Inching Towards Nelcynda". *Rational Discourse*. Vol. 12. Marthoma College, Thiruvalla. 2006.

³⁸ Ajit Kumar. "A Probe to Locate Kerala's Early Historic Trade Emporium of Nelcynda". Sunil Gupta. (eds) *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology*. No. 5. New Delhi. 2008.pp.97-106.

³⁹ V. Kanakasabhai. *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*. Asian Educational Service, New Delhi. 1904.

⁴⁰ Anto George. *The Discovery of Muziris*. Anto George. 2023.

accounts of the ports and markets of the Indian Ocean, including the exports and imports along the Western Coast of India. The *Periplus* is particularly significant as it mentions that Nelcynda was located 500 stadia from the Muziris and refers to the local rulers as ‘*Pandion*’. Translations and interpretations by scholars such as the Wilfred H. Schoff⁴¹, Lionel Casson⁴² and G.W.B Huntingford⁴³ have helped elucidate the text across different periods.

Pliny the Elder, in his *Naturalis Historia* was the first to mention Madura as the capital of the region, ruled by Pandyas. He also noted that Muziris had a problem with pirate’s attacks and he recommended Bakare as a more secure and serviceable port. Adding to this, he recorded the vast outflow of Roman coins to India which highlights the intensity of the exports especially spices like black pepper from the Western Coast to Rome. After that Ptolemy’s *Geographia* documented changes in the trade dynamics which noted that Nelcynda had lost its prominence as an emporium, with the pepper trade shifted further north to a port called *Male*. All these Greco Roman accounts provide valuable information in to the names and locations of ports, the nature of trade, and the resources of exports and volumes of imports. But none of them mention about the everyday life of the people who inhabited or worked in these ports.

For the understanding of socio economic and political landscape of the early historic period, a wide range of literary sources is available, especially the Sangam works such as *Akananuru* and *Purananuru*⁴⁴. The english translations of these works by Vaidhehi Herbert, which can be accessible though her own website is especially significant. These poems offer valuable insights into the socio- cultural-political and economic structures of early historic South India. While the poems offer rich and valuable detail, they present both

⁴¹ Wilfred H. Schoff. 1912.*Op.cit.*

⁴² Lionel Casson. *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*. Princeton University Press. 1989.

⁴³ G.W.B Huntingford. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. The Hakluyt Society, London.1980.

⁴⁴ Vaidhehi Herbert. *Purananuru*. Website. Hawaii. USA. <https://sangamtranslationsbyvaidehi.com>. Accessed on 2/04/2023.

opportunities and limitations for historical interpretations of the region. A major limitation lies in their predominant portrayal of an urbanised South India featuring capital cities, royal palaces, armies, wealthy temples and monumental architecture. This urban imagery, largely reflects the realities of major port towns and political centres rather than the broader landscape of all regions.

For a broader understanding of archaeological evidence particularly Roman and Punch marked coins the studies of Turner Paula J *Roman Coins from India*⁴⁵ and T Satyamurthy's *Catalogue of Roman Gold Coins*⁴⁶ have been useful. In addition to these direct literature sources, a wide range of scholarly works have examined the Indo Roman Trade and Early Historic period. E.H Warmington's *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India*⁴⁷ 1928, Moti Chandra's *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India*⁴⁸ published in 1977, Roberta Tomber 'Indo Roman Trade from Ports to Pepper'⁴⁹ 2010 and Raoul Mc Laughlin's 'Rome and the Distant East'⁵⁰ in 2010 were all given the information into how trade was conducted across the Indian Ocean. These works have evolved with the discovery of new evidence and archaeological findings. Most recently in 2020 the Federico Romanis book *The Indo Roman Pepper trade and the Muziris Papyrus*⁵¹ incorporates the latest available contribution which offers new perspectives on the dynamics of the transoceanic exchange.

Beyond studies on Indo Roman trade, several significant works have explored the Socio-economic dimensions of early South India. One of the earliest among them is T. K Venkata Subramanian's 'Environment and Urbanisation in Early Tamilakam'⁵² which

⁴⁵ Turner Paula J. *Roman Coins from India*. Routledge, London. 2020.

⁴⁶ T Satyamurthy. *Catalogue of Roman Gold Coins*. Department of Archaeology, Government of Kerala. 2011.

⁴⁷ E.H Warmington. *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India*. Cambridge University Press. 1928.

⁴⁸ Moti Chandra. *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India*. Abhinava Publication, Delhi. 1977.

⁴⁹ Roberta Tomber. *Indo Roman Trade from Ports to Pepper*. Bristol Classical Press, London. 2010.

⁵⁰ Raoul Mc Laughlin's. *Rome and the Distant East*. Continuum. UK, London. 2010.

⁵¹ Federico. D. Romanis. *The Indo Roman Pepper trade and the Muziris Papyrus*. Oxford University Press. 2020.

⁵² T. K Venkata Subramanian. *Environment and Urbanisation in Early Tamilakam*. Tamil University, Thanjavur. 1988.

offers detailed insights into the environmental context, the locations of urban centres and the urban ecology of South India. He also critically examined the concept of Urbanisation and its applicability into the early Tamil region. Later in 1996, R. Champakalakshmi seminal work '*Trade, Ideology and Urbanisation: South India 300 BC to AD 1300*⁵³' further expands this discourse. Her study focuses on the concept of 'Urbanism' and how it affected different regions and time periods. According to her, urbanism in South India was not uniformly spread but was largely concentrated in the port towns and capital centres.

Apart from these numismatics finds, S. Suresh's work '*Symbols of trade*⁵⁴' provides important ideas into material culture and inscriptional evidence from South India, including reference about the Roman coins discovered in the region. In 2022, Rajan Gurukkal in his book '*Rethinking Classical Indo Roman Trade*⁵⁵' critically examined the nature of Indo-Roman trade along the Western Coast of India. He argued that the term 'Indo Roman trade' is a misnomer because the local population lacked the structural capacity to engage in long distance trade independently. He pointed out that the 'Roman trade' operated through the intermediaries or conducted themselves. In his book he analyses both literary and archaeological materials which offer an overall frame of the Early historic trade networks. More recently in 2020, Dhiraj M.S in his paper '*Political and Cultural Dynastic of the Supra- Region: Punnada Country in the History of Jainism in Kerala*⁵⁶' addressed a long-standing confusion regarding the identification of 'Punnada' mentioned by the Strabo, whether it is Poonjar or not. According to him, *Punnada* was an ancient dynasty which extended across the Malabar region up to Palakkad. He supports this argument with several

⁵³ R. Champakalakshmi. *Trade, Ideology and Urbanisation: South India 300 BC to AD 1300*. Oxford University Press, Delhi. 1996.

⁵⁴ S. Suresh. *Symbols of trade*. Manohar Publication, Delhi. 2004.

⁵⁵ Rajan Gurukkal. *Rethinking Classical Indo Roman Trade*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. 2022.

⁵⁶ Dhiraj M.S. "Political and Cultural Dynastic of the Supra- Region: Punnada Country in the History of Jainism in Kerala". *Heritage. Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 8. 2020. pp. 421-449.

inscriptional evidence to establish the *Punnada* as a historical political entity rather than the place name Poonjar in Kottayam.

Studies on Post Sangam Period

The study of the post Sangam period is more challenging than that of any other phase, primarily due to lack of both archaeological and literary sources. After the decline of early historic trade, the focus of Kerala history shifted mainly to the medieval period which emphasised brahmin settlements, their temples and inscriptions. Direct scholarly attention to the Jainism and Buddhism in the region began with the P.C Alexander's research work '*Buddhism in Kerala*' published in 1949⁵⁷. In his study, he examines the migration of Buddhism into Kerala, its geographical distribution and cultural significance. His work provides a detailed discussion of the Kiliroor and Neelamperoor temples and the association of Pallibana Perumal with the region as well as other Buddhist centres including the renowned Srimoolavasam on the West Coast.

B. Padmakumari Amma⁵⁸ in her doctoral thesis '*Jain- Buddhist Centres in the Early History of Kerala*' examined both the archaeological and literary sources related to Jainism and Buddhism in Kerala. She provided a detailed analysis of the Kiliroor and Neelamperoor temples in the region, along with the Buddha idols from Ramapuram. Her works also documented Buddha idols from the districts of Alappuzha, Kollam and Pathanamthitta. The identification of the Kiliroor and Neelamperoor as Buddhist centres was further analysed by S. Jayasankar in his '*Temples of Kottayam District*⁵⁹' which was published in 2015. These studies collectively attest that Kiliroor and Neelamperoor were originally Buddhist abodes, which were later converted into hindu temples.

⁵⁷ P.C Alexander. *Buddhism in Kerala*. Unpublished PhD. Thesis. Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar. 1949.

⁵⁸ B. Padmakumari Amma. *Jain- Buddhist Centres in the Early History of Kerala*. Ph.D. Thesis. Department of History, University of Calicut. 1995.

⁵⁹ S. Jayasankar. *Temples of Kottayam District*. Directorate of Census Operations Kerala, Trivandrum. 2015.

Apart from these research works, Ajay Sekhar's '*Puthan Keralam: Kerala Samsakarathinte Bouddha Adithara*⁶⁰' in 2018, provides a comprehensive study combining linguistic analysis, etymological connections, folklores and cultural perspectives on Buddhism in Kerala. The book also discusses traces of Buddhism in Kottayam district particularly place names containing the prefix Palli, and records the presence of a Buddha idol from Vellilapally area near Ramapuram. Beyond these studies, no significant literary or scholarly works have been undertaken on Buddhism and Jainism in this region.

To understand Jainism from a broader perspective, several important works have contributed. William Logan in his '*Malabar Manual*⁶¹' discusses the presence of Jainism in Kerala noting that several hindu temples of Malabar were constructed in the Jain style. He also observed that Kollam was once a Buddhist centre and suggested that the *Ezhavas* may have migrated from Ceylon. However, as an early primary work, Logan's accounts contain certain confusions between Buddhism and Jainism. Later P.B Desai in his study '*Jainism in South India and Some Jaina Epigraphs*⁶²' published in 1895, examined epigraphical evidence and the affiliation of Kerala sites with the broader Jain tradition of South India. In 2017 Manoj T. R⁶³ in his doctoral thesis *Historical Geography of the Jain Centres in Kerala* and in 2023 *Keralathile Budhamatha Pramparyam Nattarivukaliloode* of Aju K Narayanan⁶⁴ also discussed about the Jain Buddhist traditions in Kerala.

M.R. Raghava Varier was among the first to exclusively address Jainism in Kerala through his work '*Jainamatham Keralathil*' published in 2012⁶⁵. He examined the *Yakshi* cult and its association with Jainism, documenting the presence of Padmavati *Yakshi* in her

⁶⁰ Ajay Sekhar. *Puthan Keralam: Kerala Samsakarathinte Bouddha Adithara*. State Institute of Language. 2018.

⁶¹ William Logan. *Malabar Manual*. Asian Education Service, Delhi. 2004. pp. 184-185.

⁶² P.B Desai. *Jainism in South India and Some Jaina Epigraphs*. Jaina Samskara Sangha, Sholapur. 1957. pp. 77-78.

⁶³ Manoj. TR. *Historical Geography of the Jain Centres in Kerala*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Department of History, Sree Shankaracharya University, Kalady. 2017.

⁶⁴ Aju. K. Narayanan. *Keralathile Budhamatha Paramaryam Nattarivukaliloode*. SPCS, Kottayam. 2023.

⁶⁵ M.R. Raghava Varier. *Jainamatham Keralathil*. SPCS, Kottayam. 2012.

Soumya form at the Neelamperoor temple. His study also advanced the idea about the *Vaniya* community, a subcaste within the nair community were originally Jains, those who later assimilated into hinduism. Dhiraj M.S in '*Jainism in Kerala, A historical perspective with special reference to Wayanad region*' compiled and analysed the available evidence on Jainism across Kerala. His primary objective was to bridge the so-called 'dark age' in Kerala history by tracing migration patterns through inscriptional evidence. It helps to shed light on the routes, extent and phases of Jain migrations in Kerala. Another two significant contribution regarding the concept of *yakshis* are V.V Haridas work '*Yakshi Sankalpam*⁶⁶ which explores the role of *yakshis* in Jainism and their cultural assimilations, particularly the traces of *yakshi* worship that survive in the hindu temples in Kerala and Sandya M Unnikrishnan's work *Re-reading Yakshi Cult in Kerala a Historical Quest*⁶⁷ which deals with the iconographic and symbolic interpretations of *yakshis* as well as rites and rituals of *yakshi* cults in Kerala.

In addition to specific studies, several general historical works on Kerala have also addressed the presence of Jainism Buddhism in the region. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai in his works such as *Chila Kerala Charithra Prasnangal*⁶⁸ (1962), *Janmi Smbrathayam Keralathil*⁶⁹ (1966) and *Keralam Anchum Aarum Noottandukalil*⁷⁰ (1976) examined the role of Jainism and Buddhism during the post Sangam period. He paid particular attention to the *Ay* king Vikramaditya Varaguna and his Jain affiliations. Elamkulam was one of the first historians to clearly establish the decline of the Jainism and Buddhism in Kerala around the 8th century AD. Following this, Kesavan Veluthat in his '*Brahmin settlements in Kerala*⁷¹' highlights the migration and gradual consolidation of brahmin communities in

⁶⁶ V.V. Haridas. *Yakshi Sankalpam*. SPCS, Kottayam. 2019.

⁶⁷ Sandhya M Unnikrishnan. *Re-Reading Yakshi Cult in Kerala a Historical Quest*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Department of History, University of Kerala. 2019. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/421492> Accessed on 12/11/2024.

⁶⁸ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai. *Chila Kerala Charithra Prasnangal*. National Book Stall, Kottayam. 1955.

⁶⁹ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai. *Janmi Samprdayam Keralathil*. National Book Stall, Kottayam. 1966.

⁷⁰ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai. *Keralam Anchum Aarum Noottandukalil*. SPCS, Kottayam. 1961.

⁷¹ Kesavan Veluthat. *Brahmin Settlements in Kerala*. Sandhya Publication, Calicut. 1978.

the region, suggesting that the rise and institutional development of hinduism contributed significantly to the decline of Jainism and Buddhism in Kerala.

With regard to epigraphical studies, T.A Gopinatha Rao in his *Travancore Archaeological Series*⁷² (1988) discussed Jain inscriptions in Kerala including those from Kallil temple at Perumbavoor and Chitharal. Later in 2003 Iravatham Mahadevan in his *Early Tamil Epigraphy: From the Earliest Times to the Sixth Century AD*⁷³. offered a detailed analysis of the available epigraphical evidence from the Madurai region. This work is one of the most significant contributions to South Indian epigraphy, providing valuable insights into the early historic and post Sangam inscriptions across ancient Tamilakam. Building on this tradition, M.G.S Narayanan undertook the study of medieval epigraphs in Kerala, laying strong foundations for the reconstruction of Kerala's medieval history. His work *Cultural Symbiosis*⁷⁴ is particularly important to light on the Jain history in Kerala and another work *Perumal's of Kerala*⁷⁵ provides a comprehensive understanding of the temple centred society that characterised medieval Kerala history.

The review of existing literature on the ancient history of the Meenachil river basin and the Kottayam region reveals significant gap in research. Most available studies have primarily focused on the region's religious and cultural history, often within limited interpretive frameworks. In contrast, the medieval and modern periods are better represented, largely due to the availability of inscriptions, temple records, and other primary and secondary sources. As a result, historical reconstructions are comparatively richer for these later periods, particularly regarding political formations such as Thekkumkoor and Vadakkumkoor. This imbalance highlights the need for a further inter

⁷² T.A Gopinatha Rao. *Travancore Archaeological Series*. Department of Cultural Publications. Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. 1988.

⁷³ Iravatham Mahadevan. *Early Tamil Epigraphy: From the Earliest Times to the Sixth Century AD*. The Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harward University. 2003.

⁷⁴ M.G.S Narayanan. *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*. Kerala Historical Society, Thiruvananthapuram. 1972.

⁷⁵ M.G.S Narayanan. *Perumal's of Kerala*. Cosmo Books, Thrissur. 2013.

disciplinary research that integrates geographical, archaeological, epigraphical and literary sources to build a more comprehensive understanding of the ancient history of the region.

Research Problem

The river Meenachil has a rich potential for the study of Kerala's Prehistory, Megalithic Iron-Age culture, early historic maritime and hinterland networks and possible early Jain Buddhist settlements. The literary review revealed that the region remains largely unexplored in academic research with no comprehensive studies undertaken to reconstruct its historical developments.

Recently, several explorations and excavations have been conducted in the neighbouring regions and valleys, especially in the Periyar valley and the Idukki region in the Western Ghats. The Periyar river and its basin located to the north of the Meenachil basin, have yielded significant findings. Recent activities, including the Pattanam excavation and Periyar river valley explorations, uncovered a number of Iron Age Megalithic burial and material evidences for ancient maritime activities, especially related to Indo- Roman trade. The discoveries such as various types of stone tools, megalithic burial goods, and their typologies have helped to establish the region's history as extending back to the prehistoric period. The rich material evidence including indigenous- non indigenous ceramics, precious stone beads, coin hoards suggest a period of flourishing maritime trade along Western Coast of India. Meanwhile, the region which is located in between the Periyar and Pamba is believed to have the location of two ancient port sites such as Nelcynda and Purakkad which were active during the same period of Muziris. However, there were no systematic attempts have to locate these centres.

In the Western Ghats, on the Eastern side of the Meenachil river, studies have primarily focused on early habitation cum burial sites as well as ancient trade routes that connected Madurai to the Western Coast. The discovery of rock art in the Anjunad valley, along with excavations at Nachivayal, Bison valley and Anappara, and exploration in the

Idukki district have lightened on megalithic burial sites, early human habitation sites and ancient trade routes. Recent studies indicate the existence of two major ancient trade routes connecting the Eastern and Western Coast through the Western Ghats. The first route passed through the Bodinayakanur pass, extending via Kothamangalam Adimali Munnar, Rajakkad and Theni to Madurai. The second route through the Cumbum passes via Kothamangalam, Idukki, Kumily, Cumbum, Theni and Madurai. In addition to these, two other significant routes existed through the Kottayam via the Meenachil and Manimala rivers. Similar to the Periyar river, the Meenachil was also capable of supporting inland trade from Western Coast to Madurai. The Greco-Roman literatures mention the transport of goods to places like Cottanara and Nelcynda via rivers originating from the high ranges. However, no detailed such studies have yet been conducted on the trade routes along the Meenachil river and the inland market points associated with the river banks.

On the Southern side of the region lies the Pamba River, located in the Pathanamthitta district while the western side includes the Vembanad lake and Alappuzha also has been the focus of several studies. Excavation at Enadimangalam, Niramakulam along with the recent explorations in the Pamba river basins have provided valuable insights into the Megalithic Iron Age culture and settlement of the region. Major rivers such as Pamba, Periyar, Bharathpuzha and Chaliyar as well as back waters of Vembanad Lake and Alappuzha also have been subjects of extensive research. However, despite its significance, the Meenachil river has not yet been systematically studied.

While, most of the historical narratives after the early historic period have focused on temple inscriptions and the second Chera rule. The spread of Jainism and Buddhism which developed in between periods has received limited scholarly attention. A few Buddha idols recovered from ponds and river bodies along with temples like Kiliroor and Neelamperoor associated with Buddhism suggest that the region may have been a

significant Buddhist centre in Kerala. Unfortunately, recent research on this subject is scarce, apart from a few sculptural identifications linked to these religious traditions.

From the literature review, it is clear that the historical studies of the Meenachil basin and the Kottayam region have primarily focused on the medieval and modern period. Most of these studies are based on medieval temple inscriptions and colonial records. Local historians have made several attempts to reconstruct the region's past but unfortunately, they are relying on myths, legends, and oral traditions rather than material evidence. As a result, no systematic studies have been conducted in the region so far. The present study focuses on the early social formations, the distribution of megalithic burials and early historic trade, including inland trade routes in the Meenachil river basin and Kottayam district.

Research Questions

1. How did the geography and river system shape the early settlements in the Meenachil river basin?
2. What was the character and distribution of early settlements in the Meenachil river basin?
3. What are the major archaeological indicators of early settlements in the Meenachil Basin?
4. How did the river system and its hinterlands facilitate the emergence of markets and trade centres along its routes and in what ways did these routes connect the Western coast with other regions especially with capital city of Madurai?
5. How did export commodities and Greco Roman literary sources contribute to identifying and mapping the trade routes of the region?
6. How did Jain and Buddhist communities migrate and settle in the region and did they co-exist or not?

Objective of the Study

1. To explore the role of geographical features on the historical evolution and Palaeo channels of the Meenachil river basin.
2. To collect the literature and archaeological materials which connect the region in different periods for the historical reconstruction of the Meenachil basin.
3. To map and analyse the spatial distribution megalithic burials and associated burial goods within the Meenachil river basin.
4. To make attempts to identify the locations of port Nelcynda, Cottanara and Bacare.
5. To trace the early historic hinterland trade routes and market centres along with the Meenachil valley.
6. To examine the impact and after-effects of the early historic trade in the region.
7. To trace the presence and remnants of Jainism and Buddhism in the region.
8. To understand the nature and continuity of human habitation from the prehistoric period to the Post Sangam period in the region.

Hypothesis of the Study

The present study '*Early Human Settlements in Historical Perspective: The Meenachil River Basin, Kottayam District up to 8th Century AD*' puts forward four main hypotheses. The first hypothesis suggests that the Meenachil river basin was an early site of human habitation. Basically, early human settlements often established along river banks, as these basins provided ideal environments such as fertile plains, abundant water and rich natural resources. The Meenachil basin shares these features. Its tributaries were helped for agricultural activities, facilitated trade networks and enabled communication. The discovery of megalithic burials and evidence of early tribal communities in the region further strengthened these arguments. Moreover, studies of the Periyar valley to the north and the Pamba valley in the south have already revealed evidence of early human habitation

along their river basins. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the Meenachil basin also hosted early human settlement.

Secondly, the study suggests that the Meenachil river played a significant role in the trade and communication between Western Coast and the Western Ghats. Several trade routes have already been identified that connected the Western Coast to the Tamilnadu region including to Madurai and the ports in the Eastern coast via Western Ghats. These were primarily carried goods from Tamilnadu to the port Muziris via Periyar Valley. Similarly, it is possible that goods from the Western Ghats as well as commodities from the high ranges of the Meenachil basin, were transported to inland centre Cottanara and to the important ports like Nelcynda and Purakkad through the Meenachil river. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the Meenachil river served as an important medium for trade and transpiration during the early historic trade.

Thirdly, the material goods recovered from the megalithic burials in the region such as carnelian beads, ceramics, iron tools and implements as well as Roman coins were suggested that the region was occupied during Iron Age early historic period and the inhabitants were actively participated in long distance trade. The megalithic burials resemble those found in other parts of Kerala and almost all the typologies such as menhirs, dolmens, cist, dolmenoid cists, urns were found in the region. This evidence indicates that the Meenachil valley was inhabited by Iron Age megalithic communities who were also engaged in the extensive trade networks.

The fourth hypothesis suggests that the region experienced a phase of Jain- Buddhist presence. The discovery of Buddha idols within the region, along with idols from neighbouring areas particularly sites such as Karumadi, Mavelikkara and Bharanikkavu which were located in the coastal belt of Central Kerala indicates that the Buddhism likely spread through port centres with its settlements were primarily concentrated in coastal zones. Temples such as Kiliroor and Neelamperoor which house Buddha idols along

etymological connections and local traditions linked to these faiths. It further supports the view that the region once hosted significant Jain and Buddhist settlements.

All these factors supported the Meenachil river basin as a site of continuous habitation throughout history. Temples, churches and mosques were built here during different periods. Some of the temples date back to the early medieval period, including the Kidangoor Subramanya Swamy Temple, Ettumanoor Mahadeva Temple and the Kumaranellor Bagavathy temples which were included in the 32 Brahmin settlements in Kerala⁷⁶. Later, the region was divided into two political divisions such as Thekkumkoor and Vadakkumkoor⁷⁷ followed by the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial rule. Altogether, these factors indicate that the region has witnessed continuous human habitation over centuries.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts the methodology of the Annales School of Historiography which emphasizes the dynamic relationship between human society and its physical environment⁷⁸. It follows Fernand Braudel's approach of examining how geography influences human life and how in turn human activities transform the landscape over a long period of time. Accordingly, this study employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates history, archaeology, geography and ethnography. Historically, it focuses on the long-term historical period from prehistory to 8th century AD. Archaeologically, it examines Iron Age megalithic burials, their associated material goods, Roman coin hoard and Buddhist idols from the region. Geographically it analyses the geology, morphology and

⁷⁶ Kesavan Veluthat. *Brahmin Settlements in Kerala*. Sandya Publications, University of Calicut. 1978. p.44.

⁷⁷ N.E. Kesavan Naboothiri. *Thekkumcore Charithravum Puravarithavum*. National Bookstall, Kottayam. 2015.

⁷⁸ Fernand Braudel. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. 1972., Lucien Febvre. *A geographical Introduction to History*. London.1925, Marc Bloch. *The Historians Craft*. New York. 1953. Peter Burke. *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89*. Standford University. 1990.

the suitability of the Meenachil river basin for human habitation. ethnographically, it discusses the local communities, oral histories and cultural practices in the region.

The methodology for the data collection combines field survey and literature study. The field exploration primarily focuses on locating megalithic burial sites, identifying hinterland trade routes, mapping Jain Buddhist associated sites and recording maximum available data from the Meenachil basin. This includes firstly re-documenting of already reported megalithic sites, mapping their distribution and the material study of burial goods from the excavation sites. Secondly it involves documenting potential locations for the sites - Cottanara and the port Nelcynda as well as collecting regional oral histories. Thirdly the study focuses on the re-examining of Buddhist idols and etymological connections of Jainism to establish its presence in the region and the possibilities of their co-existence. The literature review covers existing historical records and archival sources including Sangam literature, Greco Roman accounts, excavation reports, and local histories of the region.

Sources of the Study

The sources are mainly divided into two categories: archaeological findings and historical records. The archaeological sources include microliths, neolithic stone tools, megalithic burials, material goods uncovered in excavations, Indo Roman coins, Buddhist idols, sculptures, and other various antiquities that are discovered over time. The literary evidences comprise archaeological excavation reports, Greco Roman accounts such as the Strabo's *Geography*, *Periplus Maris Erythraei* of an unknown author, Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, Ptolemy's *Geography*, a loan agreement named *Muziris Papyrus* and Peutingerian Table. These works, composed during the early centuries of Christian era, provided valuable information about the ports along the Western Coast of India.

The indigenous works such as Megasthenese *Indica*, Sangam literature including *Pattupattu*, *Akananuru*, *Purananuru*, *Silappathikaram*, *Madurai Kanchi*, *Manimekalai* give insights in to the socio economic and political history of the early South India.

Religious texts such as temple inscriptions, land grants, church documents, sculptures, murals and local historical accounts were further adding the details of the people, culture, political powers, towns, port and socio economics of the people across different time periods.

Chapter Organisation

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Land Water Life, the Landscape and Early Communities of Meenachil River valley
- 3 Roots of Society: Early Social Formations in the Meenachil River Valley
- 4 Crossroads of Commerce: Early Historic Social Networks in the Meenachil River Valley
- 5 The Dawn of a New Era: The Presence of Jainism Buddhism in the Meenachil River Valley
- 6 Conclusion

The present thesis consists of six chapters including introduction and conclusion. The first chapter, '*Introduction*' outlines an overview of existing studies in the area. It also describes the research gaps, objectives, methodology, hypothesis and sources for the study.

Second chapter '*Land Water Life, the Landscape and Early Communities of Meenachil River valley*' examines how the geography of the Meenachil river basin supported human habitation. It also discusses the climate, land forms, land use, vegetation and geology of the Meenachil river basin.

Third chapter, '*Roots of Society: Early Social Formations in the Meenachil River Valley*' explores the prehistoric and Iron Age- Megalithic period of the region. The chapter analyses both material evidence and literature source, including the documentation of 23 megalithic burials in the region and material of three excavations. The study examines how the early societies were formed in the region and their activities during the Iron Age period.

The fourth chapter '*Crossroads of Commerce: Early Historic Social Networks in the Meenachil River Valley*' examines three key centres in the region which were part of the maritime trade of Western Coast during the early centuries of Christian era. It attempts to locate the port Nelcynda, Purakkad and the pepper district called Cottanara by the Greco Roman literature as well as try to reconstruct the hinterland trade routes connecting the Western Coast to the inland capital Madura via Western Ghats. The chapter also seeks to identify the pepper markets or collection points in the Meenachil valley during the early historic period.

The fifth chapter '*The Dawn of a New Era: The Presence of Jainism Buddhism in the Meenachil River Valley*' examines the developments that followed the decline of early historic trade in the region. It analyses the rise and subsequent declines of Jainism and Buddhism, while also tracing their presents through material remains and cultural imprints in the Meenachil valley. Several Buddhist idols have been discovered in the region along with the presence of sculptures and architectural features of Jain Buddhist traditions that were later assimilated into local hindu temples. This chapter further explores the arrival of brahmin migration into the region and their socio-economical cultural influences, which ultimately contributed to the gradual decline of Jainism and Buddhism from the region.

The sixth chapter '*Conclusion*' summarizes the findings of the study and highlights the historical and cultural social formations and its transformations in the Meenachil river basin over time. The chapter collaborates the archaeological, historical, geographical and literary sources to understand the early human habitation, social formation, trade networks and pre-medieval society that existed in the basin

Chapter II

‘Land Water Life’

The Landscape and Early Communities of Meenachil River Valley

Introduction

Geographical features are crucial when studying the historical geography of a region, because rivers and their water mechanisms are among the most significant geomorphic systems functioning on the earth surface¹. The present study area primarily focused on the Meenachil river which played an important role in shaping the region's geography, ecology and human settlements. This chapter is divided into three sections which each focuses on geography, human and history of the region. The first section explores the geography and physiography of the Meenachil valley and Vembanad Lake including soil, water resources, climate, and landforms. It discusses how these elements helped to early human habitation. The second section delves into the various tribal communities inhabiting the Meenachil valley and surrounding areas. It highlights their geographic distribution, cultural traditions and aspects of their contemporary lifestyles. The third section deals with a historical overview of the Meenachil region as part of the broader Kottayam district. It aims to contextualize major events and developments during the medieval and modern periods, to understand the region's evolving socio-political landscape.

Early humans primarily inhabited the foothill regions, along the banks of rivers, lakes, and seas. The primary factors for the selection and occupation of sites were the easy access to perennial water, plants and animals for foods, and the raw material for creating artifacts. It was generally believed that the dense vegetation and heavy rainfall prevented

¹ Lucien Febvre. *A Geographical Introduction to History*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London. 1925. pp.123-125.

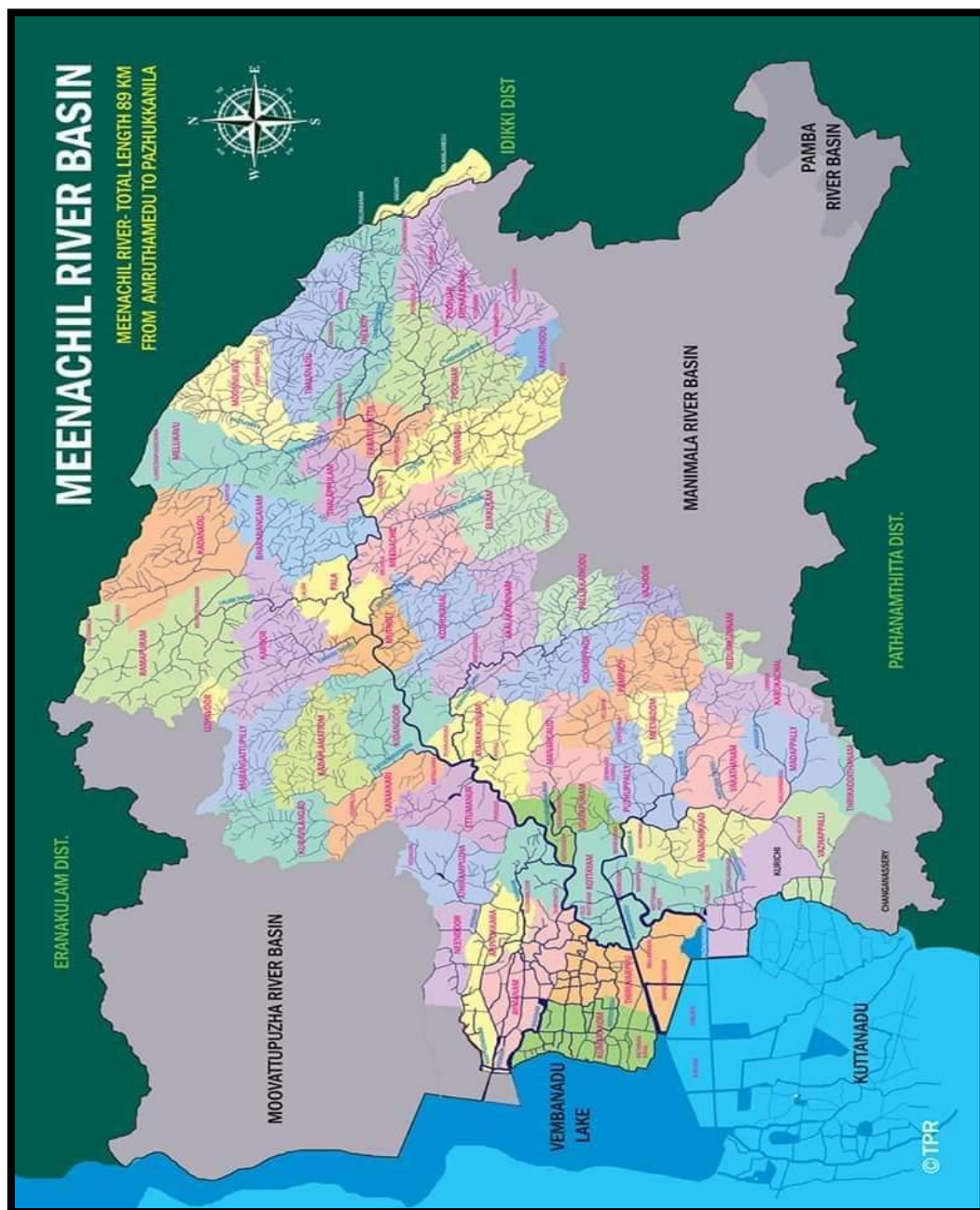


Fig: 2.1 Map- Study Area. (not in scale) Courtesy: (Pallikkonam Rajeev)

the early humans from the habitation in the Western Ghats². But recently the studies show the Western Ghats having the habitation evidence as early as before the Iron Age early historic period itself. However, the study would be incomplete without analysing the neighbouring basins and Western Ghats regions. So, the entire present Kottayam district and the parts of Alappuzha, Ernakulam and Idukki were more or less connected with the Western Ghats and Western Coast during the historical period which comes under the present study. Additionally, the chapter discusses the river Manimala, Pamba and Muvattupuzha aar, with the primary focus on Meenachil.

History of Its Geography

According to Richard Hartshorne, ‘Human societies were active participants in shaping their environments, adapting and modifying them to meet their needs rather than merely responding to natural conditions³’ and for a proper understanding of history, it is essential to study the geography of the region. The Meenachil river which empties into the Vembanad lake, and both were shaped by geological and environmental changes during the Late quaternary period. For centuries, the Meenachil river basin served as an advantageous navigation route, greatly benefiting the Kottayam town and connecting it to the ports of Alappuzha and Kochi through the Vembanad Lake. The Vembanad lake, also known as the Vembanad Lagoon, is the largest backwater system in Kerala, stretching about 80 km in length. Geographically it was formed from Tertiary sediments and believed to be a graben⁴ which is a landform created by the sinking of a block of land between two parallel faults.

² K. Paddayya. “The Acheulian Culture of the Hunsgi Valley: A settlement System Perspective”. *BAR International Series 117*, Oxford. 1982. pp.10-18.

³ Richard Hartshorne. “Perspectives on the Nature of Geography”. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. XXIX. 1939. p.77.

⁴ Narayana Chinna Allu and Priju C.P. “Evolution of Coastal Landform and Sedimentary Environments of the Late Quaternary Period along Central Kerala, Southwest Coast of India”. *Journal of Coastal Research, Special Issue 39*, 2006. p.1901.

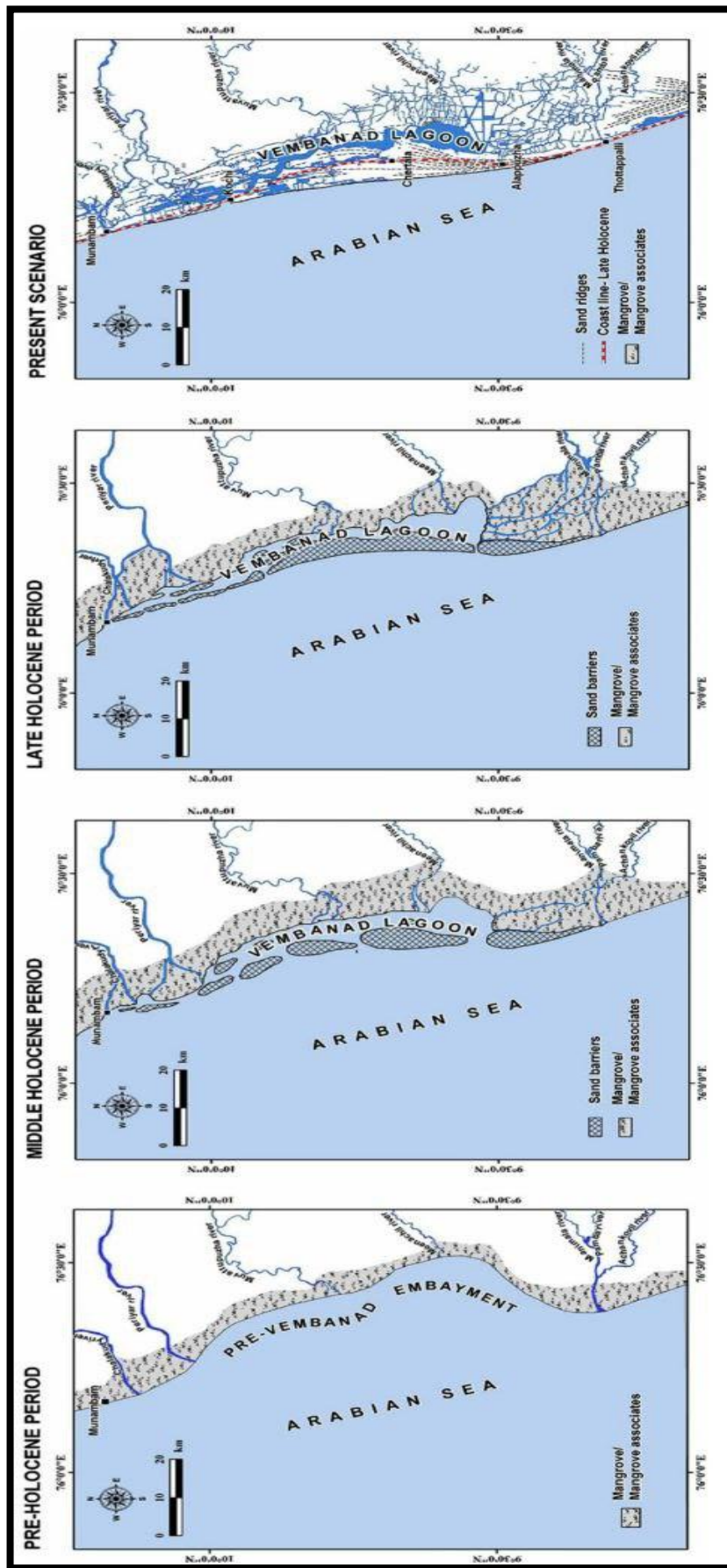


Fig: 2.2 Formation of Study Area. (not in scale) (Courtesy: D. Padmal et.al)

The occurrence of shell and peat deposit in the low-lying areas around the Vembanad lake indicates the subsidence of this part of the coastal land⁵ and the presence of a submerged forest in the region⁶. The occurrence of strandlines⁷ further suggests that the coast has undergone a series of marine transgression and regression during Late Quaternary period⁸. Pollen analysis of peat⁹ samples from the Vembanad Lake region reveals that around 40,000 years ago the area supported dense mangrove forest and evergreen vegetation. Subsequent cycles of marine transgression and regression led to the formation of fertile plains, lagoons and submerged forest tracts.

During Holocene, shifting shorelines and intense rainfall brought coarse sediments, while tectonic movements altered the course of Meenachil River, forcing it to migrate northward¹⁰. Radiocarbon dating suggest that some ancient river channels predate the formation of Vembanad late¹¹, while others developed alongside it.

Recent studies on Paleochannels and inland sand deposits by B. Ajayakumar at sites such as Mosco, Athyaman, Koshamattom and Chengalam reveal traces of seawater incursion extending far inland. These locations lie roughly midway between the Meenadom Ar and the Meenachil river, an area where no major river flows today. The findings suggest that the present Meenadom Ar might once have been an integral part of the Meenachil river system, serving as its palaeochannel¹². The evidence also indicates that the main course of the Meenachil river shift from south to north, possibly due to tectonic activity around 4000 YBP¹³. Together, these geomorphological changes contributed to the formation of the

⁵ *Ibid.* p.1898.

⁶ B. Ajay Kumar 'Studies on River Sinuosity of Meenachil River with Special reference to its Palaeo Channels Using Remote Sensing'. Unpublished PhD Thesis. School of Environmental Science, MG University 2009. p.119.

⁷ Narayana Chinna Allu. *Op.cit.* 2006. p.1901.

⁸ *Ibid.* p.1901.

⁹ Ajay Kumar. *Op.cit.* p.181.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 207, Soman K. *Geology of Kerala (1st Edition)*. Geological Survey of India, Bangalore. 1997.p.191.

¹¹ Ajay Kumar. *Op.cit.* p. 163.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 207.

¹³ Soman. K. *Op.cit.* p.191.

distinctive backwater-lagoon system of Vembanad and reshaped the Meenachil basin, creating a fertile and dynamic landscape that later supported human settlement, agriculture and trade.

Extent to the Study area

The Meenachil river originates from the Kolahalamedu in the Vagamon hills. Earlier it was believed to originate from the Araikunnumudi region. In fact, the river has two streams which one flowing as Theekoy Aar and other from Poonjar and they merge at Erattupetta and finally emptying into Vembanad Lake. It is located between 9° 25' to 9° 55' N and 76° 20' to 76° 55' E longitude. It is 78 km long, with a catchment area of about 2235 square kilometres and an elevation of 1097 meters above MSL. Along the River Meenachil, there are five taluks- Kottayam, Vaikom, Kanjirappilly Meenachil and Changanassery with 3 Municipal towns and 57 panchayats. The Meenachil has 47 sub watersheds and 114 micro watersheds and it has 38 tributaries including major and minor.

The major tributaries were Kalathukkadav Aar and Thekkoy Aar in the Northern part, Poonjar which flows from Kolahalamedu in the South and both of them join in the Erattupetta which turns sharply to the West. Other tributaries are Chittaar joins it at Kondur and the Payapparathodu joins it at Lalam. It then flows Southwest until it reaches Kottayam. Before it reaches Vembanad lake, it splits off into multiple streams here. The Muvattupuzha Aar shares the Northern regions of Meenachil basin while the River Manimala shares the South and Southeast portion of regions.

The study area primarily covers the river Meenachil and its surroundings, but it also extends beyond the current Kottayam district boundaries to explore the ancient history of the region. For the understanding of the trade and migration routes it deals with the Idukki in the East, Muvattupuzha in the North West as well as the ports that mainly deal with the Alappuzha to the West and Pathanamthitta to the South.

Physiographical Features

The Meenachil River basin exhibits a diverse range of physiographic features and this physical geography made a significant impact on its landscape and human interactions. The land form is slopes ranging from nearly level to steeply sloping. The highland terrain (Western Ghats) comprises medium hills, and isolated hillocks in the upper regions where the 27% (21 km) of the river course flows. Here the valleys created by tributaries are deeply divided. The Kanjirappilly Taluk and portion of Meenachil taluk is under the highland regions. While the broad valleys, lateritic mounds and midland lateritic areas with 53% (41 km) of the river course flow through the midland. Western portion of Meenachil taluk and the eastern parts of Kottayam, Changanassery and Vaikom taluks were under the midland regions. The coastal plains and backwaters constitute the lower land such as the western portion of Kottayam, Changanassery and Vaikom taluks were characterized by swamps, marshes and reclaimed terrain and here the river course flows 20% (16km).

Geological Features

Geological formation: The Precambrian metamorphic rocks comprise the majority of the river basin particularly in the East, which creates a hilly background. The West is marked by Quaternary formations that are partly marine or fluvial, while the centre is a low plateau. Quartzite, charnockite, gneiss and pink/ grey granites were the most common rocks type in the region¹⁴. The soil type in the area varies with laterite soil found in Kanjirappilly and Meenachil taluks and alluvial soil present in Vaikom taluk and parts of Changanassery and Kottayam taluks.

Soil: Upland soils are formed from gneissic rock and have good drainage. The soil has a sandy clay loam to clay loam texture and range in colour from black to dark reddish brown. The midland soils are well drained laterites soils with a texture ranging from

¹⁴ B. Ajay Kumar. *Op.cit.* p.45.

gravelly clay loam to gravelly clay and a dark reddish brown to red colour¹⁵. The low land soils are hydromorphic, imperfectly drained soil formed from alluvial- colluvial deposits and riverine and lacustrine sediments. The soils have a silty clay loam to clay texture and are extremely dark garish brown to black. There are places with brown soil, gravelly soil and brown and loam soils. The western part of the Changanassery and Kottayam are the location to alluvial soil. Vaikom taluk is the location of peaty or kari soil, which is distinguished by the deep colour, high organic matter content and strong acidity. There are clay soils that are rich in potassium and nitrogen but have poor drainage and aeration.

Climate and Vegetation

The district experiences four distinct seasons and generally has a wet type of climate. March and May are hot summer seasons while June to September is the South West monsoon season and October, November, December will be North East monsoon seasons and January and February are the coolest months.

Rain: based on 1901-1999 data, the region receives an average annual rainfall of 2931mm. The South West monsoon is the primary source of rainfall with 59% of the total annual rainfall. Following this, North East monsoon which is less intensive contributing 21% of the total annual rainfall¹⁶. The region shows considerable spatial variations in the rainfall due to the different altitude, distance from the coast and climatic conditions. The highest rainfall records in the Pala region where the lowest rainfall records in the Ettumanoor.

Temperature and Humidity: The temperature in the study area range from the March to May will be the highest which is 23.8 and 26.0 degree Celsius. The average temperature is 24.4⁰ c while November December and January see the lowest. The relative humidity is

¹⁵ A. Sreedhara Menon. *Kerala District Gazetteers. Kottayam*. Kerala Gazetteers, Trivandrum. 1975. p.10.

¹⁶ *District Survey Report of Minor Minerals, Kottayam District*. Department of Mining and Geology, Government of Kerala.2016. p.05.

reach 79% in the morning and 76% in the evening¹⁷. For more details there is no observatory located in the catchment areas.

Vegetation of the region: The vegetation in the region characterised by the terrain, soil and climate of the basin. The soil in the low land is alluvial which is deposited by the Meenachil river and streams over centuries. These are ideal for paddy cultivation. The Western portion such as Vaikom and Kottayam taluks were predominantly used for paddy cultivation. Secondly, the midland covered by laterite is gently sloping. This region supports a mixed agriculture pattern including both food crops and cash crops. The major crops produced in the region are rice, tapioca coconuts, pineapple banana and a wide variety of vegetables. Thirdly, the upper region which covered Meenachil and Kanjirappilly taluks have a thin forest soil cover. It supports luxuriant growth of plantation crops such as rubber, pineapple, ginger, turmeric as well as the eastern portion of the region is well suited for cultivating spices such as pepper, tea, coffee and cardamom. These plantation crops made significant contributions to the export commodities which form a backbone of local economic growth of the region.

Land use under Meenachil basin

The land use refers to human activities and the various uses which are carried on land. The Meenachil basin can be divided into high land, agricultural land, forest land, waste land, water bodies as well as other marshy lands. Initially, the high land is an area defined by human habitation developed due to non-agriculture land use. There is nothing but rock below these regions and almost 5% of the upper region is made up of grassland. In the Meenachil valley the top portion of the basin comes under this category.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 06.

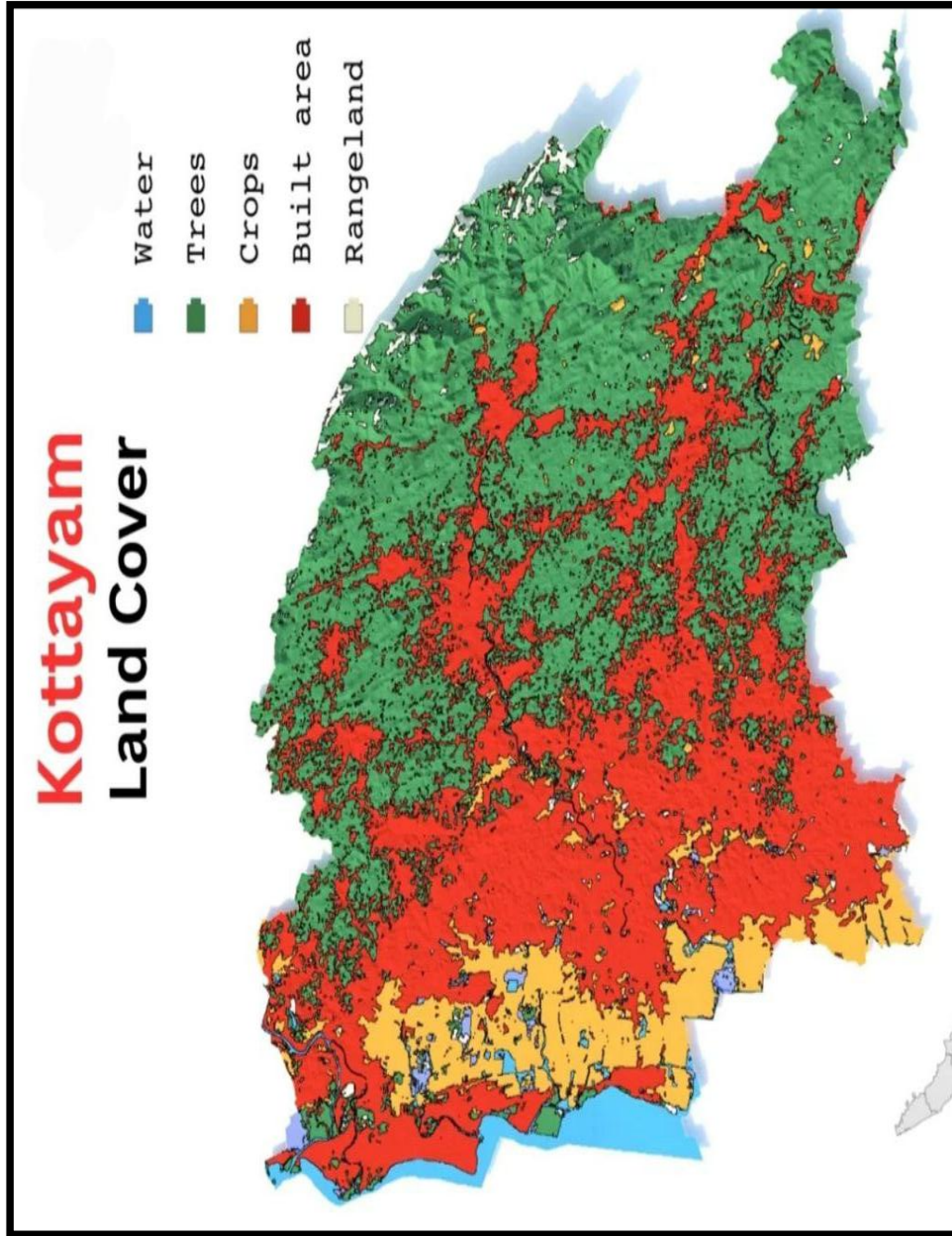


Fig 2.3: Kottayam Land Cover. (not in scale) (Courtesy: Instagram. Data Bandar)

Secondly, agricultural land which is primarily used for farming and production of food crops as well as commercial and horticultural crops. These areas distributed the fertile soil on both sides of the basin and the earlier paleochannels were formed into agricultural lands in recent times. About 85% of the land is made up of mixed agriculture and horticultural plantations, with 15% being double cropped paddy lands¹⁸. The midland and some of the seasonal waterlogged areas of lower portions consist the major portion of agriculture and nowadays in the midland paddy lands were converted to the plantations such as rubber and pineapple in the region.

Third category is forest land consisting of acquired, private and notified forest which includes evergreen/ semi evergreen, woodland as well as disturbed forests. This region formed the high ranges of the Meenachil basin and the most favourable place for the early human habitations. The fourth category is the waste land defined as underutilized land that can be resorted to vegetative cover with reasonable efforts, as well as land deteriorating because of natural causes or improper soil and water management. This category can be divided into three main classes such as land with or without scrub mainly on the uplands and erosion prone areas. Secondly underutilized degraded forest lands and thirdly stoney waste/ barren rocks areas. These categories make up 8.46% of the entire Kottayam region.

The fifth category is water bodies in which the lower area has been made up of wasteland. Nearly 5% of the lower region is formed up of water bodies¹⁹. In addition to natural lakes, rivers and canals constituted this and finally due to physical characteristics and nature of occurrence and other features marshy lands were formed in the region.

¹⁸ Vincy Mary Varghese. *A Watershed Approach for Sustainable Ecosystem Management of Meenachil River Basin with Emphasise on Remote Sensing and GIS*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. School of Environmental Science, MG University. 2015. p.43.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

Traces of Early Communities

The Meenachil river basin, which was part of the Western Ghats, has a rich history of indigenous communities and cultural practices. The historical and archaeological evidence such as megalithic practices, mode of worship which continued into modern days as well as different types of tools which were founded in the regions were showing the presence of ancient communities in the region. There were mainly four communities inhabited in the Eastern ranges of the basin, especially in Kanjirappilly and Meenachil taluks. In addition, several other tribal groups had settled in nearby region's mainly in Devikulam, Udumbanchola taluks. They were also included in this discussion because these areas were once part of the Western Ghats.

Tribal Communities	Inhabited areas
1. Mala Arayans 2. Mala Pandarams 3. Mala Ulladans 4. Mannans	Meenachil Kanjirappilly Taluks of Kottayam District Kanjirappilly Region Meenachil Kanjirappilly Taluks of Kottayam District Kanjirappilly Region
Communities near the region mainly on the eastern Ranges of the study area	
5. Karavazhis 6. Kurumbas 7. Muthuvans 8. Paliyars	Eastern ranges – Anjunad Valley Eastern ranges – Anjunad Valley Devikulam Taluk Eastern ranges – Anakkara, Udumbanchola

Table: 2.1: Tribal communities in the region

Mala Arayans were one of the most significant traditional communities within the indigenous tribal groups. They were primarily found in the Meenachil and Kanjirappilly Taluks of the region. *Arayan* is a modified form of '*Arasan*' which means king and the

Mala Arayans meaning, ‘king of the hill’²⁰. Their subsistence forms include hunting, gathering forest products and shifting cultivation. They eventually transitioned to settled agriculture and began cultivating commercial crops like rubber. Majority of them follow ritual traditions of contemporary hindu religion and they commonly worship Sastha, Durga and their ancestors too. However, during the early 19th CE the missionaries helped the community for the conversion to the Christianity and subsequently, the community made progress in the social and economic domain of the society.

Mala Pandarams: They were a semi – nomadic tribal group who were the inhabitants of the region’s forested area especially in Kanjirappilly Taluk. They lived a nomadic lifestyle centred on hunting and food gathering but more recently they settled down and started trading medicinal plants²¹. They spoke a poor dialect with a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam words and phrases. Generally, they live in small groups close to streams or rivulets in the forest and they have very minimal contact with other communities. They mainly worshiped Sastha and Karuppuswami and some of them were following Kaali Mariamman, Chaplamma, Kattlaparamma and other forest deities. The primitive community abandons the dead body where it died rather than burying or cremating it. Later on, they buried themselves in graves that were deep and distant from their communities.

Mala Ulladans: The people who lived in the interior are indicated Ulladan. *Ul* signifies interior and *nadu* means country. They are also a nomadic people who hunt and gather food for subsistence. They are primarily located in the Kanjirappilly and Meenachil Taluk of the Kottayam district²². Earlier they lived in the hollow of trees and under over hanging trees and later in huts. Over time they started to collect the medicinal herbs for their income. They were devil worshipers and animists and they follow the deities like Chakki, Kottia

²⁰ A. Sreedhara Menon. 1975. *Op.cit.* p.56.

²¹ *Ibid.* p.57.

²² *Ibid.* pp. 57-58.

and Ayya and believe in black magic. For their protection, they propitiate the spirit of their ancestors. Their dead bodies were buried in isolated locations in a solemn manner.

Mannans: The people from this community were concentrated in the Kanjirappilly taluk in Kottayam District, Devikulam taluk in Idukki and Attappady region of Palakkad. They practiced animism, worshiping forest deities and natural spirit and believed themselves as the vessels of the king of Madurai²³. They spoke a dialect that was a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam and practiced slash and burn cultivation in these regions.

Other Groups

In addition to these four communities, the Karavazhis, Kurumba's, Muthuvans and Paliyar's inhabited the neighbouring regions. The Karavazhis and Kurumba's were primarily located in the Anjunad valley of the Devikulam Taluk. The Karavazhis also known as Mala Pulayans²⁴ were settled in the Eastern ranges particularly in Anjunad Valley. They buried their dead in a common graveyard, placing the head towards the North. Their funeral processions were accompanied by music and drums²⁵. The Kurumba's considered themselves as superior to all other hill tribes. They spoke a highly unintelligible form of Malayalam. Like the Karavazhis, they buried their dead in a common graveyard close to their settlement, and placed all the belongings beside the head portion²⁶.

The Muthuvans and Paliyar were traditionally located in the Devikulam and Udumbanchola taluks. The Muthuvans are believed to have migrated from the forest regions of Madurai and settled in the isolated hamlets, deep forest, areas that are difficult to access. They also practiced slash and burn cultivations as well as terrace farming, relying on the hilly terrain for agriculture. They practiced animism and worshipped natural spirits.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Nikhildas. N. *Archaeology of the Anjunad Valley with special reference to the Megaliths and Rock Art, Idukki District, Kerala*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Department of Archaeology, Deccan College. Pune. 2014.p 27. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/22701>. Accessed on. 06/05/2023.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 26.

Their main deities were Murukan and Kannaki Amman. The Paliyar on the other hand, inhabited bordering regions, especially around Cumbum, Udumbanchola and Anakkara. They generally lived in the rock shelters and caves which is reflected in their name 'Paliyar' derived from the word '*Pali*' meaning cave.

The study of these tribal communities is crucial for understanding the suitability of the region for the early human settlements and its continuity. These communities utilized the region's geography for their entire livelihood. For their subsistence, they rely on the terrain, hills, rivers, river valleys, plants, animals and other natural resources. The hunting, shifting cultivation, slash and burn cultivation, fishing and the construction of megalithic monument shown the region's capacity for early human habitation. The material culture, mode of worship, rituals, social and economic aspects and way of life will bridge the gap between the past and present.

Historical Background of the region

The river Meenachil has been mentioned by several names in local usage such as *Gauna Nadi*, *Valanjar* and *Kavanar*. These names derive from various stories that are believed to have taken place at different periods in history. Among them the most believing story is connected with the Meenachil, is comes from the goddess Madurai Meenakshi, who was protector of Poonjar Rajas and Meenachil Karthas who come to Kottayam from the Cumbum- Gudallor region²⁷. Meenakshi evolved into '*Meenachi*' and then '*Meenachil*' over time. Another tale is regarding the name Gauna Nadi which is believed to come from the holy vessel of sage Gauna Maharshi. He kept an idol of Lord Subramanya in the vessel and filled sacred water from the Sapthanadis which threw away, when he was disappointed that he had missed Lord Rama's darshan upon his return from Lanka²⁸. The idol was

²⁷ Vincy Mary Varghese. *Op.cit.* pp.33-34.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.34.

eventually housed in the Kidangoor Subramanya Temple and the water that spilled from his vessel came to be known as the Meenachil river.

The Kottayam region was under the rule of second Chera power during the medieval period, as evidenced by the Vazhappally inscription of Rajasekhara (820-1102 CE), Perunnai and Thrikkodithanam inscription by Bhaskara Ravi Varman and Perunnai inscription of Rama Varma Kulasekhara (1090 – 1102 AD)²⁹. The entire region was part of three distinct nadus including Nantruzainadu, Munjunadu and Vempolinadu during the second Chera rule. The boundaries of this nadus are not clear but with the available evidence, the Changanassery and Kanjirappilly taluks, a portion of Meenachil taluks were under the Nantruzainadu. Munjunadu ruled over the Kottayam and Ettumanoor regions while the Vaikom and Meenachil were under the Vempolinadu. By the early 12th century, the region was divided into Thekkumkoor and Vadakkumkoor. The Northern portion of Vempolinadu became the Vadakkumkoor while Munjunadu and portion of Nantruzainadu constituted the Thekkumkoor. In addition to this, the North Eastern part of the district which is in the high ranges was ruled by the Poonjar and Meenachil principalities³⁰.

The Thekkumkoor was a powerful territory during the medieval time. It comprised of the Changanassery and Kanjirappilly Taluks and a portion of High ranges. They had their capitals in the Vennimala, Manikandapuram and Thazhathangadi regions in different times. Vadakkumkoor Rajas and their capital Kaduthuruthy were mentioned in Unnuneelisesandesam and Sukasandesam of Lakshmidasa, which were written in the 14th century AD³¹. Vaikom, Ettumanoor and a portion of Meenachil taluk were included in them. It was a small region that was strategically located among the inland waterways and paddy fields. The Champakassery Rajas are close to them and the raja gave portion of Kuttanad

²⁹ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*. National Book stall, Kottayam.1970. pp. 245-247, MGS Narayanan. *Perumal's of Kerala: Brahmin Oligarchy and Ritual Monarchy*. Cosmo Books, Thrissur.1996. pp. 280-282.

³⁰ A. Sreedhara Menon. 1975. *Op.cit.* pp. 32-34.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 22.

to his wife who was the princess of Vadakkumkoor³². Both the Vadakkumkoor and Thekkumkoor had a trade relation with the Portuguese and Dutch and the Portuguese referred to the Vadakkumkoor as the pepper country because of the abundance of the finest quality of pepper that grew here. Mathandavarma later annexed these entire regions and extended his rule up to Meenachil river in the 18th century AD.

According to K.P. Padmanabha Menon, the Poonjar principality was founded by a member of Pandya Royal family from Madurai³³ Manavikrama Kulasekhara Perumal. Due to the constant internal conflicts and political instability by poligars and Kulasekhara's they were forced to migrate to Poonjar principality in the Western Ghats. Earlier they ruled over a large portion Western Ghats and Meenachil plains including Poonjar, Erattupetta and Vagamon and extended to Thekkady and Kumily. Later in 18th century AD, the Marthandavarma expanded his rule over the Poonjar and later established it as a tributary of his Travancore state. In the 19th century AD, the English planters acquired large tracts of land in the high ranges for the tea plantations from the Poonjar Rajas.

The last small principality that Marthandavarma annexed was the Meenachil. It is believed to have originated from *Njavakkat Karthas*. According to local tradition, the family was descended from the two ladies of Vengalur, who were married and brought from Kumbakonam to here.

Conclusion

Recent studies on Kerala shows that during the Holocene period, the entire region underwent significant climatic and environmental changes that influenced its geography, ecosystem and human habitation. The early phase of Holocene characterised by warm and humid climate which followed the end of ice age. After the warm climate during the Late Holocene the climatic stability facilitated to the human habitation in the region. It can be

³² *Ibid.* p. 27.

³³ K.P. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala. Vol. II.* Manohar Publishers, Delhi. 1924. pp-85-91.

assumed that the early human settlements were existed in the Meenachil valley during the time. The Iron Age megalithic period in South India began during the 10th century BC and there are several reasons that contributed to the possibility of human settlement in this region. Firstly, the favourable climatic condition itself. The valley experienced tropical monsoon climate which is get ample rainfall and maintained warm temperature throughout the year. It created a stable water supply for drinking, fishing and irrigation from the Meenachil river and its tributaries. Secondly, the fertile alluvial soil which came from the monsoon rain and annual floods throughout the basin which made the region suitable for the agricultural production activities. Thirdly, the geographic advantages like elevated terrain and natural formations of hills offered protection from different weather conditions such as cyclones, heat, flood as well as provided dwelling facilities. Fourthly, the availability of natural resources such as stone, wood and bamboo as well as metals and minerals for their tool making and megalithic construction and finally, the river networks served as a natural route for movement and communication for the settlers to explore and connect with the wider region. Together, these geographical, geological, morphological factors created an environment that meet the fundamental needs of early human societies.

Chapter III

‘Roots of Society’

Early Social Formation in the Meenachil River Valley

Introduction

This chapter attempts to explore the early social formation of the Meenachil river valley on the basis of archaeological and historical evidence. It already discusses how the geographical position, favourable climate, and abundant natural resources facilitated sustained human habitation in the river basin from early times. The archaeological findings from the region attest to this long continuum of human presence. It includes prehistoric artifacts particularly four Neolithic celts and evidence of microliths from the region. For the understanding of Iron Age megalithic society, A number of megalithic burials with different typologies have been identified along with Meenachil river basin. The material assemblages recovered from the sites such as ceramics, iron tools, beads and other artifacts which will give the idea into the life and economy of the people especially emergence of burial practices, advent of iron metallurgy, technological advancement, craft specialization and indications of external contacts and trade links.

In addition to material evidence, historical evidence derived from oral traditions such as stories, legends, customs and beliefs also contribute significantly to understanding the social and cultural dynamics of the Meenachil region. The chapter therefore, integrates archaeological data with the evidence from excavation and exploration reports, government records, previous research studies as well as literary and oral traditions to present a comprehensive reconstruction of the early social formation of the Meenachil basin.

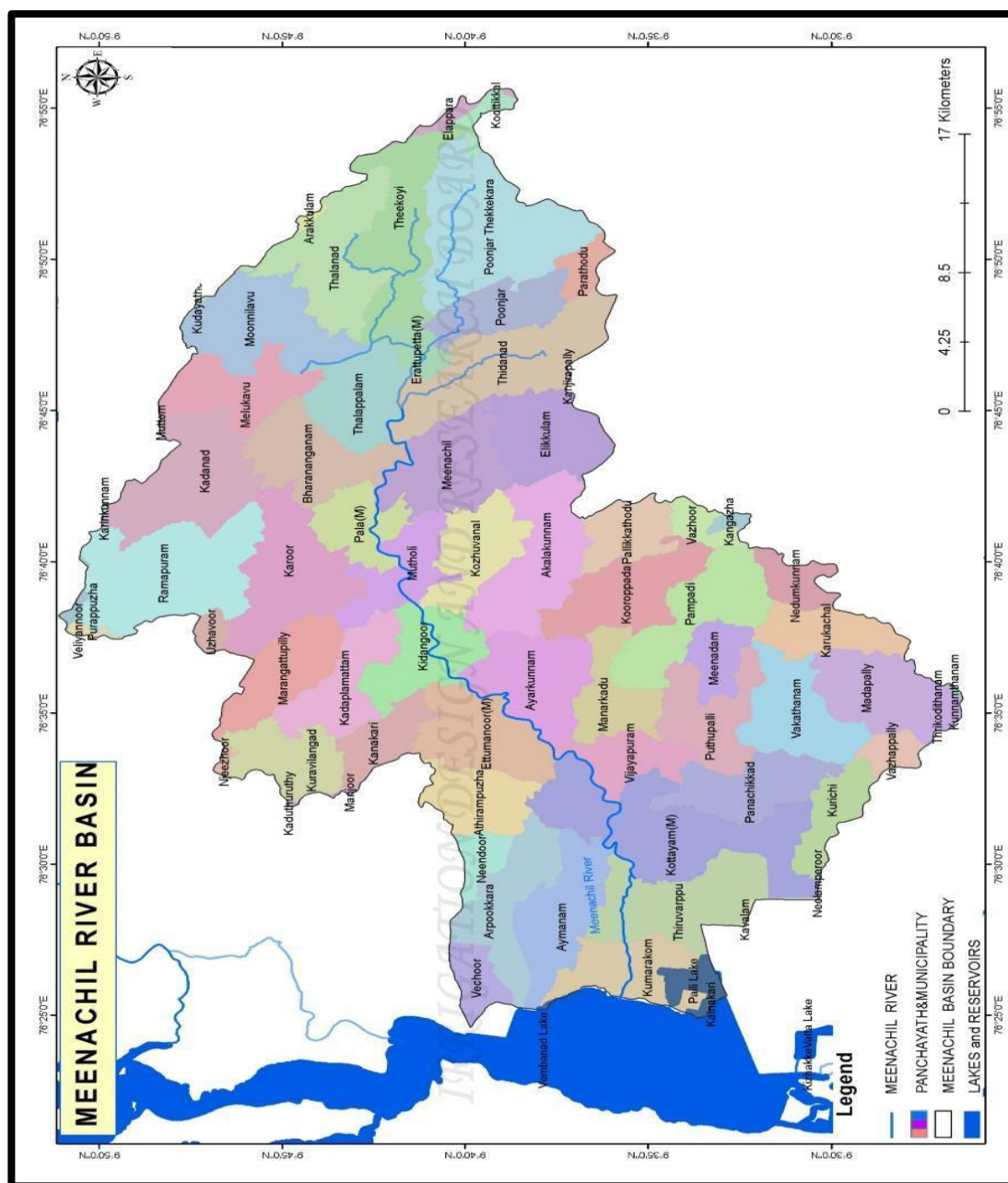


Fig 3.1: Map – Meenachil River Basin (not in scale) (Courtesy: B. Ajayakumar)

Pre Historic Evidences from the Meenachil Basin

During the early explorations in Kerala, the researchers were unable to find any stone tools from the region. This led to the assumption that the area had not supported human settlements in prehistoric times. One of the main reasons suggested was highly dense forest cover and the absence of raw materials like quartzite, used for tool making¹. However, this was changed during the 1970s when P. Rajendran discovered several pre-historic sites across Kerala, including microliths, neolithic celts from different locations². The term ‘celt’ refers to stone tools produced by four basic technologies such as chipping, pecking, grinding and polishing³ and they are typically made from locally available rocks, such as gneiss or granite. As part of the present study, four neolithic celts have been identified from the Meenachil region specifically from Kunnoni, Chemplavu, Pannagam Thodu and Melukavu.

Kunnoni Neolithic Celt

Kunnoni is a village situated at the foothills of Vagamon, within the Poonjar Thekkekara panchayat. It lies about three km from Poonjar and is characterised by high terrain with thick vegetation. P. Rajendran reported the discovery of a neolithic axe made of quartz from this site. According to him various types of scarppers and choppers made by locally available quartz⁴ were also found from the region. The present author collected a letter document during the personal communication with Thomas Kunnikkal, a teacher and native of Kunnoni, who had been part of P. Rajendran’s exploration team. This letter describes that the celt as a grinding stone with flat surfaces that converge at one end,

¹ Robert Bruce Foot. *Catalogue of the Prehistoric Antiquities in the Madras*. Government Press, Madras. 1901. pp. 04-06.

² P. Rajendran. *Unravelling the Past: Archaeology of Keralam and the Adjacent Region in South India*. Heritage Publishers, New Delhi. 2017. pp. 112-118.

³ D.P Agarwal and J.S Kharakwal. *Bronze and Iron Ages in South Asia*. Archaeology of South Asia- II, Aryan Books International, Delhi. 2003. p.236.

⁴ P. Rajendran. “Oliyani Cist Burial Excavation”, *Journal for the Centre for Heritage Studies II*. 2005. pp. 41-46.

indicating it used for grinding⁵. In addition to these, microlithic tools made from pebbles⁶ were also founded from the region. They were mistakenly classified the microliths as megalithic tools in the newspaper⁷. However, apart from a single newspaper report, no further evidence or detailed studies are available regarding these findings. The explorations and discoveries were made before 2005 but there is a lack of proper documentation, material analysis and photographic records.



Fig 3.2: Kunnoni Neolithic Adze.



Fig 3.3: Microliths (Courtesy. Thomas Kunnikkal)

Chemplavu Neolithic Celt

Chemplavu is located in Kidangoor Panchayath, Meenachil taluk in Kottayam. A neolithic celt was discovered by sand miners in late 2006 from the river basin near Cherpunkal area. The find was reported in newspapers on 26th January 2007 but no further details are available. The celt features a straight cutting edge, and a rounded butt end⁸. It has since been handed over to the Archaeological Museum of St. Thomas college Pala.

⁵ P. Rajendran letter to Thomas Kunnikkal dated 29-06- 2009 (See the letter in appendix)

⁶ P. Rajendran, Information from newspaper. No further data available.

⁷ The photographs indicate that the tools were microliths; however, the original materials are currently unavailable for examination.

⁸ Cyriac Jose. "Neolithic and Iron Age- Megalithic Findings from the Meenachil River Basin, Kottayam". *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology. Department of Archaeology. University of Kerala.* 8.1. 2020. p. 450.



Fig 3.4: Neolithic celt from Chemplavu (Courtesy: Cyriac Jose. 2020)

Neolithic Celt from Pannagam Thodu

Pannagam Thodu is a tributary of river Meenachil, about 30 km long, eventually joining the Meenachil river at Punnathara. The name Pannagam meaning ‘snake’ refers to its winding course through the hills. A neolithic celt seems to be finely made, of an uncommon type was discovered along the banks of Pannagam Thodu. It appears to have slipped down from the river bank and been exposed by the flowing water. The celt measures 6.5 cm in length, 4.5 cm. width and 2 cm. maximum thickness⁹. It has a flat butt, an oval section, and a straight cutting edge. The surface is highly polished in condition. However no scientific studies have been conducted on this celt so far.



Fig 3.5: Pannagam Thodu Neolithic celt (Courtesy. Goutham Thiruvanchoor)

⁹ The celt was discovered by Goutham V. (Teacher Parippu LP School) and remains in his personal collection.

Around the region Kunnoni, there are two notable rock shelters located such as Kunnoni Muthallu¹⁰ and Anangumpadi Muthanallu¹¹, which were probably used during an early period. According to local information, these shelters are called as ‘*Muthallu*¹²’ which means the rock shelters.



Fig 3.6: Muthallu (Kunnoni), Anangumpadi Muthanallu

Both sites are situated at the foothills, close to tributaries of the Meenachil river. Kunnoni *Muthallu* was examined by P. Rajendran, who documented it as a 10-meter-long cave that ended in a pit. Unfortunately, the site has been heavily disturbed due to contemporary human activities. The Anangumpadi muthallu contains natural springs that currently serves as a water source for neighbouring families. This is now part of the local panchayat water irrigation project.

Unidentified Neolithic Celt from Melukavu

In 2020, a Neolithic celt? was identified by Tony Antony (Government Teachers Training Institute Kottayam) during his field exploration from a local house near Melukavu. According to him, the artifact had been found by a local resident near a nearby stream and

¹⁰ *Malayala Manorama*. News Paper. 2016 April 18 Monday. p. 04. see appendix.

¹¹ *Poonjar- Thekkekkara Gramapanchayath, Neerthada Vikasana Report*, Water Authority, Kottayam.2018. p. 49.

¹² Thomas Kunnikkal. *Personal Interview*. 03-06-2023.

was kept in their personal collection¹³. During his visit he photographed the object and later shared the image on social media.



Fig 3.7: Unidentified celt? Melukavu (Courtesy. Tony Antony 2025)

In the present exploration, the author attempted to locate the exact findspot but was unsuccessful. Without proper material examination, it cannot be conclusively classified as a Neolithic celt; However, its overall shape and reported find context suggest that it might indeed belong to the Neolithic period.

There were limited evidences for the prehistoric phase in the Meenachil river basin and it does not necessarily imply the absence of prehistoric habitation. The discovery of these neolithic celts provide important clues to support the possibility of early human activities in the area. Even though they are found from the secondary context, they were found in the basin of tributaries of Meenachil river, such as Kunnoni Thodu, Pannagam Thodu, Cherpunkal and Melukavu Thodu. It suggests that the early groups may have chosen the valleys and small streams, possibly to avoid seasonal flooding in the main Meenachil river.

Despite the discovery of four isolated Neolithic celts in the Meenachil river basin, there is no clear evidence of settled habitation from this period. During fieldwork, the

¹³ Tony Antony. *Personal Interview*. 07-10-2025.

present researcher attempted to identify associated features such as post holes and lithic debitage. However, the sites were highly vegetated and largely inaccessible. Moreover, the extensive alluvial deposition of Meenachil river, combined with erosion and subsequent land- use changes, has made it difficult to identify potential settlement sites in the region.

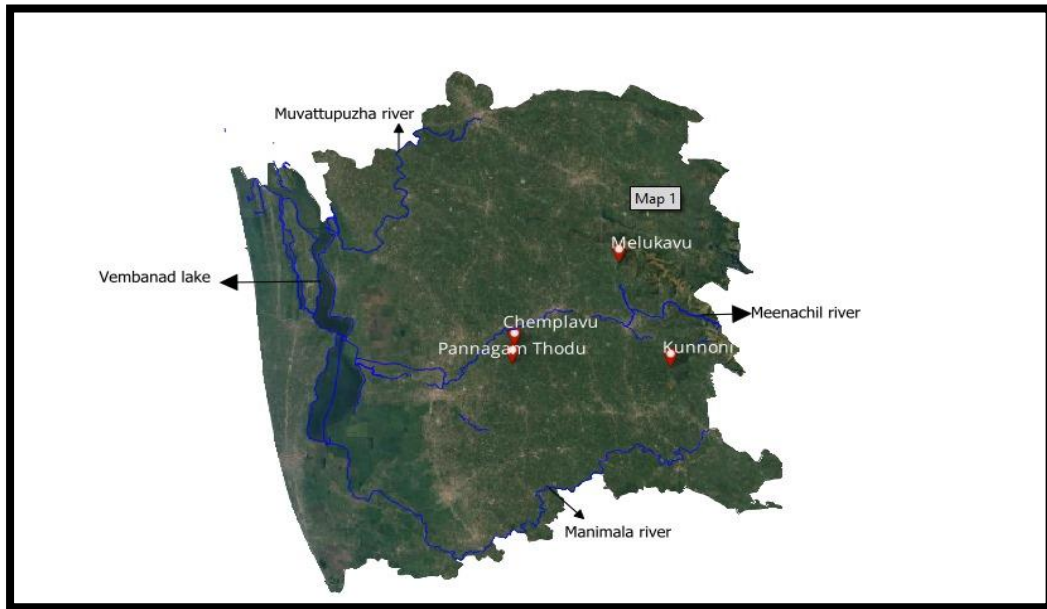


Fig 3.8: Map- Locations of Neolithic Celt (not in scale)

Recent studies indicate that similar celts have been recovered in megalithic contexts, such as at Kallimaly near Rajakkad¹⁴, where one celt was found near an urn burial and at the recently excavated site of Anappara¹⁵ in Idukki, an early historic habitation site where such objects are believed to have continued for ritual purposes. Even today, communities like the *Malapandaram* tribes of Konni Forest (Pamba basin) were worshipping the celt as *linga*¹⁶. At Kalady in the Periyar basin, a number of polished axes and celts were collected by a local resident Ali¹⁷, further highlighting the continued cultural significance of these celts. On the other side, it is important to note that these four celts were not subjected to

¹⁴ Sandra M.S. *Megalithic Vestiges in Udumbanchola Taluk, Idukki*. Unpublished MA Dissertation. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2018.p.62.

¹⁵ From the Talk of Dinesh Krishnan: *Early Historic Archaeology of the Periyar Valley: Pattanam to Anappara*. KCHR Foundation Day Lecture Series, UC. College Aluva. 13.03.2025.

¹⁶ Ambily. C.S. *Holocene Archaeology of Pamba Basin*. PhD Thesis. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2017.p. 44. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/414073>. Accessed on 23/05/2024.

¹⁷Exhibition on Tools. School of Social Science M.G. University by A. K. Ali, Mekalady Ernakulam. 26-08-2022.

any systematic study. Three of them are currently held in private collections and the lack of proper documentation and preservation further complicates interpretations regarding cultural contexts and chronology. Although, available information is limited, but it is providing a promising foundation for further exploration of possible neolithic phases in the region.

Iron Age- Megalithic Evidences from the Meenachil Basin

The present study investigates the megalithic burials in Meenachil river valley as an indicator of human habitation and socio-cultural complexity during the Iron Age Megalithic period. The ‘megalithism’ is the practice of constructing large stone monuments primarily served as a sepulchral monument to marking or commemorating the dead. The period generally dated between mid-first millennium BC to mid first millennium AD¹⁸ and most of the evidence derived from these burial structures and associated grave goods. The previous discussions have already suggested that the strategic location, along with the favourable geographical and climatical conditions, made the Meenachil basin an attractive area for early settlers. The present study has identified 23 megalithic burial sites within the Meenachil basin. The previous excavations in the region have unearthed different material goods including ceramics, iron implements, beads and other artifacts. These findings point to the existence of an organized megalithic community with the ability to mobilize labour and resources for the construction of megalithic burials. Moreover, the variety of burial goods shows the agricultural activities, craft production and trade networks among them.

The study of the megalithic burials in the Meenachil basin can be organized into four categories. Firstly, accidental discoveries and salvage operations, during the time of natural disasters and construction activities such as road building, and foundations and digging activities such as canals and ponds. Unfortunately, many of the sites in the basin

¹⁸ Rajan Gurukkal and M.R Raghava Varier. *Cultural History of Kerala Vol-I*. Department of Cultural Publications. Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. 1999. p. 103.

were destroyed before they could be documented. Secondly, early exploration conducted by the colonial officers. Their reports often lacked details, features, drawings except locations. The site locations were inaccurate due to the later administrative changes in taluks and panchayaths. Thirdly, the excavations and exploration done by ASI and School of Social Science, MG University. Finally, the findings of independent researchers and local historians have also contributed to the identification of burials in the Meenachil basin.

Distribution of Megalithic Burials in the Meenachil Basin

No:	Site Name	Taluk	Typology	Reference
1	Vedagiri	Kottayam	4 Menhirs	IAR 1963-64. p.13
2	Vedagiri	Kottayam	Hood Stones	IAR 1963-64. p.13
3	Thevarathumala	Vaikom	Menhir	Adarsh Shaju. 2023
4	Thirunakkara	Kottayam	Menhir	IAR 1963-64. P 13
5	Muttom	Kottayam	Misinterpreted Menhir	Renjinimol.2013
6	Vempally	Vaikom	Dolmen	Aparna K R. 2025
7	Kaalikavu	Meenachil	Dolmen	Cyriac Jose. 2020
8	Kuzhikkandathil	Meenachil	Dolmen	Aparna K R. 2025
9	Kurinji	Meenachil	Dolmen	Nikhil Das and Joglekar. 2011
10	Kizhathari	Meenachil	Dolmen	Aparna K R.2025
11	Marangattupalli	Meenachil	Dolmen	Cyriac Jose. 2020
12	Kayyoor	Meenachil	Dolmen	Aparna K R. 2025
13	Kunnoni	Meenachil	Urn	P. Rajendran. 2005
14	Parappilly	Meenachil	Urn	Cyriac Jose. 2020
15	Neendoor	Kottayam	Urn	M G University Museum,
16	Kudakkachira	Meenachil	Urn	Cyriac Jose. 2020
17	Thellakam	Kottayam	Urn	K.P Shajan
18	Thakkadi	Meenachil	Cist	P. Rajendran. 2005
19	Neendoor	Kottayam	Cist	Aparna K R.2025
20	Payyanithottam	Meenachil	Cist	Cyriac Jose. 2020
21	Mattathilpara	Meenachil	Cist	Kadanad Excavation 2007-08
22	Kurumannu	Meenachil	Cist	Kadanad Excavation 2007-08
23	Inchukavu	Meenachil	Dolmenoid Cist	Kadanad Excavation 2007-08

Table 3.1: Distribution of Megalithic Burials.

The primary objective was to locate maximum sites from different geographic locations within the basin and to revisit already reported sites to know the current condition of the burials. The study documents a total of 23 megalithic burials of different typologies such as Dolmen, Cists, Urns, Menhirs and Dolmenoid Cist. The author documented as much as possible information including locations, photographs and local legends associated with these burials.

Megalithic burials were often associated with local myths and legends¹⁹. In some cases, these beliefs led to the protection of the monument and in some other cases it contributed to the destruction too. Traditionally, stone worship was considered as a protection against illness, evils and demons. Meenachil basin also exhibits this practice, especially in connection with menhirs. Menhirs were upright monolithic stones, placed vertically into the ground, varying in height are known as ‘*nattukallu*’ ‘*patakallu*’ and ‘*pulachikallu*’. Four menhirs have been found from the basin and all of them are still under worship.

Vedavyasagiri Menhir

Vedavyasagiri is located in Athirampuzha village of Kottayam Taluk, at an elevation of 28 meters above sea level. The site lies on a small hillock about 200 meters away from S. E. Limited and approximately 2.5 kilometres away from Ettumanoor railway station in Kottayam district. The site was earlier known as *Vedankari* or Vedagiri and it is currently known as ‘Vedavyasagiri temple.’ In some local legends, the temple referred to as ‘*Dakshina Kasi*’ as it is considered as *garbhagriha* of the Ettumanoor Mahadeva Temple²⁰. The site consists of four menhirs which are all made from undressed granite boulders of varying size and shapes. Among them, the largest menhir stands about 9 feet in tall and is

¹⁹ Babington. J. “Description of the Pandoo Coolies in Malabar”. in *Transaction of the Literary Society of Bombay*. 3: 1823. pp.324-330, Rajesh. K. P. *Vadakkan Malabar Samooahavum Charithravum*. National Book stall, Kottayam. 2014, pp 17-31

²⁰ Sreekanth. V. J. *Exploration of an Archaeological Site in Kerala: The Case of Vedagiri*. Unpublished MA Dissertation. School of Social Science, MG University. 2012, p.35.

currently under worship. It is covered with a yellow cloth and sheltered under a separate roof, with a basement and an oil lamp²¹ which is reflecting the importance of complexes in the spiritual way nowadays.



Fig 3.9: Vedavyasagiri Temple.



Fig 3.10: Menhir worshiped as Bheema

The main menhir is worshiped as Bheema and the remaining three menhirs are installed in front of it at a distance ranging from 10 to 15 meters. The northern menhir is a prolonged shape with a rounded body and a flattened base. The middle menhir has a vertical rectangular shape, standing 6 feet high with plain surfaces on both sides. The southern menhir measures 5 feet height and has a semi-circular shape with backward sloping position. According to local oral traditions, it is believed that the Pandavas visited this place during their forest dwelling (*vanavasa*) and dwelt on these hills. It is also believed that there were six stones in the area, with the largest menhir representing Sage Vyasa as a teacher and the five menhirs symbolising the Pancha Pandavas as students. Another legend holds that the sage Vedavyasa performed penance here and composed 18 puranas from this site. In the same hill there were multiple hood stones which are believed to be *kalari* or the

²¹ Aparna. K.R. "Iron Age Megalithic Findings in Ettumanoor Region, Kottayam". *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*. Department of Archaeology. University of Kerala. 10. 2025. p. 329.

classroom of Vedavyasa. On the first day of every month, *deeparadhana* or ceremony of lightning lamps and special *poojas* are performed by local priests²².



Fig 3.11: Three Menhirs in front of the Temple

The site was identified by K. Chandrasekhara Menon of the Southern Circle of Survey of Archaeological Survey of India. During his visit he conducted a trial digging and found iron implements and tools. However, apart from a brief mention by M.G. Sasibooshan²³, there were no further information available regarding this trial digging. According to local accounts, there was once a cave and a number of menhirs in front of the temple, but most were destroyed by the miners²⁴. Only four of them have been recovered.

Multiple Hood Stones

The hood stones at Vedavyasagiri consist of circular alignments made of five to twelve orthostats typically erected from laterite. Beneath these structures, the deceased were buried, either in a pit, an urn or sarcophagus. At Vedagiri there are two distinct sets of

²² Sethu Maria. “Vedagiri: An Undisclosed Megalithic Site”. *Insight, an International Multilingual Journal for Arts and Humanities*, Vol: I. Issue:9. November. 2021.p.10.

²³ M.G Sasibooshan. *Kerala Charithrathilekkulla Nattuvazhikal*, SPCS, Kottayam. 2016.p.125.

²⁴ Sethu Maria. 2021.*Op.cit.* p.10.

hood stones within a 50 meters distance from the Menhirs²⁵. Both sects are composed of stone slabs which are placed in an inwardly inclined manner. The local people recall that three groups of hood stones once existed in the area, but one has been completely misplaced, only two are visible today. One of these structures is arranged in a complete circle without joining the top slabs, giving it an open circular form. In recent times, local people have been lightninging lamps inside this stone structure as part of their rituals²⁶. The second hood stone is half circular in shape, with many of its stones scattered around the locality. Due to thick vegetation, it is difficult to locate and identify the remains of this structure.



Fig 3.12: Hood Stones I and II

K. Chandrasekhara Menon identified this structure as cairn circles²⁷ and it was supported by the following researchers. Cairn circles are typically characterised by their circular or oval shapes and are composed of small stones. During the exploration, the present scholar observed that the site contains larger, rectangular stones which are more accurately identified as hood stones.

²⁵ Aparna. K. R. "Megalithic Burials as Cult Spots and Temples, A Study on the Meenachil River Basin, Kottayam, Kerala". *South Indian History Congress*. 2022.p.08.

²⁶ Aparna. K. R. 2025. *Op.cit.* p.09.

²⁷ C. Chandrasekhara Menon. *Indian Archaeological Review-1963-64*. Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi. 1967. p. 13.

The site Vedavyasagiri was earlier known as ‘*Vedankari*’, where ‘*vedan*’ means hill and ‘*kari*’ denotes water. The hill was once had five natural springs that flowed throughout the year, even during hot summer²⁸. Currently two of these springs were located by the scholar, locally known as ‘*Vyasatheerth*’. These springs are considered as holy water and are now protected by stone enclosures. Some of the earlier local histories mentioned that the hill was once inhabited by the tribal group, *Mala Arayans*²⁹ and they used these water sources for their daily needs and performed ancestral worship at this site. Over time, these practices were absorbed and later it transformed into brahminical hindu worship traditions.



Fig 3.13: Natural Springs in the Vedagiri Hills (*Vyasatheerth*)

Thevarathumala Menhir

Thevarathumala is located in the Njeezhoor panchayath of Vaikom Taluk. It is a hilltop site near Kattampack Kurishumala, reaching 1.5 kilometre from the ground. On the hill there are two stones. One is a standing menhir and other is a lying stone that looks like a capstone of a cist burial. These two stones are locally known as *Mannan - Mannathikkallu*³⁰. The main menhir called *Mannathikkallu* is in a standing position at a

²⁸ Parameswaran Namboothiri. *Oorum Perum, Kottayam Jillyale Sthalanamangal*. Thrissur.2004. p.65.

²⁹ Sethu Maria. 2021. *Op.cit.* p.10.

³⁰ Adarsh. Shaju. *Megalithic of Meenachil Taluk, Kottayam*. Unpublished MA Dissertation. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2023.p 36.

height of 2.4 meters and width of 1.3 meter. According to the legend, a woman who was collecting potatoes from the hill fell onto a rock, causing it to break and start bleeding. It was believed that the rock contained a Siva linga and as a result lord Siva cursed her turning her, into a stone. About 15 meters away another stone was found in a lying position believed to representing her husband ‘*Mannan*’. This *mannan* stone looks like an orthostat of a capstone of cist burial, because only this horizontal stone is visible on the surface. The surrounding area is known as *Mannan Kadam* which K. Chandrasekhara Menon previously reported a number of dolmenoid cists³¹ from this site as well as Ajith Kumar mentioned it as a dolmen site. Unfortunately, except these two stones no other structures are visible.



Fig 3.14: Thevarathumala Menhir. Fig 3.15: Capstone? (Courtesy: Adarsh Shaju. 2023)

Thirunakkara Menhir

The Menhir at Thirunakkara is also known as *Rudrakshasila*, *Veerasila* and *Thirunakkarakallu*. It is located in Kottayam taluk (9°35' 24.7" N 76°31'13.9 E). It is a laterite menhir standing in front of the Thirunakkara Mahadeva Temple, measuring 6 feet in height and 4 feet in width. According to local legends, one story tells about a *pulaya*

³¹ C. Chandrasekhara Menon. *Indian Archaeological Review-1965-66*. Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi. 1973. p. 21.

couple who attempt to harm ‘the *Nandi*’ the sacred vehicle of Siva, leading to a curse that turns the woman into stone. Another story is about a brahmin priest who was touched by a *pulaya* woman, cursed to become a stone. Recently, the temple authorities carried out several renovations around the menhir and enclosing the menhir with a gate. Today the menhir has become a part of the temple and there is an oil lamp which lights every morning and evening.

There is an alternative view, suggesting that it was not menhir, but rather markers created during the construction of the K.K. Road from Boat Jetty³². Caravan frequently slipped while descending the steep slope of Nakkara Kunnu, leading traders to complain to the authorities. In response, the gradient was reduced by removing the soil and placing laterite stones as height markers. A similar stone, still seen in the backyard of the Kottayam Collectorate, was used for the same purpose, and there having the official letter to these constructions



Fig 3.16: Thirunakkara Menhir Fig 3.17: Muttom Menhir (Renjini Mol. 2013)

³² Agith. K. Sreedhar. *Personal Interview*: SPCS, Kottayam. 09- 08-2025.

Muttom Menhir

Muttom is located in Nattakom Panchayath in the Kottayam Taluk. It is Sree Muthan Muthi Temple in Nattakom which is located very next to a paddy field. The site has four menhirs like granites standing side by side, which measures approximately 6 feet tall and 5 feet wide³³. The menhirs? were worshiped as tribal gods named Muthan and Muthi. The people believed that the spirit residing in the stone would protect them from the diseases. There is an opposite viewpoint regarding the identification of this site as menhir or not by the present author. The argument is based on two reasons. First, the characteristics of these stones suggest that they are more natural rock formations than intentionally placed monuments. Secondly, geological studies indicate the area was submerged under sea in the past. Thus, their classification as menhirs seems to be a misinterpretation based primarily on superficial resemblance rather than archaeological evidence.

All the above menhirs are under worship. Worship makes these are under protection on one side; these are good for preserving these monuments. The second category under worships is dolmens which were consists of a single capstone supported by multiple upright orthostats, arranged on the ground to create an enclosed chamber beneath the capstone³⁴. They exhibit different features such as some have portholes, some dolmens are double chambered and some others are encircled by a stone circle. They are also known as ‘stone of monkeys’ and *Kurangupattadai* with local legends connecting to the Hanuman and ‘ancestors treasure hoards’³⁵. In the Meenachil region, 7 dolmens have been located.

Vempally Dolmen

Vempally is a village in the Uzhavoor block, located 6 kilometres from Ettumanoor. The dolmen site is situated 500 meters away from the Vempally Devi temple along the

³³ Renjinimol. M.N. *Archaeology of Kottayam Taluk*. Unpublished MA Dissertation. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2013. p.24.

³⁴ Gururaj Rao. B.K. *Megalithic Culture in South India*. University of Mysore, Mysore. 1972. p. 38.

³⁵ L.A. Krishna Iyer. *Kerala Megaliths and Their Builders*. University of Madras, Chennai. 1967. p. 15.

Vempally- Kadappoor Road. The dolmen is located in the backyard of a house, about 100 meters away from the front road, and currently it is used as a wood storage area. The dolmen is multi-chambered which is east-west oriented and filled with soil. The orthostats are large in size, with the capstone measuring 12-meter length and 7.5-meter width³⁶. The western side of the dolmen is open, while the eastern side has multiple stones used to extend the chamber to make it two. According to the property owner, initially the structure stood fully above the ground³⁷, but over time it is covered with soil which now looks like a dolmenoid cist. The Vempally Kattachirathodu is a nearby water source.



Fig 3.18: Vempally Dolmen

Kaalikavu Dolmen

Kaalikavu is a small village in Kuravilangad Panchayat in Meenachil Taluk. The site is located 1.5 kilometres from M.C Road along the Vayala- Kuriam road within a rubber plantation on a private property. The dolmen is oriented east- west and situated 38-meter above the sea level. The orthostats are large and heavy but have been partially disturbed due to the plantation activities. The interior of the chamber is filled with red colour soil giving an appearance of a dolmenoid cist³⁸. The western side remains open while other

³⁶Aparna. K.R. 2025. *Op.cit.* p.332.

³⁷ Devadas. *Personal Interview.* 25-06-2022.

³⁸ Cyriac Jose. 2020. *Op.cit.* p. 453.

sides are covered with three orthostats. The capstone measures approximately 3.8-meter length 0.42-meter thickness and 12 cup marks³⁹? are visible on the surface. The southern orthostats are 2.76-meter long and the northern side is 2.4 meter and the eastern orthostats measure 1.50 meters.



Fig 3.19: Kaalikavu Dolmen.



Fig 3.20: Chamber fill with soil

Kuzhikkandathil Dolmen

The dolmen is located on the property of Kuzhikkandathil house which is 400 years old traditional nair tharavad. The site lies behind the Kurinji Sreekrishna Swami Temple, along the Ramapuram- Kurinji Road. The dolmen is in a highly disturbed condition due to the rubber plantation and the family has attempted to dismantle the structure for plantation⁴⁰. It causes the stones to be scattered around the property. The thick vegetation makes it very difficult to measure the orthostats accurately. However, four orthostats and a huge capstone measuring 1.8-meter length 2.5-meter width are identifiable⁴¹. The structure is east west oriented and its inner portion filled with soil which make an appearance of dolmenoid cist. No port holes are visible. Additionally, several stone orthostats are scattered

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 454.

⁴⁰ M. Ramesan. Kuzhikkandathil. *Personal Interview*. 25-06-2022.

⁴¹ Aparna. K. R. 2022. *Op.cit.* p.05.

in the surroundings of this property which suggests the possible existence of multiple dolmens. But the thick vegetation limits further exploration of the area.



Fig 3.21: Kuzhikkandathil Dolmen

Kurinji Kaavu Dolmens

Kurinji is an important pilgrimage site in Kottayam located on the foothills of Kurinji Koomban mala, north east part of Kuravankunnu mala at the border between Kottayam Idukki districts. There are two sacred groves located in the hill – Kurinji kaavu and Muthiyarkavu and both are situated in the interior and still under worship. The non-perennial *Kurinji Thodu* is flowing through the region, and rich natural resources, ancestral worship practices, megalithic burials, and settlements of *Malaarayans* were suggesting the presence of the early human habitation in the region. The Kurinji kaavu is an ancient sacred grove area located near the town Ramapuram in Meenachil taluk. The name ‘*Kurinji*’ has a symbolic meaning that refers to the ecozone of Sangam tinais, characterised by hilly terrain which is similar to the landscape of the Kurinji kaavu area. It was once a site that contained more than ten megalithic dolmens. But many of them were dismantled due to natural hazards. In 2010, four dolmen sets⁴² were reported from the site but at the present, only three dolmen groups are visible.

⁴² N. Nihildas and P. P. Joglekar. Recent Megalithic Findings in Palaghat, Idukki and Kottayam Districts, Kerala. *Bulletin of the Deccan College of Post- Graduate and Research Institute*, Pune. 2010-11. p.49.

The Kurinji dolmens are located within the Kurinji Vanadurga Temple, owned by the Kuzhikkandathil Kudumba Trust. The temple complex spans four acres land connected to the Kurinji Koomban hills. It is an ancient grove (*kaavu*) dedicated to Vanadurga and it is believed that the temple was built over a dolmen⁴³. The exact period when the dolmen was modified into a temple complex remains unknown. There were other sub shrines marked by iconic stones including *Ayalakshi*, *Anthimahakalan*, *Vellambagavathy* and *Sastha* along with some weapons are placed inside the shrine⁴⁴. In 2003 Archaeological Survey of India Thrissur Circle rediscovered three groups of dolmens and only two are currently accessible.



Fig 3.22: Kurinji Vanadurga Temple

The temple is locally known as Kurinji kaavu, associated with various beliefs related to mother goddesses and ancestral worship. In the past, the people would light a lamp and worship a stone placed on a stone slab (orthostat) which was likely a dolmen. Over time, this simple structure gradually developed into the present Vanadurga temple complex. In front of the temple two burials are visible in an east west orientation. One of them is

⁴³ M. Ramesan. Kuzhikkandathil. *Personal Interview*. 25-06-2022.

⁴⁴ Sethu Maria George. "Purusha Thalappoli, A Unique Ritual Practice of Kurinji kaavu". *Research Journal of Arts and Management and Social Science*. JCRS. Vol.21, Madhya Pradesh. 2021. p. 40.

protected by an enclosure and another one is in a damaged condition. Additionally, there are seven more similar burials located within the Kaavu, but thick vegetation limits access to those interior areas.



Fig 3.23: Kurinji Dolmen set 1 (in front of the complex)

Burial II: It is situated next to the first burial and the structure appears to be a multi chambered one. It is partially buried in the soil with only 0.60 meters visible above ground. The rest of the structure remains filled with soil. The capstone is misplaced and other orthostats are placed around the chamber, giving the appearance of a multi chambered dolmenoid cist.

Burial III: Third burial located about 20 meters north- west of the temple. It is situated in the interior and is highly damaged in condition due to thick vegetation. It is oriented north south and appears to be multi chambered, with orthostats scattered around the site. This burial group is currently not accessible in condition. During an exploration by Nikhildas, measurements were taken but details remain limited due to its deteriorated condition⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ N. Nikhildas and P. P. Joglekar. *Op.cit.* p.49.



Fig 3.24: Burial 2 Scattered orthostats



Fig 3.25: set 3 in the interior of Kaavu

It is interestingly noted that the myths and legends played an important role in preserving these dolmens at least in their current conditions. Most of the damages to the dolmens is attributed to the natural causes such as the growth of tree roots and soil erosion. There are several stories associated with Kurinji kaavu. The first legend claims that the temple was built by Parasurama⁴⁶. Then second popular myth related with a fight between the goddess Bhadra Kali and a group of demons⁴⁷. According to the story, the demons began attacking women in the region and they started praying to goddess Parvathy, who descended to earth and killed the demons with her sword. But her anger remained uncontrollable and she started threatening to annihilate all men from the earth. Eventually lord Siva came in the form of *Anthimahakalan* and tried to appease Parvathy. But unknowingly she cut off his legs. It was only after sometime that she realised that it was her husband. In order to commemorate this event, a unique ritual called '*purusha thalappoli*' is performed during the Malayalam month of *Menam*. During the ritual, men participate in a rhythmic dance known as '*thalamthullal*' to seek the blessings from Bhagavathi and to reduce her anger.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Aparna. K. R. 2022. *Op.cit.* p.06.



Fig 3.26: *Purusha thalappoli*. (Courtesy: Pallikkonam Rajeev)

Muthiyarkavu Settlement site

It is an ancient grove located near the Kurinji kaavu in the Kottamala hills in Ramapuram Panchayath. Muthiyarkavu was once a settlement area of the *Mala Arayans* tribe. In modern days, the Mala Arayans are educated and economically more developed than other tribal communities⁴⁸ in Kerala that lived in Meenachil taluk in Kottayam. It is unknown when they moved from the Muthiyarkavu region but they have continued their ancestral worship in the site even to this day. Their main deity is believed to be a goddess, although there is no clear image of the idol. The only available figure is a terracotta figurine with a fragmented head portion, resembling a human-like figure⁴⁹. A prominent ritual among them is *vellamkudi* and toddy was the main offering. On *amavasi* or new moon day special poojas are conducted for ancestral worship called ‘*vavubali*’.

⁴⁸ Rev. Samuel Mateer FLS. *Native Life of Travancore*. W.H Allen and Company. 1883. pp. 289-393.

⁴⁹ Aparna. K. R. 2022. *Op.cit.* p.09.



Fig 3.27: Muthiyarkavu tribal settlement

Kizhathari Dolmen

Kizhathari is located in the Meenachil taluk, on the western side of Kurinji kaavu and approximately 200 meters away from Kottamala. The dolmen site is situated in the backyard of a private house near the S.N.D.P Temple near Kizhathiri - Thottam Kavala. During the present author's visit, it was in an unapproachable condition due to its highly disturbed and abandoned condition.



Fig 3.28: Kizhathari Present view and file image (Courtesy: Rajeev Pallikkonam)

The burial is currently covered with vegetation and its chamber has been reused as a waste dump. It features four orthostats with 1.75 cm length and 2.25 cm breadth and 30cm thickness and its capstone is partially damaged which oriented towards the north- west. Interestingly, an old photograph of the site was found, which shows the structure resembling a dolmenoid cist. The present author enquired about the structure with local people, who mentioned that the soil had later covered much of it. But it still unclear whether the monument is a dolmen or dolmenoid cist.

The dolmen site at Kizhathiri holds significant potential due to its strategic location near to an ancient grove, now occupied by Chirakkal Kaavu Bagavathy Temple as well as a granite quarry near to the site. All these suggest possibilities of early ancestral worship in the region.



Fig 3.29: Chirakkal Kaavu Bagavathy temple and granite quarry at Kizhathiri

Marangattupalli Dolmen

The site is located in the Meenachil village, behind the Marangattupalli police station in Meenachil taluk. It is a private property where two dolmens have been reported, very close to the house. The dolmens are east -west oriented, with one being intact and other in a disturbed condition. The distance between the two dolmens is approximately 50 meters. The intact dolmen consists of four orthostat and features a porthole on the western

orthostat measuring 0.35 meters in diameter. The capstone measures approximately 3 x 2 meters with a thickness of 0.2-meters. The southern orthostat measures 2 x 1.65 x 0.15 meters while the northern orthostat measures 2.65 x 0.15 meters⁵⁰. The eastern orthostat is partially broken and leans outwards. To the south west of the dolmen, fragmented orthostats are visible. The disturbed dolmen, also oriented east west, has a capstone measuring 1.6 x 1 x 0.15 meters. The western side orthostat is visible with a measurement of 1.2 x 1 x 0.05 meters⁵¹, while the eastern orthostats are found scattered around the site. The inner chamber of this dolmen is filled with soil.



Fig 3.30: Marangattupalli Dolmen and orthostats used as *Kayyala*

The house owner, who believes that these monuments belong to his ancestors, has made efforts to preserve them by building an enclosure around the dolmens. According to him, there were originally more than five similar structures situated in the area during his childhood, but only these two are survived. A number of orthostats are scattered to the north side of the house which is used as a mini wall (*'kayyala'*). Many of the stone orthostats were taken to the nearby newly built church for use in constructing the steps.

⁵⁰ Cyriac Jose. 2020. *Op.cit.* p. 455.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Kayyoor Thevarmala Dolmen Site

Kayyoor is located in the Barananganam Panchayath, stretches for about two kilometres in a north south direction. The region is positioned between Thevarmala in the south and Nadukani hills in the north. Thevarmala contains three significant sites, two of them features orthostats indicating the possibility of a burial site and the third is a natural hillock that may have been used by the settlers.

The first site is situated within a sacred grove at the hilltop, associated with the Sankaranarayana swami Temple at Thevarmala. In the vicinity of the hill, several orthostats can be observed in scattered positions. However, apart from these stone orthostats no other material artifacts have been collected from the area. The temple is managed by three families *Kulappuram*, *Chooramala* and *Machukad* and notably, women are not allowed to enter into both the grove and temple.



Fig 3.31: Scattered Orthostats in the Thevarmala hill (Courtesy. Adarsh Shaju)

The second location is situated on private property near Thevarmala. The site is currently a pineapple plantation. Within the site, several stones resembling orthostats are scattered around. The site is highly damaged and stones are broken into multiple pieces.



Fig 3.32: Newspaper report. Fig 3.33: Kayyoor plantation site. (Courtesy: Pallikkonam. Rajeev)

Both sites at Kayyoor are significant not only because of the possible burial orthostats, but also due to their geographic position, rich biodiversity and natural hillocks. The location offers excellent visibility of the surrounding areas from the hilltop which may have been advantageous for early settlers. Additionally, the natural hillocks might have provided shelter points to them. Thevarmala is also the origin of several springs that flow into the *Kavilkadavar*, which later joins to *Kulathukadav*, a tributary of Meenachil river. All the available evidence suggests that this region holds a high potential location for an early habitation site.

Many of the dolmens in the Meenachil river basin are either heavily or partially damaged, primarily due to human vandalism. The destruction of these structures is largely attributed to the lack of awareness among the people. Over time, people have opened and dismantled dolmens in search of hidden treasures driven by different beliefs associated with these megalithic monuments

Urn burials, are another category of monument which face the same issues. There are five urns have been discovered within the Meenachil basin, but most of them were damaged at the time of discovery. Beside the officially reported sites, more than 35 sites have been through information collected by present scholar from the daily labourers,

construction workers and field workers. During visits to these sites, it was found that while digging for house construction, canal works and other activities they found such pots, often breaking them open in hopes of finding coin hoards or gold. The number of accidental discoveries of this kind is particularly very high in Ettumanoor and its surrounding region.

Parappilly Urn Burial

The urn burial site is located on the school ground of Parappilly government lower primary school in Kizhapparayar, along the Pala – Edamuttom road in Meenachil taluk.

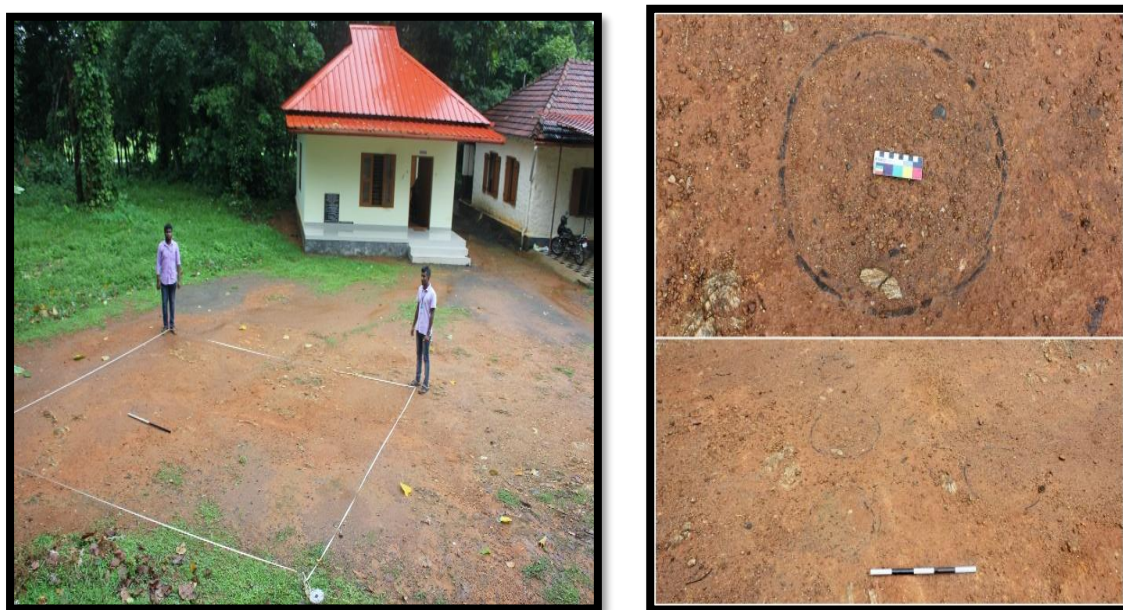


Fig 3.34: Parappilly GLP School ground and exposed rim portions (Courtesy: Cyriac Jose.)

The site situated just 750 meters from the Meenachil river and was accidentally discovered during a summer rain. Prior to this the laterite soil above the burials had been removed to extend the playground, leaving the rim portions of seven burials exposed above the school ground. All these seven burials, appearing to be disturbed, are clustered within an area approximately of 6-meter length and 5-meter width. And each has 40 cm diameter with 1-meter thickness⁵². The discovery was reported in several newspapers on 12th June 2019.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 456.

Neendoor Urn Burials

The site ‘Akkakunnu’ is located approximately 1 km east of SKV Higher secondary school Neendoor and 400 meters away from Ettumanoor – Neendoor road. It is a private property situated about 200 meters from Mangattuparambu cist burial site. The site was excavated in 2012 by Social Science, M. G University as part of a salvage excavation, which uncovered one huge urn burial. According to the local information, more than five urns were excavated by the team⁵³. But unfortunately, only one urn remains and no other records are available. The department did not document the site characteristics; the nature of landscape and materials found inside the urn. The only recorded details are the measurement of the urn which is 105 cm in height, 72 cm in width and 280 cm in diameter⁵⁴. The burial goods recovered from the urn such as pottery, iron tools, lid were kept in the department Museum of School of Social Science, M. G University.

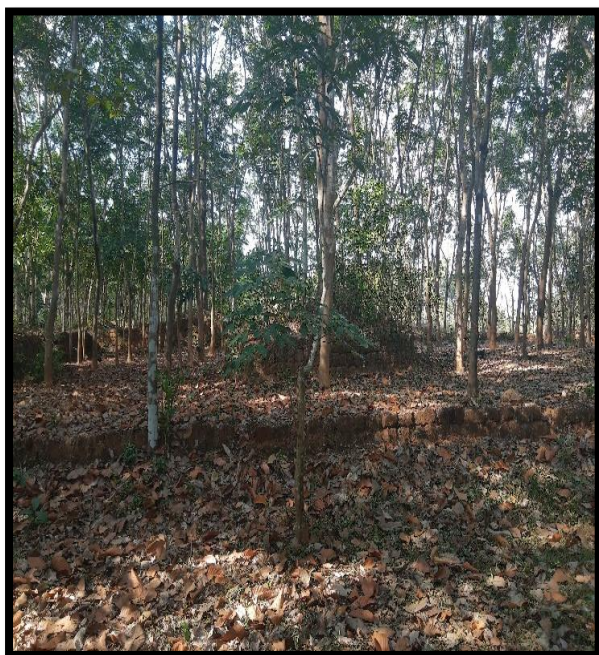


Fig 3.35: Pullarikkunnu Site



Fig 3.36: Excavated Urn

(Courtesy: MG University)

⁵³ Activity Register, Library. School of Social Science, M.G University, Kottayam. p.13

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Kudakkachira Urn Burial

The Kudakkachira urn burial site is located along the Kurichithanam - Kudakkachira road within the compound wall of Sree Krishna Temple in the Vallichira village of Meenachil taluk. Three urn burials were identified by the temple authorities during soil excavation for the extension of the temple complex. Unfortunately, all the urns were broken during the work, and only a small portion of them survives today. The urns were placed approximately 1 meter above the surface and fragments of miniature pots and bowls were found inside the urns⁵⁵.

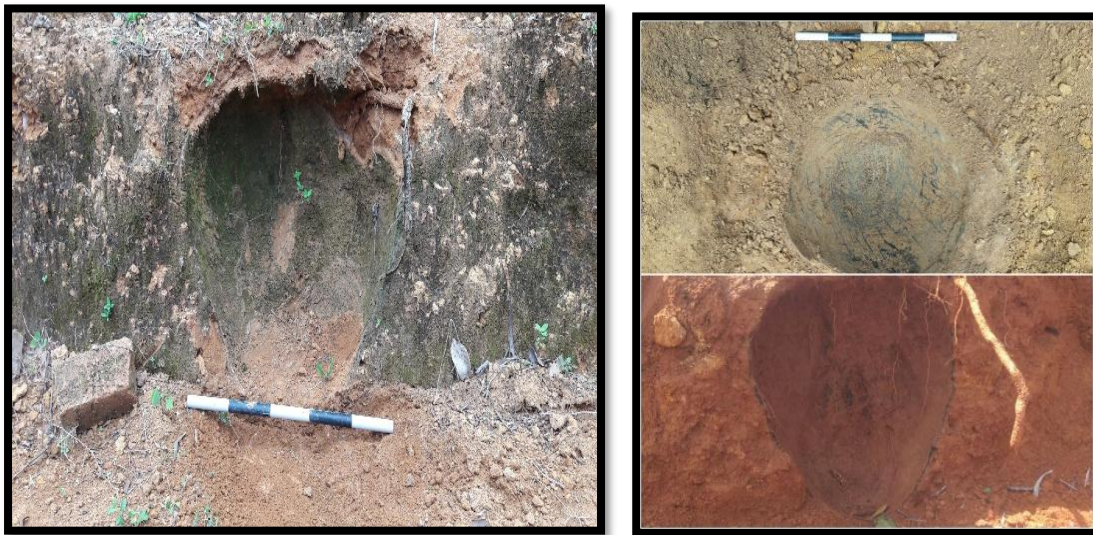


Fig 3.37: Kudakkachira Urn Burial (Courtesy: Cyriac Jose)

Other Urn Burials in the Meenachil Basin

Two other Urn burials sites have been reported from the Meenachil basin. One is the Kunnoni urn burial reported by P. Rajendran from Kunnoni St. Joseph UP School compound⁵⁶, which no evidence exists apart from some newspaper reports. The other one is the Thellakam Urn burial reported by K. P Shajan which is preserved in the

⁵⁵ Cyriac Jose. 2020. *Op.cit.* p. 457.

⁵⁶ P. Rajendran. 2005. *Op.cit.* p.41.

Archaeological Museum of the School of Social Science, M.G. University Kottayam and except the measurements there is no further evidence available.



Fig 3.38: Thellakam Urn Burial (M.G. University Archaeological Museum)

One of the major challenges associated with salvage archaeological excavation is improper documentation of monuments and sites. In case of urn burials in the Meenachil valley, especially found from the three salvage excavations, no systematic recording was done even in precise location of the burials. Essential information such as the surrounding landscape and topography, the depth of the pit, nature and composition of the soil, photographic evidence and the cataloguing of associated material goods was not recorded. Without these basic details it is very difficult to study these burial monuments and their cultural and historical evidence.

After the salvage excavations there are two systematic excavations were conducted in the Meenachil river basin such as Oliyani Thakkadi excavation in 2005 by P Rajendran and the Kadanad excavation in 2007 by the Archaeological survey of India Thrissur Circle. Unfortunately, neither of these two excavations were completed properly due to unpublished excavation reports, leaving the material goods unstudied. The Oliyani Thakkadi excavation unearthed single cist burial and Kadanad excavation uncovered six cist burials and one transcepted dolmenoid cist. The cists are another type of megalithic

monument which is commonly found in hilly terrain, generally constructed from granite stones arranged in a clockwise pattern with four orthostats. Most cists are single chambered, while multi chambered is called transepted cists⁵⁷. They are buried under soil and they are marked by stone circles on the surface. The dolmenoid cist, on the other hand, are partially buried in the soil. It is difficult to differentiate between dolmens and dolmenoid cists because, as soil erosion and other activities over time have caused some cist burials to become clearly visible on the surface, leading to mistakes in classifications.

Oliyani Cist Burial Excavation

The Oliyani cist burial is located in a rubber plantation near to the Kunnoni Sree Dharma Sashta Temple at Poonjar Thekkekara. The excavation unearthed two adjacent cist burials, oriented in an east west direction. The cist on the left side is shorter, measuring 1.86-meter in length with stone orthostats averaging 11 cm in thickness. Each orthostat was placed vertically with approximately 7 cm projecting above the soil surface.

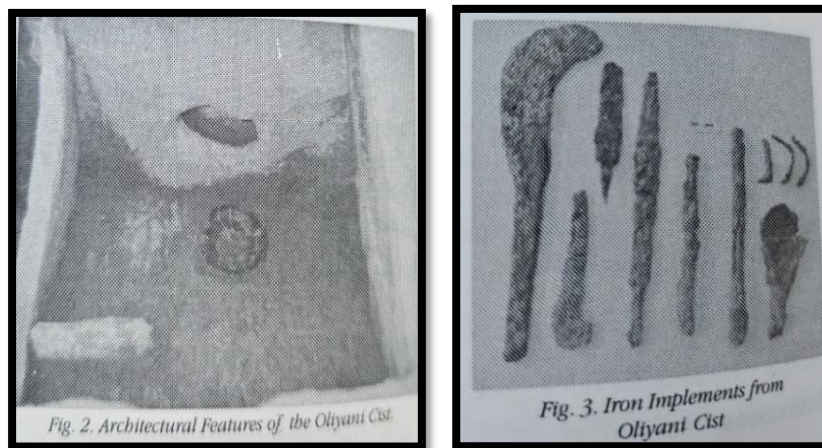


Fig 3.39: Oliyani Excavation photos (Courtesy: P. Rajendran 2005)

The cist is divided into four chambers by three internal stone orthostats and is filled with soil. A porthole measuring 37 cm in diameter is visible on the western orthostat and it

⁵⁷ Chakrabarti. D.K. and Makhan Lal (ed.) “The Iron Age in Tamilnadu”. *Protohistoric Foundations: History of Ancient India, Vol. II*. 2014. pp. 599-613.

is closed from the outside with an inverted 'U' shaped stone⁵⁸. After removing the topsoil to a depth of 88 cm, ceramic goods were discovered, including bowls, dishes cups and lids. At the bottom, iron implements and ceramic plates were found.

The material goods unearthed from the excavations include a red ware pot with chain marks impressions around the middle and a few incised crisscross graffiti marks on the inner surface of the rim⁵⁹. Additionally, five fine quality black and red ware bowls were recovered, each featuring a black polished interior. One of the bowls has white dotted line painting on its black outer surface. Other findings included three black polished plates, one cup, two dishes on stands and three lids, all of which were completely black polished. The potteries were wheel made and filled with soil⁶⁰. Interestingly, fragments of a single pottery vessel found broken pieces, were located in opposite direction North-West and South-East⁶¹. This pattern resembles present-day funeral practices, where the people perform three rounds of circumnutation around the dead body while carrying a pot of water and breaking it at intervals before cremations. In addition to the ceramics, iron implements were also unearthed from the burial including sickle, dagger, sword, sphere, spoon and three serpents-shaped objects.

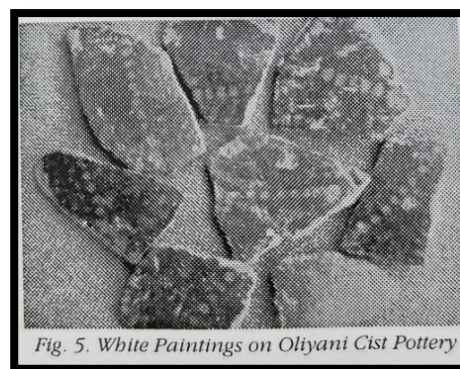
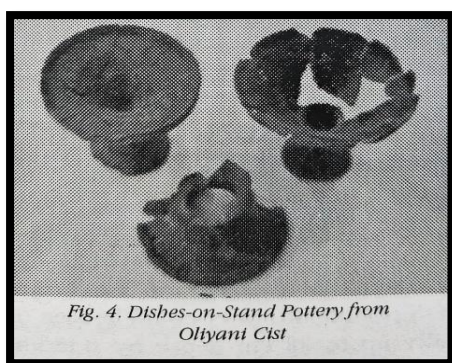


Fig 40: Oliyani Excavation Materials (Courtesy: P. Rajendran 2005)

⁵⁸ P. Rajendran. 2005. *Op.cit.* p. 42.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p.43.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Mangattuparambu Cist Burial

The Mangattuparambu also known as Akkakunnu is situated in Neendoor village, Kottayam Taluk. The site was discovered based on information given by a local villager, and is located near the Pullarikkunnu excavation site. It lies approximately 1 km east of S.K.V Higher secondary school Neendoor and about 400 meters away from the Ettumanoor- Neendoor road. The burial is located on a private property in an east west orientation. The western orthostat is missing and the capstone is scattered within the property⁶². According to the house owner, the chamber was once opened in search of treasures, but no material was found⁶³. This kind of human intervention along with land encroachment has caused significant damage to the burial.



Fig 3. 41: Mangattuparambu Cist burial and scattered capstone

Payyanithottam Cist Burial

The cist burial site of Payyanithottam is located near Mankuzhikunnu Junction in the Poonjar- Thekkekara village of Meenachil taluk. It is situated behind the Kairali boys' hostel, and can be reached by Payyanithottam- Kaippally road. The cist reported as an intact structure in 2005, is located within a rubber plantation and is oriented east west direction. During the recent visit by the present author, only 2-3 scattered orthostats were observed,

⁶² Aparna. K.R. 2025. *Op.cit.* p. 332.

⁶³ Mohanan. *Personal Interview.* 26-06-2023.

with no significant structural remains found. The details of the cist have been gathered from earlier research of Cyriac Jose. The capstone measures 2.15 x 1 x 0.15 meter. One of the orthostats measures 1 meter length and 0.15-meter in thickness, while another orthostat measures 1.15 x 1 x 0.15 meter⁶⁴. Near the site, a granite quarry is located, where P. Rajendran documented a few unused rock slabs. He speculated that this might been a megalithic quarry site⁶⁵.



Fig 3.42: Payyanithottam Cist Burial (Courtesy: Cyriac Jose 2020)

Cist Burial from Kadanad Excavations

Kadanad is a village situated in the Meenachil taluk of Kottayam district. It is located in the upper reaches of the upper midland region close to the high ranges. This village is located around 60 km north east of Kottayam town. The archaeological excavations have been conducted at three prominent sites within Kadanad such as Mattathilpara, Inchukavu and Kurumannu. These sites have yielded significant findings such as ceramics; iron implements and a variety of beads. Except for the site features and the locations of the three sites, all information regarding the excavation activities at Kadanad is obtained from the preliminary excavation report of the ASI.

⁶⁴ Cyriac Jose. 2020. *Op.cit.* p .458.

⁶⁵ P. Rajendran. 2005. *Op.cit.* p..41.

Mattathilpara Cist Burial

The site is located in Kadanad village in Meenachil Taluk. It lies approximately 50 meters from Kodumpadi Junction on the Anthinad – Melukavu road. The cist is situated on a private property owned by Kunnel Tharavad family. The land, now a rubber plantation, is in an abandoned condition. During a recent visit by the present author, the cist could not be located and most of the neighbours were unaware about the excavation activities⁶⁶. The information provided by Thomas mash (a neighbour) suggests that the site was once known as a '*kallara*' belonging to the Poonjar royal family. According to him, officials from the Archaeological Survey of India excavated the site and the public was not allowed access at the time. However, local residents had little knowledge about the site or its excavation. The property itself is extensive, vegetated and currently inaccessible



Fig 3.43: Mattathilpara Cist Burial (Courtesy: ASI Thrissur Circle)

The site consists of two cist burials in a partially disturbed condition, oriented in an east west direction. A horizontal excavation method was adopted, and the soil was excavated to a maximum depth of 170 cm. The first cist located on the northern side

⁶⁶ During the field visit, the present author enquired about the site with many villagers, including those who had lived in the area for over 50 years. However, except for the neighbour Thomas Mash, no one aware about any excavation activities having taken place.

measures 203 x 111 x 154 cm.⁶⁷ A porthole is visible on the western orthostats, while the eastern orthostat is partially broken. The second cist situated on the southern side measures 176 x 152 x 155 cm. The orthostats are partially broken and have fallen inward. This cist has a stone paved floor at a depth of 135 cm from the ground level. Except for a few body shreds of red ware and black ware, no material remains recovered from the burial⁶⁸.

Kurumannu Cist Burials

The Kurumannu site, located in the Kadanad village of Meenachil taluk. The site was unearthed by a group of four cist burials. These were discovered in a rubber plantation on a private property along the Kollappally – Muttom road, opposite the Kadanad village office. The cists are oriented east west and arranged side by side. Notably, the orthostats of two cists are arranged in a clockwise direction while the other two are in an anti- clockwise direction. Each cist contained a rich assemblage of material goods including ceramics and iron implements⁶⁹. The cist I, II and IV each had a single urn, while cist III contained two urns. The pottery assemblage varied across the burials; with cist I had 6 types of pottery and cist II contained eighteen. Cist III produced twelve Pottery types while, cist IV yielded twenty-five potteries including ten ring stands.

The Kurumannu excavation also revealed a variety of beads made from chert, quartzite and carnelian displaying barrel shaped, cylindrical and pendant forms⁷⁰. The cist I produce beads made of jasper, chert and quartzite and cist II yielded an etched carnelian bead and a gold leaf. Additionally, numerous iron implements were found including eight iron implements from cist I and twelve from cist II such as daggers, spearheads, swords, long rods, hoes and axes⁷¹. Unfortunately, both the ceramic and iron artifacts are in a fragile

⁶⁷ Nambirajan. M. and C. Kumaran. "A Brief Note on Megalithic Excavations Conducted at Kadanad, District Kottayam". Ajith Kumar. eds. *Recent Trends in Kerala Archaeology*, University of Kerala.2011. p. 124.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*p.124.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

condition. On the basis of typology of the burial goods the site tentatively dated to 300-200 BC⁷².



Fig 3.44: Four cist burials in Kurumannu (Courtesy: ASI Thrissur Circle)

Inchukavu Dolmenoid Cist Burial

The Inchukavu burial is located 2 km away from Neeloor on the Kollappilly - Muttom road. It is a transcepted dolmenoid cist which is a - half buried, dolmen-like structure with multi chambers. It was originally covered with cairn packing⁷³. The site is situated within the ‘Kuzhinjalil Granites’ quarry, which is still under working. It was reported as a pineapple plantation at the time of excavation but now it is highly vegetated and covered with soil. The burial is oriented in a south east – north west direction. Of the five orthostats, the western one was broken, while the remaining four were intact in condition. The western orthostat had two portholes. Apart from a few fragments of red ware, black ware, and black and redware, no other antiquities were found⁷⁴.

⁷² *Ibid.* pp. 123-127.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 125.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 126.



Fig 3.45: Inchukavu Transcepted Dolmenoid Cist. (Courtesy: ASI Thrissur Circle)

Discussion and Conclusion

This section presents a detailed discussion and analysis of the early social formations in the Meenachil river basin based on the above mentioned archaeological remains and early Tamil Sangam literature. The previous chapter already explored the geographical advantages of the river basin and its suitability for human habitation from the prehistoric period onwards. Following, this section turns to archaeological evidence to demonstrate the presence of early communities in the basin. In the absence of written records, prehistoric human activity can only be understood through the stone tools which they left behind. For the Iron Age megalithic period, a broader range of material culture—including different types of burials and their associated goods helps to study social and cultural life of people. The Meenachil river basin with its diverse topography and rich environment offers important clues about patterns of habitation, burial practices, material culture and evolving socio-economic structure. It also refers to a comparative study from the neighbouring river basins and ecological zones for a contextual understanding of the developments in Meenachil basin, within a wider framework of early historic South India.

The concept of ‘burying the dead’ reflects the cognitive evolution of early humans, showing emotions such as affection, respect and fear towards the deceased. The earliest

evidence for such practices traced back to the Mesolithic period in the Ganga Valley⁷⁵ with currently available evidence. But in Kerala, especially in Meenachil valley this aspect remains obscure due to the lack of substantial material evidence except Thalappa findings. It was a significance discovery regarding the occurrence of microlithic tools from Thalappa in Kunnoni region, reported by P. Rajendran. Despite the significant of the find, it has not been followed by any systematic study or formal publications. The subsequent excavations and explorations in the same Kunnoni region have not reported additional microlithic materials or stratified cultural layers making the Thalappa discovery an isolated one.

Following the microlithic phase, the next set of evidence for the prehistoric occupation of the Meenachil valley comes from surface findings of neolithic celts. These artifacts also suffer from the absence of stratigraphic context, which limits their chronological and cultural interpretations. But none of the three celts are found from a habitational layer or primary context, which makes it difficult to interpret their chronological value. The comparable stray findings from neighbouring river basins such as celts from Pamba River basin and the three axes from Kalady in the Periyar river basin suggests a pattern of low- intensity or mobile occupation rather than a neolithic settlement.

In contrast to the Deccan and other parts of peninsular India, there is no evidence for a distinct chalcolithic phase in Kerala. This chronological gap is making it difficult for interpreting the fragmentary materials. The recent studies indicate that the neolithic celts have been recovered within the megalithic burial context including, a neolithic axe was found from the Ummichipoyil⁷⁶ megalithic burial site of Kasargod and a stone celt was

⁷⁵ Schug. G. W and S.R Walimbe. *A Companion to South Asia in the Past*. John Wiley and Sons, West Sussex. 2016.p.122.

⁷⁶ Jayashree Nair. "Exploring the Megaliths in Kasargod". *The Journal of the Centre for Heritage Studies. Vol. II. Hill Palace, Thrippunithura*. 2005. pp. 30-32. cited Ambily. C.S.2017. *Op.cit.* p. 240.

found at the early historic site of Anappara⁷⁷ in Idukki. This suggests either the continued symbolic use of neolithic artifacts during the Iron Age or the survival of certain neolithic traditions into the megalithic period.

So, the prehistoric phase of the Meenachil basin cannot be conclusively proven due to the limited availability of evidence. However, the mesolithic rock art from the Anjunad valley in Idukki, and the neolithic celts recovered from the Pamba and Periyar basins indicate the presence of early communities in the Central Kerala region and the Western Ghats. These communities were likely very small in population and consisted of hunter-gatherers who inhabited natural shelters and the hillocks. Based on the available archaeological evidence, geographical positioning and field observations, the Kunnoni region in the Meenachil basin emerges as a potential site of prehistoric occupation.

There are several reasons behind this argument. Firstly, the discovery of microliths in the area supports this possibility. Secondly, two natural rock shelters locally called Muthallu would have provided a suitable location for their habitation. Thirdly, among the three celts identified in the region, one was found at Kunnoni while the other two were discovered along the path leading from Kunnoni to the Vembanad lake. This pattern suggests that the celts may have originated from the Kunnoni region itself. Fourthly, the presence of celts in the neighbouring basins found from the ancient migration routes. For instance, the celt from Pochambara⁷⁸ near Konni in the Pamba River basin lies along a known path from Tamilnadu to the Western Coast via Kumily- Sabarimala- Konni route, while finds from Kalady in Periyar basin suggest migration via Palakkad gap and via Kothamangalam- Devikulam Munnar route from Madurai. Similarly, Kunnoni, located in the Meenachil basin, is positioned along a possible migration corridor from Cumbum, just

⁷⁷ From the Talk of Dinesh Krishnan: *Early Historic Archaeology of the Periyar Valley: Pattanam to Anappara*. KCHR Foundation Day Lecture Series. UC College Aluva. 13-03-2025. The present researcher also participated in this excavation from 06-12-2024 to 23-02-2025.

⁷⁸ Ambily. C.S. 2017. *Op.cit.* p. 44.

80km from the recently excavated site Anappara in Idukki. The route from Madurai through Vagamon and Erattupetta could have served as a passage for the prehistoric population.

These passages help to the migration of communities into the region over time. It played a significant role in the gradual transformation from nomadic hunting groups to settled agricultural villages. This transition was not only because of the internal developments or cognitive advances but also through sustained interactions, communication networks and cultural exchanges with neighbouring regions. It is also important to note that these cultural transformations did not happen overnight and the older traditions gradually fade while new forms take place. In this idea, the Iron Age megalithic context can refer to a continuation or survival of stone age practices with a more developed social, technological framework.

Iron Age- Megalithic Culture

The megalithic period marks a significant shift in the archaeological and cultural landscape of the region. The different types of burial monuments along with associated material goods such as ceramics, iron tools and beads reflect the development of more complex, organized and possibly stratified communities⁷⁹. The term megalith comes from the Greek words ‘*mega*’ (huge) ‘*lithos*’ (stone)⁸⁰ and it is commonly used to describe the burial practices and denote South Indian Iron Age culture. These monuments are typically characterised by their large and monumental nature with different typologies. Not all the megaliths are made of stone, while the cist, dolmens, umbrella stones, hat stones and menhirs were constructed from stone and urn burials were made of clay and rock cut chambers were carved into laterite. So, the megaliths function as an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of mortuary practice that spanned from roughly 1000 BC to

⁷⁹ Rajesh. K.P. “Megaliths of North Kerala: Formation of Technologically Advanced Agro- Pastoral Iron Age and Early Historic Society”, *Heritage. Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology. Department of Archaeology*. University of Kerala. 5. 2017,pp. 486-506.

⁸⁰ Wheeler. R.EM. *Early India and Pakistan*. Thames and Hudson, London. 1959.p.150.

300 BC, with some traditions continuing in to the early historic period and even surviving into modern times among certain tribal communities⁸¹.

It was Babington who first identified a megalithic tomb in Kerala in 1823⁸², though at the time people were largely unaware of its archaeological and historical importance. According to Babington, popular beliefs surrounding these monuments varied widely and had regional variations⁸³. Most of them are linked to legends of the Pandavas, while others were thought to contain hidden treasures guarded by ghosts. In some regions they were believed to be the tombs of rulers or the abodes of sages⁸⁴. In the Kottayam region many of these monuments are considered to be associated with the Poonjar kingdom, believed by locals to have served as a hiding place for warriors during the war with Marthandavarma. In several cases these structures are still under different kinds of worship and only a smaller number of people recognize them as a burial monument.

The earliest scientifically dated megalithic burial in Kerala is from the Mangadu in Thrissur, ranging between 1299- 902 BC⁸⁵ and the earliest reference to such burials can also be found in Sangam literature. It clearly indicates a diversity of funerary customs and among them cremation described as a predominant form along with urn burials. The *Purananuru* refers to a woman requesting a potter to make a large *Muthumakkathazhi* (urn burial), one big enough to accommodate both herself and her deceased husband (*Puram* 256). It also refers the cremation of the ruler *Athiyaman Nedumanchi* on a funeral pyre

⁸¹ Abayan. G. S. "Iron Age Culture in Kerala. South India: An Appraisal". Akinori Uesugi. Eds. *Iron Age in South Asia. Archaeological Research Institute*, Kansai University. 2018. p. 145.

⁸² J. Babington. *Op.cit.* p.324.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 326., Rajesh. K.P. "200 Years of Babington's Pandoo Coolies: A Critique of the Megalithic Studies in Kerala". *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology. Department of Archaeology*. University of Kerala. 11.2. 2023-24. pp.303-304.

⁸⁴ Kenneth. R. Kennedy. "The Physical Anthropology of the Megalith- Builders of South India and Sri Lanka". *Oriental Monograph Series 17. Australian National University Press*, Canberra. 1975.p. 29.

⁸⁵ T Sathyamurthy. *The Iron Age in Kerala: Mangadu Excavations*. Thiruvananthapuram. Kerala Department of Archaeology. 1992. cited in Arya. P.N. *Megaliths and its Cultural Manifestation in Archaeological Record of Thrissur District*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2022.p. 73.

(*Puram* 239)⁸⁶. Other literary sources further illustrate the diversity of burial customs such as the *Ettuthokai* corpus refers to two types: *Idukavonto*, where the body is exposed, and *Chudukavonto*, where the body is cremated (239: 20-12). The *Manimekalai* identify five types of funerary practices such as those who cremated by fire as *Suduvor*, those who exposed as *Iduvor*, those who buried in pit as *Thodukuzhi Paduppor*, those who interred in sub terrain cists as *Thazhvayinadaippor*, and those who placed in urns refers as *Thazhiyil Kavippor*. (*Manimekalai*. VI 65-73)⁸⁷.

These different references indicate the use of different types of cremation methods across South India. It includes both primary and extended burial practices. However, in Kerala, no complete skeletons have been reported so far. Most of the burials are either fractional or secondary in nature. It also noted that there is an instance of single, multiple and multi chambered burials in the region but these categories having no clear definitions for these differentiations. The multiple burials might be representing the groups, clan or a community practice similar to the collective burial traditions still followed by Christians and muslims today. Multi chambered burials could possibly indicate families or couples and the single burials are likely individual. Interestingly, all these types of burial practices are present within the Meenachil valley.

The explorations and excavations have reported ten group burial sites and three multi chambered burials representing various typologies. The group burials primarily consisted of menhirs and cists, with urns also being part of the assemblage. The multi chambered burials included both cists and dolmens. Among the reported sites seven dolmens were identified and they are the most numerous in the region. These included both single chambered and double chambered. The classification of the dolmens at Vempally, Kaalikavu and Kuzhikkandathil remains uncertain, as they might be dolmenoid cists. This

⁸⁶ P.K. Gopalakrishnan. *Keralathinte Samskarika Charithram*. Edition 10. The State Institute of Languages, Kerala, Trivandrum. 2019.p. 174.

⁸⁷ Rajan. K *South Indian Memorial Stones*. Manoo Pathippakam. Thanjavur. 2000. pp.11-12.

confusion arises mainly due to the changes in the landscape. They are currently above the ground level, their multi chambered structure and the partial burial of the lower sections in soil have caused confusion in typological identification. The dolmens were generally found clustered in high terrain areas. The sites of Marangattupalli, Kaalikavu, and Vempally lie within a 10 kilometres radius while Kurinji, Kuzhikkandathil, and Kizhathari are located within a 5-kilometre range. All the seven dolmens are situated near water bodies and the Kurinji cluster is particularly significant due to its proximity to ancient groves and its connection with a hilly landscape.

Following the dolmens, cists were the next most prominent category of burials in the region which is five in number. The Thakkadi and Payyanithottam cists are located approximately 4 kilometres apart, while the cist at Kurumannu, Mattathilpara and the dolmenoid cist at Inchukavu are situated within 5 Kilometres radius. The Neendoor cist is located in the midland and other five including dolmenoid cist are situated in the highlands. All five cists including dolmenoid cist have been excavated and each produced material remains at minimum pottery shards. Among these, Thakkadi cist and Inchukavu dolmenoid cist are multi chambered and others are single chambered. The Mattathilpara cist had a cairn packing and port holes and both Thakkadi cist and Inchukavu dolmenoid cist also featured portholes. Both dolmens and cist in the region are typically found near the granite sources. Even the Neendoor cist located in the midlands, is situated close to a granite quarry. Interestingly, across the region the cist and dolmens exhibit two key features: Cup marks and port holes.

The cup marks or cupule represents one of the earliest known forms of rock art, discovered across various space and time periods. It is attributed with multiple interpretations. These are hemispherical depressions carved into the stone surfaces and are commonly seen on the capstones of megalithic burials, rock shelters and open-air rock

beds⁸⁸ in Kerala. Despite their widespread presence, their original function is still unknown. In the Meenachil river basin, the Kaalikavu dolmen have seventeen cup marks on the capstone of the dolmen reported by Cyriac Jose in 2020. The cupules are both circular and oval shapes, with largest cupule measuring approximately 12 cm in diameter and 2.5cm. in depth and smallest around 5cm in diameter with a depth of 1cm⁸⁹. The interpretations of cupules are vary wildly in global context with astronomical connotation, fertility imagery resembling the female vulva, gaming boards, ritual alters and even proto writing systems used to mark the dead in case of age, status of children even the number of enemies slain by the warrior⁹⁰. Beyond the megalithic context, cupules have also been found on the laterite bedrocks and boulders at Ariyittappara in Kasargod and Cheramangad at Thrissur⁹¹.



Fig 3.46: Cup marks in Kaalikavu Dolmen (Courtesy: Cyriac Jose.)

The portholes are generally interpreted as symbolic passages between the world of the living and the dead. In Kerala they are primarily associated with cists and dolmens. Within the Meenachil basin, portholes have been reported in the cist burials at Thakkadi,

⁸⁸ Kuriakose. B. *Rock Art of Anjunad Valley*. Unpublished Diploma Dissertation. Centre for Heritage Studies. Thrippunithura. 2008. cited in Cyriac Jose. 2020. *Op.cit.* p. 29.

⁸⁹ Cyriac Jose. "Cupules found in the Megalithic Site of Kaalikavu in Meenachil Taluk, Kottayam". *Man and Environment XLVIII(I) Indian Society for Prehistoric and Quaternary Studies*. 2023. p.33

⁹⁰ Rivett. Carnac. J.H. "Prehistoric Remains of Central India". *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. 1879. p.04.

⁹¹ Ajith Kumar, K. Nandakumar and R.K Varman. "A Note on Petroglyphs from Ariyittappara. Pothamkandam. Kasargod District". *Heritage. Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology. Department of Archaeology. University of Kerala*. 8. 2020. p. 189. cited in Cyriac Jose. 2023. *Op.cit.* p.33.

Mattathilpara and the dolmenoid cist at Inchukavu as well as in the dolmen at Marangattupalli. The Thakkadi cist features a porthole with a diameter of 37 cm and both the Thakkadi and Mattathilpara portholes were found sealed from outside. The Inchukavu dolmenoid cist contains two open portholes, while the Marangattupalli dolmen has a porthole measuring approximately 35 cm. in diameter. Typically, portholes in megalithic structures are located on the eastern or western orthostats⁹²; and in the present region all the portholes found on the western orthostats. These features are commonly observed in the granite rich highland regions and display considerable variation in their size, shape, orientation⁹³. While, most of them are circular and centrally carved into the orthostats. But in some cases, they were semicircles and carved at the top edge of the orthostats just below the capstone⁹⁴. At Thakkadi an uniquely inverted U shaped was identified. Among the Mala Arayans of Travancore, it is customary to construct imitation dolmens with a porthole after a person's death⁹⁵ and it suggests that these features may have been used for placing offerings to the deceased within the burial chamber.



Fig 3.47: Porthole from Mattathilpara (Courtesy: ASI Thrissur Circle)

⁹² Ambily. C.S.2017. *Op.cit.* p. 232.

⁹³ Devan. V.P. "Portholes Cists of Kerala: A Comparable Parallels in Other Places". *Indian History Congress, Vol.72. Part II.* 2011.p.1172.

⁹⁴ B.K Gururaja Rao. *Op.cit.* p.252.

⁹⁵ S. Mateer. *Native Life in Travancore.* Madras. 1883.p.102.

The next category is urn burials which is evidently less, but more locations by local information. There are only five urn burials that have been documented at least with a photograph while more than 30 sites have been identified based on the local information collected by the scholar. Unfortunately, none of them have even a single photograph because most of them are discovered accidentally and were broken by locals out of curiosity, and after that they throw the shards away. The documented urn burials are found in both midland and highland zones. Sites such as Kunnoni, Kudakkachira and Parappilly are located in the highlands, are group burial sites, where multiple urns were found clustered together. In contrast the burials at Neendoor and Thellakam were situated in the midlands and are single burials.

The urns in the region are generally pyriform or a pear shaped in form and having decorative elements such as chain like impressions. Both Neendoor and Thellakam urns appear to be handmade. The Thellakam urn seems to have been made using the coiling method with the rim portion placed separately and attached to the upper portion of the vessel. In the below part of the neck portion an applique design resembling a chain mark running horizontally, without forming a closed loop. This pattern may be applied using a thumb or a simple tool. Interestingly this urn also has two hooks positioned on opposite sides just below the inner rim which likely used to suspend beads or other articles⁹⁶. Similar features have been reported from sites like Porkkalam and Nedumbal in Thrissur district⁹⁷ and Adichanellur in Tamilnadu. According to B.K Thapar, such hooks were used for hanging bead strings⁹⁸. This burial also has chain-like marks. It is just below the neck portion.

⁹⁶ Ambily. C.S “Funerary Goods in the Iron Age Megalithic Burials of Pamba River Basin. South Kerala- A discussion”. *Social Orbit*, Vol.6. 2020.p.109.

⁹⁷ Arya. P.N. *Op.cit.* p.448.

⁹⁸ B.K Thapar. “Porkkalam Excavation of a Megalithic Burial.1948”. *Ancient India. Bulletin of the Archaeological Survey of India*.8. 1952. pp 14-16. cited in Arya. P.N. *Op.cit.* p.448.

The Neendoor urn burial also looks to be handmade with two rows of finger impressed applique designs on the neck portion just below the rim. Compared to the Thellakam urn, this one has a notably thicker rim which is also attached separately. The base portion is broken and it is not sure whether the hole was originally part of the urn or broken during the excavation. Within the urn grave goods such as iron tools, small shards, a lid and a knob were discovered. According to the excavation team member Anil, some powdery material, possibly bone fragments was also found⁹⁹ and all the material goods were fragile in condition. Further exploration at the site uncovered a small pot and broken shards from three other vessels. Aside from these two urns, the remaining cases lack sufficient materials for detailed study. The urns at Parappilly remain unexcavated and are still underground and in case of Kudakkachira, only photographs are available, with no other details. The Kunnoni urn is mentioned by P. Rajendran but no photographs or other detailed descriptions exist. However, internal variations are observed in the shape, size and colour of the urns and none of them show any evidence of capstones.



Fig 3.48: Inside hooks & outer chain marks in Thellakam Urn Burial

(Courtesy: MG University)

⁹⁹ Mr. Anil. *Personal Interview*. 16-04-2025.

Following the Urn burials, Menhirs represents the next significant type of megalithic monument in the region which is located the three sites: Vedagiri, Thevarmala and Thirunakkara. Among these Vedagiri, Thevarmala contains a group of menhirs and Thirunakkara features a single menhir. All the three sites are situated within the transitional zone between lowlands and midlands. Based on the map, it appears that these locations were once part of ancient coastlines or the erstwhile boundary of the Vembanad lake boundaries and are associated with small hills except Thirunakkara. The Thirunakkara menhir is currently located in a secondary context and its original placement remains unknown. The menhirs at Vedagiri and Thevarmala are made of granite and are located in areas where granites are naturally available and Thirunakkara menhir is in laterite. All the three menhirs are under worship. Finally hood stone, a unique type reported only from Cheramangad in Thrissur and Anakkara¹⁰⁰ in Palakkad in Central Kerala. The burial was initially reported as a stone circle, but recent field exploration suggests that the shape, size and arrangements of the stones more closely resemble hood stones. It is also reported hood stone similar burial in Naduvayal¹⁰¹ in Kannur.

When it comes to the distribution pattern, the majority of megalithic burial sites are located in the highlands, followed by the midlands, relatively less in lowland. In the highlands dolmens and cist are the important burial types. This region was densely forested during the Iron Age megalithic period and several ancient groves which continue to serve as a worship place situated in this area. It is also observed that burials in the highlands often occur in groups or clusters as seen in regions such as Kunnoni, Kadanad and Neeloor. These regions also have natural granite sources, with granite quarries identified near to the documented sites. In the midlands all types of burial are founded, though most of them are single burials. Urn burials are especially common here because of the abundant availability

¹⁰⁰ Shajan. K.P., Selvakumar, P. Radhika, Rajesh. K. P. and Sreelatha Damodaran. "Archaeological Excavation at the Megalithic site of Anakkara, Palakkad. A Preliminary Report of 2008 Season". *Tamil Civilization. Vol. 25.* 2021.pp.25-53.

¹⁰¹ Arya. P.N. *Op.cit.* p.453.

of clay in the region. In contrast, the lowland regions produce urn burials only, possibly because these areas marked the boundary between the ancient waterline and the midland zone of present Kottayam. The information about the urn burials is that the lowlands are nearly three times greater than the actual documented sites with all of them distributed in and around Ettumanoor and its western side regions which constitute the current lowland region of Kottayam district.

Materials From the Burials

The material goods associated with the megalithic burials in the Meenachil river basin are broadly similar to those found in other parts of Kerala. These include ceramics, iron implements, and beads, most of which were recovered from the cist burials and urn burials. Excavations at Kadanad, Oliyani along with a salvage excavation at the urn burial in Neendoor conducted by MG University have yielded a significant amount of such artifacts in the region. However, only preliminary research reports have been published on the Kadanad and Oliyani excavations and the finds from Kadanad are currently kept at the Archaeological Survey of India Thrissur Circle. In case of Neendoor, no formal reports or documentation are available and the materials which are highly fragile in condition are kept at the MG University Museum. With all these limitations, only a limited analysis of the material culture is currently possible.

Ceramics: One of the most important assemblages recovered from the region is ceramics. These are varied in terms of fabric, surface treatment, firing conditions and decorative elements which suggests a gradual evolution over time due to the change in the settlement patterns and external influences. The excavation at Oliyani yielded a number of ceramic forms including bowls, dishes cups, lids and plates. But these materials have not been studied in detail, and it remains unclear whether they are fresh or used by the deceased. The materials include a red ware pot with a chain mark impression around its middle and

also a few incised crisscross (graffiti) patterns on the inner surface. According to P. Rajendran these markings may represent early pictographic depictions.

Additionally, five black and red ware bowls of fine quality were recovered, one of which features white dotted line paintings on its black outer surface looks like geometric patterns¹⁰². These lines were similar with examples found at Poredam in Kollam, Niramakulam in Pathanamthitta. Other finds include three black polished plates and one cup, all of the fine fabric. Two dishes on stands and three lids were also found and they are completely finished in black polish. These lids show similarities with pottery recovered from Kuttikkol, Aripa and Niramakulam¹⁰³. These ceramics from Oliyani appear to be wheel made and well fired.



Fig 3.49: Black Lid and Knob from Neendoor (Courtesy: Anil MG University)

In the case of Kadanad, the Kurumannu yielded ceramics from four cists including black and red ware bowls, red ware vessels and miniature pots and ring stands. Cist IV alone contained twenty-five pottery types, ten of which were ring stands. Cist III yielded twelve potteries, cist II eighteen and cist I, six ceramics¹⁰⁴. These vessels are in fragile condition, coarse in fabric and appear poorly fired. From Neendoor, the urn burial produces

¹⁰² P. Rajendran. 2005. *Op.cit.* p.43.

¹⁰³ Ambily. C.S. 2020. *Op.cit.* p. 110.

¹⁰⁴ Nambirajan. M. and C. Kumaran. *Op.cit.* pp. 123-127.

one black ware lids and a black ware knob. The black ware lid is having similarities with the lids discovered from Kadanad and Niramakulam.

Iron Implements: The second most numerous materials recovered are iron tools and implements. All the excavations sites have yielded a rich assemblage of iron objects including weapons for defence as well as tools and implements for household uses and agriculture purposes. From the site of Oliyani, P. Rajendran reported the discovery of sickles, dagger, sword, sphere and spoon each represented by a single specimen along with three objects he identified as serpents¹⁰⁵ (present author observed it as a fish hook) which is used for ritual practices. There is no detailed material studies have been conducted on these artifacts and they remain in his personal collection, with only photographic documentation available

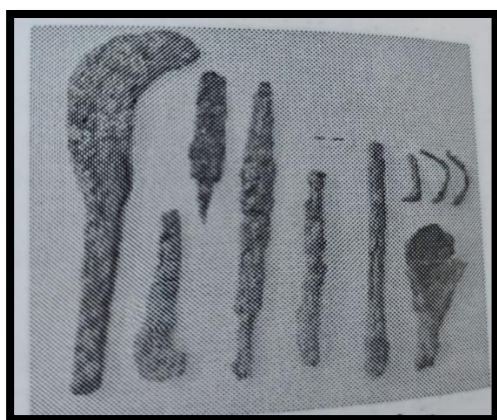


Fig 3.50: Oliyani iron tools. (Courtesy. P. Rajendran)

Based on an analysis of the images, the present author suggests that Rajendran may have misidentified the three serpentine motifs. Instead, they appear to resemble fish hook, comparable to an example from Nallur in Kozhikode¹⁰⁶. The form of the objects, especially the thickened handle portion, supports this interpretation and the corroded and broadened end may have been mistaken for a serpent's head. Considering that the site is located along

¹⁰⁵ P. Rajendran. 2005. *Op.cit.* p .43.

¹⁰⁶ Ambily. C.S. 2020. *Op.cit.* p.104.

a tributary of the Meenachil river, his reinterpretation indicates that fishing may also have been an important activity practiced by the community.



Fig 3.51: Serpent? iron tools from Oliyani and Iron fish hook, Nallur. (Courtesy: Ambily. C.S)

Secondly, the Kadanad excavation at the Kurumannu cist yielded a significant number of iron implements. From cist I, it was recovered a dagger, chisels, hoes, leaf shaped knife, a sword, and an iron rod with a hilted handle at one end and long curved projections on the other end which was found placed in a vertical position. It was total eight implements were recovered from this cist I¹⁰⁷.



Fig 3.52: Iron Tools from Kadanad Excavation (Courtesy: ASI Thrissur Circle)

¹⁰⁷ Nambirajan. M. and C. Kumaran. *Op.cit.* pp. 123-127.

From cist II, around twelve iron implements were discovered, consisting of chisels, battle axe, dagger, knife, ladle and notably a long spear like object along with two implements featuring curved edges on both sides. Unfortunately, beyond the preliminary listing of these artifacts no detailed material studies have been undertaken and the excavation reports remain unpublished.

The Neendoor urn burial produces five types of iron tools. The tools were kept in the Museum of School of Social Science MG University. All of them are highly corroded in condition due to the lack of proper care of the objects. The present author examined all the tools and it was very difficult to identify the tools due to their fragile condition. So, the author used a comparison method with photographs with other megalithic sites. From the observations the first two were identified as tools rather than weapons and fig. A looks like an iron axe or adze blade by its shape. One of the edges is sharpened suggesting the functional edge and its waist portion is narrow shaped and this probably used as a hand axe tool. The second tool is probably a dagger or knife. Its long size and corrosion pattern suggest it is a knife and used as a weapon.



Fig 3.53: A: Adze tool?



Fig 3.54: B Knife?

The three were weapons and the fig: C is probably a chisel or dagger and its leaf-like shape with a pointed tip suggest that it was used for piercing and its size and form make it more likely to be a weapon rather than a utilitarian tool. Fourthly the tool is identified as an iron chisel which has a straight elongated form with a slightly rounded functional edge. This tool has a handle section which is a small narrow extension suggested that was inserted

into a wooden or bone handle. The next is fig. E identified as a long dagger having elongated shape which suggests the use as intended for stabbing. This also has a small extension on one edge that is used for a wooden handle.



Fig 3.55: Chisel?



Fig 3.56: D Chisel



Fig 3.57: E long dagger

The iron tools recovered from the Meenachil basin include both domestic implements and weapons, suggesting that the people of the region were engaged in a mixed economy of hunting-gathering and agriculture. Most of these tools are relatively small and not heavy tools. The finds from Oliyani are difficult to analyse only from photographs, but they appear to resemble small agricultural implements. At Kadanad several tools show features more closely related to weapons defensive tools¹⁰⁸. Among these, an iron rod with a flat handle on one end and long curved projections on the other end discovered in Cist I, stands out as a unique one. The Neendoor assemblage in contrast, is dominated by domestic

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

agricultural tools, its shapes and sizes were suggested for use such as digging, land clearance and cutting purposes like knife. A long dagger from the site might be a weapon.

From the analysing of the iron tools from the region, most common implements are sickle and daggers. Sickles are likely used as primary agriculture tools for harvesting cereals and grasses. Their presence shows the transition to a settled agriculture. The daggers were probably used for hunting. It is effective for both close attack and throwing at running animals. Other weapons include arrow heads, spear heads and swords are appearing to have been used in both hunting and defence, while, hoe, axe, sickles were primarily used as agricultural tools.

The tools found from the basin show considerable variations in size, shape, features and functions. During the megalithic period such minimal tools were often employed for multiple usages. It might depend on the landscape, the nature of the site and the activities undertaken. The iron tools found at Kadanad and Kunnoni were located in the upper basin of the river valley along the Western Ghats, are generally long in size and small in shapes. This suggests their usages in the forest region possibly clearing the vegetation or for defensive in nature. In contrast the tools from Neendoor are situated between the coastal plains and the midlands and the tools are bigger in size and broad in shapes. So, it indicates the purpose of agricultural activities. The variations in tools and types again can differentiate on the basis of age groups and experience among the users. The small size, shaped tools could have been handled by younger, less experienced individuals and the larger, sharper implements were likely used by an elder or experienced person. In many cases tools served multiple functions, such as both agricultural works and defence¹⁰⁹. Notably most of these implements were double edges with one edge being functional and opposite end may have carries a spike or a wooden handle which is now lost to decay.

¹⁰⁹ Abayan. G.S. 2018. *Op.cit.* p.173.

All the iron tools discovered in the region show close similarities to those from neighbouring areas. In addition to the excavated iron tools, the information collected during the field work indicate that local villagers were aware of iron objects such as knives and small nails, probably even fish hooks that were identified from the urns during accidental discoveries. But there are no photographs or materials of these that survived. Apart from these differences, some megalithic burials contained freshly manufactured tools, likely placed as grave goods for the deceased. From the Chenkalthadam region, an iron axe¹¹⁰ was recovered from a burial as seemingly unused at the time of deposition. Unfortunately, no systematic studies were carried on the Meenachil basin to confirm or contextualize these findings for a conclusive answer.

Beads: The third category of the assemblage is beads, which are a predominant feature of megalithic grave goods. From the Meenachil basin the beads made of carnelian, chert and quartz were excavated and all of them found in the Kurumannu cist I in the Kadanad excavation¹¹¹. Among them, carnelian beads stand out as particularly significant because its raw material is not naturally available in Kerala. Carnelian is a reddish orange variety of chalcedony, typically sourced from regions in the Deccan and Central India. There is one etched carnelian bead which is long and barrel shaped with zigzag lines enclosed within a marginal line on either side was discovered at Kurumannu. Similar barrel shaped beads with vertical lines have been reported from Niramakulam, Machad and Pazhayannur¹¹². The carnelian beads are also been found at other nearby sites such as Niramakulam in Pathanamthitta (15 beads), Nariyampara near Kanchiyar village in Idukki (26 beads) Kurumassery (135 beads)¹¹³ Okkal in the Periyar basin. The carnelian beads represent symbol of wealth and prestige in the Iron Age period due to their durability,

¹¹⁰ Ambily. C.S. 2020. *Op.cit.* p.104.

¹¹¹ Nambirajan. M. and C. Kumaran. *Op.cit.* pp. 123-127.

¹¹² Arya. P.N. *Op.cit.* p .456.

¹¹³ Rajan. Chedambath. *Investigations into the Megalithic and Early Historic Periods of the Periyar and the Ponnani River basins of Kerala*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Deccan College, Pune.1997. pp. 120-123.

vibrant colour and glossy finish. The etched carnelian variant featuring distinct designs added further value and was likely associated with status and ritual significance in burial. All beads found in Kerala appear to be finished beads, suggesting that they were not manufactured locally. Their presence shows the long-distance exchange networks and inter-regional exchanges and interactions during the megalith period. Thapar dated the burial at Porkkalam to the 3rd century BC to 1st Century AD, while Machad Pazhayannur sites have been dated 2nd century BC to 2nd century AD (Jayasree. 2007) on the basis of carnelian beads.

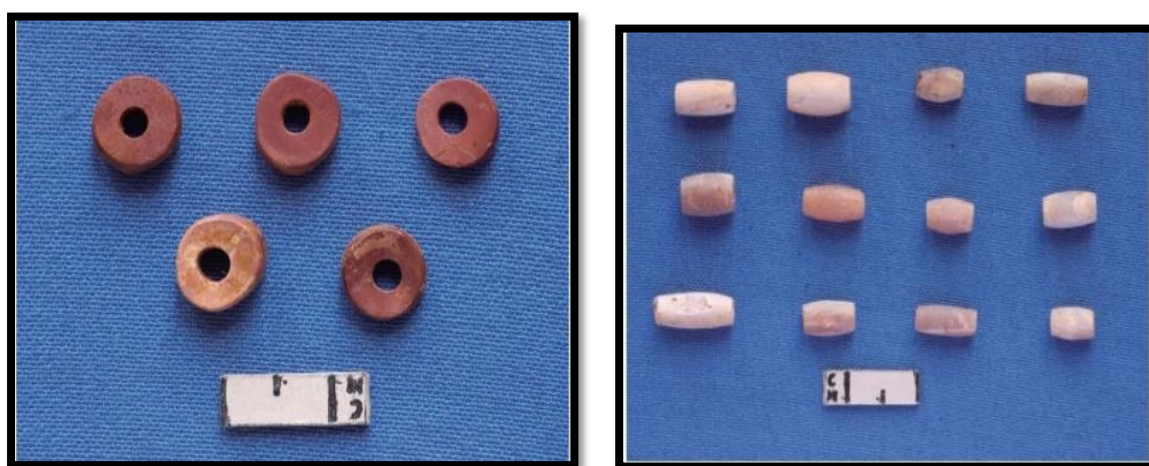


Fig 3.58: Stone Beads from Kadanad (Courtesy: ASI Thrissur Circle)

Other types of beads found at Kadanad include those made from chert and quartzite. The chert is widely available across India and not naturally found in Kerala. However, chert tools have been reported from Nachivayal and their use for tool making has been noted in the rock shelters of Anjunad valley as reported by Nikhildas¹¹⁴. The chert occurs alongside quartzite and quartzite beads also recovered from the Meenachil basin. These include cylindrical shaped beads and wedge-shaped pendent models, the later of which is comparable to similar finds from Chellarkovil in Idukki¹¹⁵. The local information gathered

¹¹⁴ Nikhildas. N. *Archaeology of the Anjunad Valley with special reference to the Megaliths and Rock Art, Idukki District. Kerala*. PhD Thesis. Department of Archaeology. Deccan College Post Graduate Institute, Pune. 2014.p.144. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/22701>. Accessed on. 06/05/2023.

¹¹⁵ Regional Archives Kozhikode. File NO. ARCPRM/ 14/2020. A. dated 13.07.2020. (Regarding the carnelian beads found from the Kanchiyar Village, Idukki)

from the sites, especially urn burial sites revealed that locals had occasionally found beads or beads like materials within the burial soil. These finds are now lost due to unawareness about its archaeological importance.

During the salvage excavation of the Neendoor cist, team members also reported the presence of beads inside the urn¹¹⁶. But unfortunately, no further documentation is available. Adding to these a gold leaf was also recovered from the Kurumannu cist which is a rare occurrence in Kerala megalithic context. The gold objects as grave goods are extremely uncommon and so far, only three sites in Kerala produce gold ornaments such as three slotted gold ear rings at Arippa in Kollam¹¹⁷ and Puliyoor in Alappuzha¹¹⁸.



Fig 3.59: Quarts pendent



Fig 3.60: Gold leaf (Courtesy: ASI Thrissur Circle)

The last but least available evidence from the burials were the bones. No complete skeleton has been found from any burial in Kerala. All the burials appear to be secondary in nature. However, some of the burials yielded the bone remains in various forms like ashes stored in pots or vessels, sand mixed with bone fragments and a chalky white powdery form. These were found in different parts of Kerala, though most were in highly decayed and fragile condition. In the Neendoor urn, a white colour powdery material was

¹¹⁶ Mr. Anil. *Personal Interview*. 16-04-2025

¹¹⁷ IAR *Indian Archaeology A review 1990-1991*. Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi., 1991 pp. 31-35.

¹¹⁸ Satyamurthy. T. *The Iron Age in Kerala: Mangadu Excavations*. Kerala Department of Archaeology, Thiruvananthapuram. 1992. p.10.

noticed inside a pot placed within the urn which is likely to be cremated bone¹¹⁹. Similarly, information gathered from the Ettumanoor region indicate that some urns contained a small pot filled with soil and ashes like powdery martial¹²⁰. These findings suggest that compared to other burial monuments, urn burials often contained bone fragments in the region but no more discussions are possible due to their degraded conditions.

The material evidence recovered from the Meenachil basin suggests that the megalithic society in the region was complex, possessing technological skills and engaging in various forms of subsistence such as hunting and gathering, cattle keeping, agriculture, fishing, slat making, craft productions, masonry, tool making, pottery manufacturing and local inland and coastal exchanges. The recovered materials which are similar in form and function to those found in nearby burial sites indicate that these cultural traits were not unique to the Meenachil river basin area but were part of broader cultural patterns observed across Kerala. The distribution pattern of monuments and material goods provides valuable insights into the socio-cultural and economic life of megalithic communities in the Meenachil region.

Megalithic Society in Meenachil Basin

To discuss the nature of megalithic society in a broader spatial and temporal context, it is important to consider the period and population involved. The Iron Age megalithic culture in South India is generally dated between 10th century BC to 3rd century BC, though recent dating methods indicate that much later phase of the megalithic burials even in the Oliyani cist burial in Meenachil basin. It was dated to (charcoal) 1030-1297 AD and 1373-1377 AD (cal.) and these indicate a wide chronological span to the megalithic period. According to Rajan Gurukkal, the megalithic period in Kerala was tribal in nature and he describes it as a primitive society¹²¹. But like all other cultures and civilizations the

¹¹⁹ Mr. Anil. *Personal Interview*. 16-04-2025

¹²⁰ Jessi Arrumanoor.. *Personal Interview* 16-04-2025.

¹²¹ P. Rajendran. 2005. *Op.cit.* p.45.

megalithic society too evolved over time. While it is true that no full-fledged settlement site or architectural monuments have been found in Kerala but this absence should not be misinterpreted as evidence of a rudimentary or static social structure. The earlier phase may have been tribal and primitive in nature but over the centuries, megalithic society gradually developed in every aspect of society such as socially, economically, politically and culturally.

One of the main problems in understanding the complexity of this society is the perspective on the period and landscape. Many scholars have assumed that the terrain of Kerala was not fit for a permanent settlement during the megalithic period¹²². The landscape was indeed different in the megalithic period but does not necessarily imply that it was uninhabitable. Historical references to the *Keralaputhras* during the Maurya period and material evidence such as horse bones, carnelian beads and lapis lazuli from Sri Lanka suggest that early trade relations between Sri Lanka had with the North West part of India especially with Gujarat even before 3rd century BC. This must be via Western Coast of India and the inscriptions from Madurai in 3rd century BC mention the traders, merchants and mediators implying that inland trade networks were carried out just before Sangam period¹²³. All these were indicating the long-distance interactions existed in the region well before Sangam age. So, in this context the material remains from megalithic sites such as ceramics, iron tools, beads, gold were strongly suggesting the presence of a socially stratified community. So even though the earlier megalithic phase was tribal or primitive in nature, it likely developed into a more complex society well before the Christian era itself.

¹²² Robert Bruce Foote. *The Foote Collection of Indian Prehistoric and Proto Historic Antiquities*. The Commissioner of Museum, Chennai. 1916. p.45.

¹²³ Conningham. R.A.E., Allchin. C.M. Batt and D. Lucy. "Passage to India / Anuradhapura and the Early Use of the Brahmi Script". *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*. 6(1). 1996. pp. 73-97. Also. Robin Coningham, Mark Manual and JO Shoebridge. "Reconstructing Network of Trade and Exchange in the Indian Ocean During the Early Historic Period: Case Studies from Anuradhapura" K.S. Mathew. eds. *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris. New Perspectives on Maritime Trade*. Routledge. 2017. p.41

Social Life: In order to understand about the Megalithic society in the region, it is important to note the existence of kinship structure and social stratification. In the initial stages, early inhabitants likely lived in small mobile bands or groups. These groups selected areas which were suitable for hunting and gathering, places that provided forest resources, safety from wild animals, and protection from seasonal floods. Typically, these groups were composed of one or two extended families and were not organised as densely populated communities. Over time, these small groups gradually evolved into settled communities¹²⁴. This transformation may have taken years and was likely influenced by different kinds of migrations also. The natural calamities such as floods, landslides, and forest fire in summer, along with the constant search for food and water could also prompt different groups to merge and settle together in specific areas. The survival of every community depended on cooperation, which eventually led to the development of a kinship-based society¹²⁵. These early communities might have been aware about the sharing of food and resources, practiced division of labour, and engaged in small scale inter-groups exchanges within a local landscape. Gradually they began to settle permanently and put control over the land and resources. As this settlement grew, they formed into clans which were composed of scattered but related communities across a small geographical area. In this stage people began constructing their own burial structures and developing their own worshiping practices which led to the emergence of social hierarchy¹²⁶. This hierarchy may have been influenced by various factors such as leadership roles, participation in trade and exchange networks, technological skills and craftsmanship. Such differentiation is reflected in the burial distribution patterns; clustered burials may represent class or family based burial sites that formed the basic unit of social organization frame. The Kurumannu, Kurinji and Vedagiri were such sites that noticed group burials. From Niramakulam, two dates- inside

¹²⁴ Rajesh. K.P. 2017. *Op.cit.* p. 494.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 500.

and outside obtained from a cist burial¹²⁷ indicate the reuse of burial space, which reflects the idea of lineage continuity.

According to Korisettar, burial monuments were probably not constructed for commoners but for individuals belonging to elite strata¹²⁸. The social stratification in megalithic society can be identified through several indicators. Firstly, the variability in burial types point towards social differentiation. The burials range from simple urn to elaborate dolmens, cists and laterite chambers. While the availability of raw materials may explain some of this variation, it is also likely that the status differences played a role. Secondly variation in grave goods recovered from the different burials also reflects social hierarchy. Recent studies shows that both fresh and used goods were placed in burials with significant differences in the quality and quantity and typology of these materials¹²⁹. Beads made from carnelian, chert and quartzite indicate the luxury status of some individuals. The number and quality of ceramics vessels, the presence of finely crafted products, iron tools and their typological distinction among these tools such as agricultural tools, defensive implements suggest differing social status. Together all these materials, goods and burial practices suggest the presence of some kinds of social stratifications in the megalithic society.

Economical Life: The term economy in the context of megalithic societies refers to how these communities sustained themselves through a combination of food subsistence, production of goods, exchange resources and organized labour. There are two primary patterns of substance among the megalithic people that can be identified¹³⁰. In the initial

¹²⁷ Ambily. C.S.2017. *Op.cit.* p.237.

¹²⁸ Ravi. Korisettar. "The Archaeology of the South Asian Lower Palaeolithic: History and Current Status" *Prehistory Vol. I. Archaeology of South Asia. ICHR, Manohar. 2002. pp.1-55.*

¹²⁹ From the Talk of Jaseera. C.M. Reassessing Kerala's Megalithic Burial Pottery: A Use Alteration Analysis. KCHR Foundation Day Lecture Series, UC College Aluva. 13-03-2025.

¹³⁰ Udaya Ravi Moorthi. S. *Megalithic Culture of South India*. Ganga Kaveri Publishing House, Varanasi. 1994. p.44 and Mohanty R.K and V. Selvakumar. "The Archaeology of Megaliths in India. 1947- 1997". S. Settar, Ravi Korisettar (ed) *Prehistory Archaeology of South Asia Vol. I. Manohar, New Delhi. 2002. pp.330-331*

stage hunting and gathering were the predominant means of their survival. Over time, they began to observe how certain plants grew and ripened naturally with the changing seasons. They developed an understanding about suitable land, moisture and sunlight, eventually leading to a gradual transition towards agriculture. It is important to note that this cognitive capacity which is the ability to recognize and respond to environmental patterns emerged during the last phase of the stone age itself, particularly in the neolithic period. But in Kerala there is no evidence for a neolithic community. So, it is during the megalithic period the region started the second subsistence strategy, agriculture.

The agriculture in the region did not emerge from untapped resources. It evolved from the collective efforts by highly organised communities likely composed of skilled hunter gatherers developed over generations¹³¹. In the case of Kerala, this transition was likely influenced not just by human cognitive capacity or internal innovations, but also by external factors such as migrations, communication networks and inter regional exchange activities. When the family units developed into clans, there happened a transition from wild to domestic which contributed to population increasing. According to V. Gordon Childe, innovations arise from necessity, the invention and adoption of agricultural practices can be seen as a response to growing need for food security¹³². Even during this period, evidence of inter-regional exchange and hinterland connections suggest that the idea of agricultural production may have reached the region primarily through communication and contact with other regions.

The evolution of agriculture was a gradual process that evolved over several stages. In the initial stage, shifting cultivation was likely practiced. Considering the low population density at the time, early communities may have cultivated millets and pulses nearby their

¹³¹ Mannion. A.M. "Domestication and the Origins of Agriculture: An appraisal". *Progress in Physical Geography*. Vol. 23. 1999. pp 37-56.

¹³² Vasudha Pant. *Beginning of Agriculture and Domestication in India*. Infinity Foundation India, Chennai. 2020. p. 37.

settlements. It is located on hillocks or upland terraces after clearing small areas of land. When soil fertility declined or seasonal climatic conditions changed, they moved to new areas.

Following this stage, communities may have transitioned to more organized forms of slash and burn cultivation¹³³. During this stage they cleared the forest using iron tools such as axes, sickle and hoes etc. and the vegetation was burned to enrich the soil with nutrients. This stage marks an important shift as it coincides with the emergence of permanent settlements particularly in regions with favourable terrain. In the Meenachil region the geological settings characterised by hilly terrain was suitable for slash and burn cultivations. Over time this practice gave a way to the developments of permanent or semi-permanent cultivation fields. This transition is driven by population growth and the increasing need for food stability.

This agricultural development was not a response to demographic pressure only, but was also influenced by trade and exchange. It likely occurred during the transitional phase between the megalithic period and early historic periods. The presence of both agricultural tools and hunting/ defensive weapons in burial goods suggests a period overlap during this phase in which communities engaged in both cultivation and hunting and gathering. Later, the evolution of this cultivation in the region shaped how these communities adapted to their local geography moving from upland areas to more fertile river valleys. It also played a crucial role in their social transformation from tribal to stratified communities and in their technological advancement particularly the shift from stone to iron¹³⁴.

The deliberate practice of cultivation initially started as a means of food production but it soon became closely tied to the development of inequality and hierarchy. It eventually

¹³³ Rajan Gurukkal, Raghava Varier .1999. *Op.cit.* p.168. and Rajesh. K.P. 2017. *Op.cit.* p. 495.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 495-496.

became a tool for social scarification.¹³⁵ The first communities identified as agriculturists. They were likely composed of families or small groups who possessed knowledge of seasonal patterns, land preparation, and harvesting techniques. The material evidence from burial goods suggest that they used tools such as hoes, axes and adze similar to axe. These implements were used to clear vegetation, loosen soil, and dig for planting. When the cultivation makes surplus production, there arose a need for containers to store the grains, water, honey and other food items. Before the early storage may have relied on natural materials such as leaves or woven containers. But later the demand for durable vessels that could safely store goods over time and be used for transport or exchange, led to the idea of pottery.

Then the vessels were needed for another purpose that is cooking requirements. Unlike food consumed raw or roasted over open fire, cultivated crops required specialized cooking vessels and pots. This led to a development of ceramic technology and the formation of potter communities. This same thing occurred among the groups of pastoralists. With the spread of cultivation, the need for different types of animals increased. Initially it was domesticated for meat and milk animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. Then later they used animals for agricultural support such as ploughing fields, animal dung used for increasing productivity and transportation of goods. Over time, certain animals also took on ritual practices and became symbols of social status.

During the period, when the emergence of small groups and settlements alongside the beginning of agriculture, the people started burying the dead body. In the initial stages burials were likely intended for the commemoration of important individuals or ancestors. But later these practices began to serve territorial functions such as marking clan boundaries or asserting ancestral claims to land¹³⁶. However, at a point of time the dead may have come

¹³⁵ Vasudha Pant. *Op.cit.* p.63.

¹³⁶ Rajesh. K.P. 2017. *Op.cit.* p.494.

to be associated with some kind of beliefs involving fear, reverence and spiritual respect. This shift likely led to the practice of burying deceased in designated areas, often located on the outskirts of settlements or in uncultivated lands, away from fields used for food production¹³⁷. So, the construction of these burials which is involved large stones or megaliths required a group of people with specific knowledge and skills in quarrying, transporting to burial locations and assembling stone structures. Over time, they developed into a specialized group of stone masons or funerary specialists¹³⁸.

The other groups, such as traders and exchange facilitators likely emerged within megalithic societies when agricultural and forest-based surpluses started to be exchanged across the region. Initially these communities may have traded forest products like honey, medicinal plants, fruits and vegetables. Later cultivated products were also exchanged. The long-distance movements of goods would have required a specialized group of people capable of walking long distances, crossing rivers, and climbing hills. Eventually, they may have used wooden carts and other domesticated animals for transportation. The presence of non-local items among the grave goods such as iron tools, carnelian beads and gold, were indicates the active involvement of these trading communities in regional and inter regional exchange networks

Apart from these communities, the recovered burial goods also suggest the presence of iron smiths and bead makers. However, these commodities came to the region as a result of trade and communication networks. There is no evidence of iron furnaces or other remains related to on-site production in the region. Except the finished iron tools, no evidence of iron smelting or production such as iron slags, charcoal residues have been found. It indicates that iron technology was likely introduced to the region from outside sources, based on the evidence currently available. The same applies to bead makers too.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

The beads recovered from the region were finished products made from non-local materials. The carnelian is not naturally found in Kerala further supporting the idea that these items reached the region through external contacts and influences.

The growth of agricultural production and the emergence of different occupational based groups contribute to the transformation of a society into a more stable and organized form. As production and craft activities increased, there arose a need for common space where goods could be exchanged. The various social groups scattered across the uplands, midlands and coastal areas want to connect through common centres for the exchange of goods. These points were gradually developed into trade centres within the hinterlands. Many of these centres were located in the river valleys, taking advantage of the convenience of water transportation. Over time, these common markets were expanded into more complex hubs, where a wide variety of goods could be accessed in a single location.

Political Space: The growth of economic activities, the establishment of permanent settlements and the emergence of market centres were led to the development of various forms of leadership within society. In the context of production, leadership was essential to organize labour, manage the distribution of surplus goods within the community and facilitate exchange with other regions¹³⁹. Leadership also played a vital role in the storage and redistribution of the resources during times of scarcity such as drought. This growing need for coordination and control gave rise to organized leadership, which likely evolved from clan-based authority in the earlier stage of social formation. Initially this may have involved a respected elder or a group from a prominent family among the community. However, such leadership structures later developed into more formal roles who governed specific communities in the region. These leaders began to exercise control over the natural resources, irrigation systems, and local exchange networks. By the close of the 3rd century BC historical references to the Chera Chola and Pandyas were appearing in Greco Roman

¹³⁹ Rajan Gurukkal, Raghava Varier. 1999. *Op.cit.* pp.176-178.

literature as well as Sangam texts. These early dynasties likely emerged from earlier clan or community leadership structures, consolidating the powers over larger territories such as the Pandyas rule in the Madurai region.

Cultural/ Beliefs Space: The developing social transformations and expanding communication networks were likely to bring significant cultural changes in the region especially in customs and beliefs systems. One of the major shifts was the emerging practice of burying the dead which reflects a growing belief in their life after death. Prior to this, it is believed that bodies may have been left in an open space exposed to eat birds and Sangam literature having the reference to such practice as *Iduvor*¹⁴⁰. This suggests that the attitude toward the dead and it changed to construct burials for the dead indicating evolving spiritual beliefs. It is reasonable that early communities initially feared the natural forces such as thunder, lightning, and rain etc. later they personified these phenomena into natural deities and protective spirits. While there is no direct evidence for such beliefs from the Meenachil basin. On the other hand, celts found in burial contexts do not clearly reveal their actual role in society or in the burial practice. However, their presence suggests a symbolic or ritualistic dimension possibly a later form of worship.

Regarding the belief system in the region, the presence of ancient groves in the Meenachil basin holds significant importance. These groves likely served as a sacred space and in some cases, they function as a focal point for community gathering or seasonal rituals. Generally, they appear to be continuations of early nature-based worship practices like the Kurinji kaavu in the Meenachil region. The site is an ancient grove believed to have been built over a dolmen, with multiple burials located in surrounding areas. The main deity called Vanadurga is associated with the forest and wilderness which suggest a deep-rooted tradition of nature worship. The site remains an active place of worship even today. A similar tradition can be seen at Vedagiri hill, another ancient sacred site in the region. This

¹⁴⁰ Rajan. K. 2000. *Op.cit.* pp.11-12. cited in Rajesh. K.P. 2017. *Op.cit.* p. 489.

hill is marked by monuments like menhirs and hood stones. The historical traditions and local information report the presence of tribal groups at the site until recent times. These two sites were indicating the possible survival of sacred tradition that may stretch back to the megalithic period.

Burial Site	Distance	Temple
Vempally Dolmen	500 meters	Vempally Devi Temple
Kaalikavu Dolmen	500 meters	Ooramattom Badrakali Temple Vayala.
Kuzhikkandathil Dolmen	30 meters	Kurinji Sree Krishna Temple.
Kizhathari Dolmen	250 meters	Chirakkal Kaavu Bhagavathi Temple
Marangattupalli Dolmen	100 meters	Siva temple, Marangattupalli
Thevarmala Dolmen site	50 meters	Sankaranarayana Temple
Kunnoni Cist	500 metres	Sree Dharmasatha temple Kunnoni.

Table 3.2. Temples near the Burial site

The table shows that beyond the groves several burial sites, especially dolmens, have been discovered in close proximity to present-day temples. This spatial relationship suggests that these burial sites may have once been important places for funerary or ancestral rituals, and over time people continued to worship there which eventually turned them into temple spaces seen today. Among the megalithic burials, specific architectural features such as portholes and cup marks reinforce their ritualistic nature of burial practices. Portholes may have served as a symbolic function allowing the living to communicate with the dead and to offer food and other ritual items. The cup marks which appear across the world indicate a shared ritualistic symbol and their presence in the Meenachil region points to the influence of external contact.

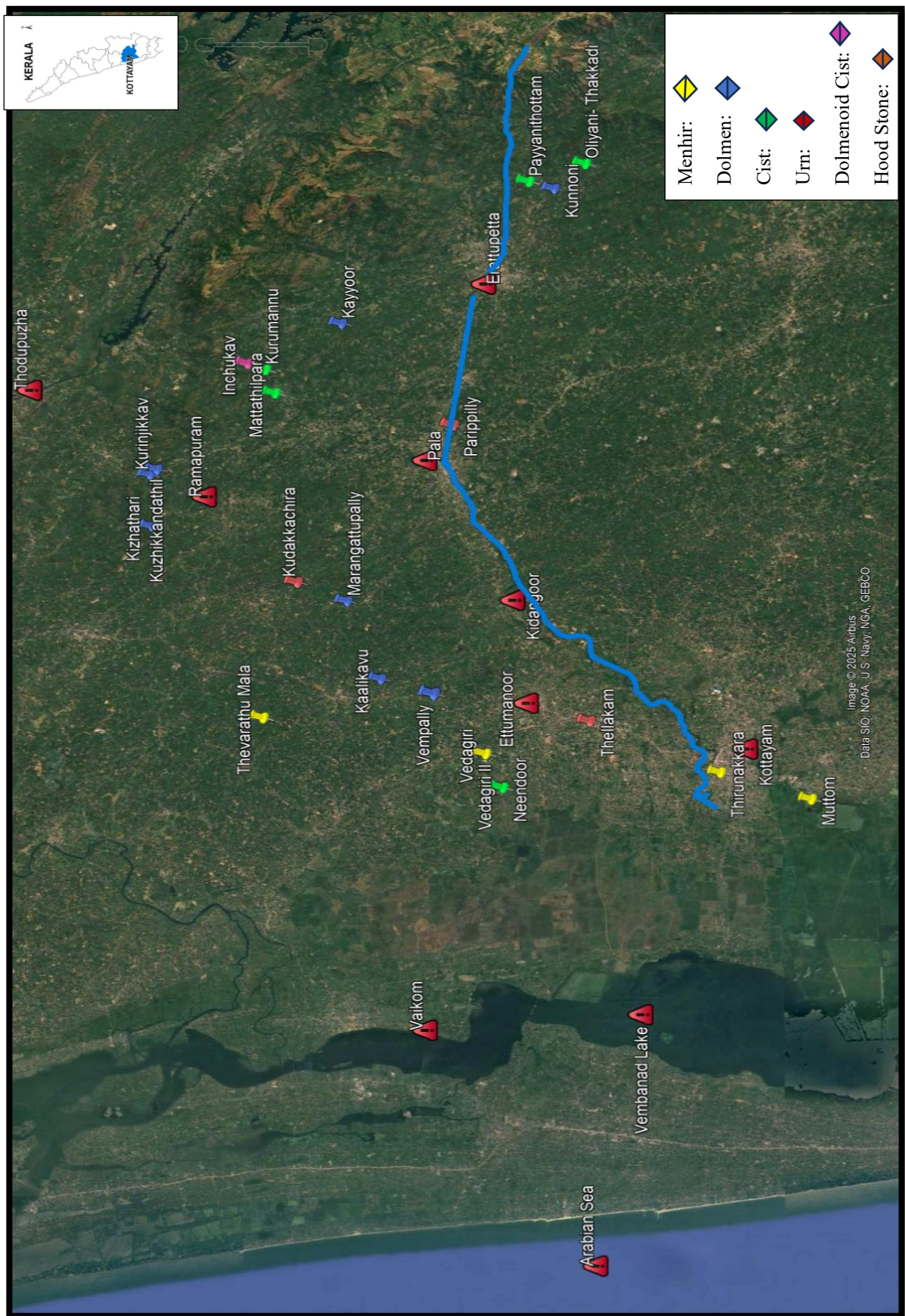


Fig 3.61: Distribution of Megalithic Sites. (not in scale)

Possible Settlement Locations in the Meenachil Basin.

There is no clear evidence of Megalithic habitation sites in Kerala. Several locations such as Pattanam in the Periyar river basin¹⁴¹, Nachivayal, Alampetti in Idukki district¹⁴² have shown traces that suggest the possibility of habitation. But no detailed studies were conducted. It is difficult to identify habitational sites in the Meenachil basin due to several seasons. Firstly, natural calamities such as landslides, floods and other geographical changes over the past 2000 years have significantly altered the landscape, especially the surfaces. Secondly, typical indicators of habitation such as surface level pot sherds, postholes, ash mounds, etc are absent. It is mainly due to continuous reuse of these areas, especially with the region's high population density in modern times. Except for scattered burial monuments and associated grave goods, no other conclusive evidence has yet recovered regarding the settlement pattern in the basin.

Against this backdrop, exploration carried out as part of the present study have led to some notable findings including, clustered burial sites, potential migration routes and theoretical possibilities that could suggest the possibility of habitation in the Meenachil basin such as Kunnoni and Kurinji region. In the Kurinji region more than ten burials have been identified across four sites and all of them are dolmens. Geographically this area is situated in the highland of Kurinji Koomban hills which lie between Idukki and Kottayam district. The region is rich in natural resources necessary for habitation, including small rivers, waterfalls, and natural rock shelters. The Kottamala and Kurinji Koomban hills also provide natural protection. Additionally, the presence of ancient groves such as Kurinji kaavu and Muthiyarkavu where worship continues even today. Both the sites contain burials which suggests a continuity of ancestral worship practices originating in the

¹⁴¹ From the Talk of Dinesh Krishnan: *Early Historic Archaeology of the Periyar Valley: Pattanam to Anappara*. KCHR Foundation Day Lecture Series, UC College Aluva. 13-03-2025.

¹⁴² From the Talk of Nikhildas: *Doing Archaeology in the land of Dolmens: A Narration of Archaeological Research and Public Engagements from the Anjunad Valley, Idukki*. KCHR Foundation Day Lecture Series, UC College Aluva. 13-03-2025.

megalithic period. Kuringi is located approximately 15 kilometres from Pala, which is located in the Meenachil river, believed to be an ancient active market centre, on the Pala - Thodupuzha route.

Kunnoni located at the foothills of the Western Ghats is another possible region. The site features include two natural rock shelters, unidentified microliths, a neolithic celt and three burial sites. Its potential as a habitation zone lies primarily in its material evidence of continuous events. Secondly, due to the geographical position, which Kunnoni is located on the basin of tributary of the Meenachil river where a clustering of megalithic burials indicating the possibilities. The region is located along the route from Vagamon to Erattupetta, which may have historically served as a corridor between Madurai to Western Coast. Excavations at the cist burial here recovered grave goods including iron tools suggests their use in later megalithic phase.

Both Kuringi and Kunnoni are strategically located along the ancient trade routes which once linked the Western Ghats and Western Coast. Notably, they are situated near the key centres in the river valley such as Pala and Erattupetta. Interestingly, no burials have been located in the Meenachil flood plains. Especially both the two regions lie along the tributaries of the Meenachil River, possibly due to the seasonal flood in the Meenachil rivers supporting their potential as stable and strategic habitation zones during the megalithic period.

Conclusion

This chapter discusses the early social formation in the Meenachil River Basin. The archaeological evidence from the river basin including microliths, reported neolithic celts, burial monuments and associated grave goods suggest that human habitation in the region extended dates back to an early prehistoric period. However, it is only through a detailed and systematic analysis of the recovered microliths and celts, that the antiquity of this habitation can be placed within the stone age cultural sequences. The study further suggests

that, beyond the advantages offered by the region's favourable geography, the cultural elements of the Meenachil basin was significantly shaped by process of migration, inter-regional exchanges and sustained communication networks.

The process of social formation in the Meenachil basin likely began during the megalithic phase, a period that also marked the beginning of significant external contacts. The construction of megalithic burials, introduction of agriculture, the practice of placing goods within burials, the use of advanced ceramic technology, portholes, cup marks, iron implements and carnelian beads were points to cultural influence that did not originate within the region itself. Instead, these elements appear to have been adopted through sustained interaction with neighbouring cultural zones. This suggests that the Meenachil basin was already integrated into a broader inter regional exchange network during the megalithic period facilitated by routes traversing both the Western Ghats and coastal plains.

The migration and trade routes in the region functioned through both land and water. The Meenachil river itself served as a viral corridor linking the Western Ghats with the Western Coast, passing through key locations such as Vagamon Erattupetta, Pala and Kidangoor. Over time, these sites evolved into important market centres and continue to remain prominent towns in the present day. The author identifies potential early settlement zones around Erattupetta, Pala and Kidangoor areas, which by the early medieval period, had also developed into significant brahmin settlement regions. It reflects a long continuity of habitation and socio-cultural transformation along the Meenachil basin.

The above study indicates that the Megalithic phase in the Meenachil river basin spanned a broad chronological range. Some burial practices appear to have continued into the medieval period and in certain forms, even persist among communities such as *Cholanaikers* today. Grave goods including ceramics, carnelian beads and iron implements are associated with a later phase of the megalithic tradition, possibly corresponding to the Sangam period, when long distance trade and exchanges networks flourished. During the

early phase, exchange activities were primarily based on a barter system involving forest products like honey, fruits and vegetables and later cultivated products. Notably, there is no archaeological evidence of commodities like pepper, cardamon or similar goods from the megalithic context. But by the 3rd century BC, indications of contact between Sri Lanka and North West India suggests that communities of the region had already begun accessing the Western coast and its hinterlands. In a subsequent early historic period, the establishment of Greco Roman trade links further integrated valuable spices such as pepper and cardamon into wider exchange items. So, it may be inferred that organized trade and the long-distance exchange system in the Meenachil basin began to take shape around 3rd century BC itself. The following chapter will discuss in detail about the early historic social formation of the region and its integration into wider cultural and commercial networks.

Chapter IV

‘Cross Roads of Commerce’

Early Historic Social Networks in the Meenachil Valley

Introduction

This chapter attempts to discuss the role of the Meenachil River during the early historic period roughly between 3rd century BC to 5th century AD. The previous chapter already discussed the early social formations and the Iron Age megalithic society in the basin. This chapter focuses on the developments in the inter-regional exchanges, the expansion of trade networks especially Indo Roman trade, and the developments of market centres and traded goods. It examined possible trade routes connecting to Madurai from Western Coast through the Meenachil river and also made attempts to locate the ancient port of Nelcynda and Bacare and the site Cottanara as mentioned in the Greco Roman sources. The primary material evidence for this period is punch marked coins and Roman coin hoards discovered in the region. Literary references, field works findings and probable trade routes are integrated to shed light on the socio-political and cultural life of the region.

Additionally, the local histories connected to Vaikom and Kaduthuruthy are considered for their possible role in the trade network. Etymological clues and geographical markers are also used to reconstruct the region's history. Last but not least, the contemporary port site of Muziris is brought into discussion to understand the Meenachil basin and its development within a broader historical and cultural framework. By examining parallels in trade goods, settlements, distribution and cultural exchanges, the study seeks to demonstrate how the Meenachil basin was integrated directly or indirectly into the early historic maritime trade networks.

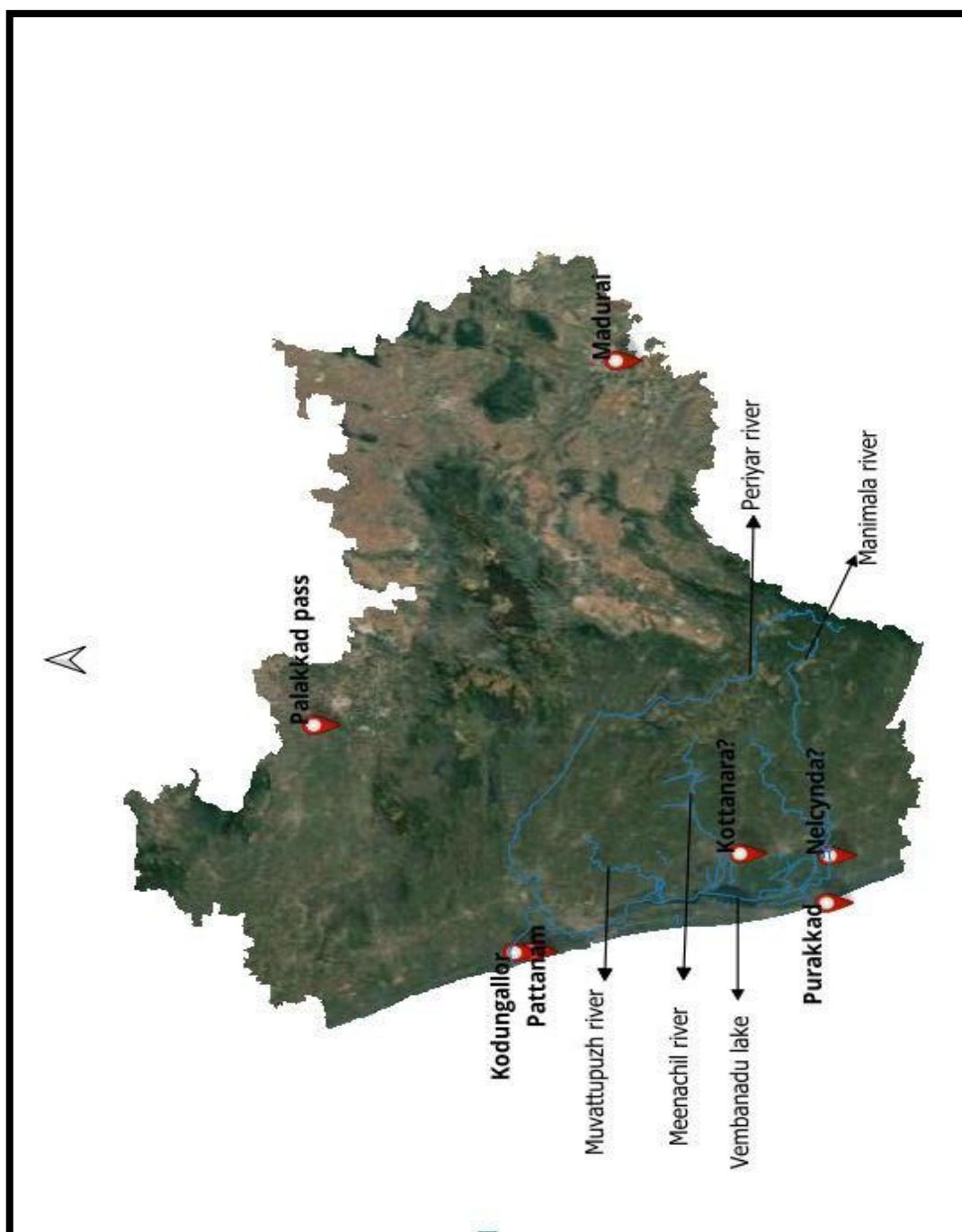


Fig 4.1: Early historic sites in study area. (not in scale)

Sources for the Early Historic Period

Unlike the megalithic period, the Early historic society of the region is better illustrated through both indigenous and foreign literary sources. Kerala was renowned for its spices and active coastal trade in Iron Age and Early historic times. Accounts by foreign travellers offer valuable insights into the ports along the Western Coast and its imports and exports activities. The early Tamil Sangam works written by local poets of ancient Tamilakam provide a vivid picture of the region's socio - political and cultural life. It was in 4th century BC, Megasthenes, a Greek envoy at the Mauryan court wrote about transactions between the Southern parts of India and the Ganga valley, noting that spices were sourced from the Southern part of India¹. In the 1st century BC, the Greek historian Strabo mentioned that around 120 ships sailed annually from Myos Hormos to India in his book *Geographia*. It indicates the growing volume and reaches of maritime trade networks in the first century BC itself².

During the early centuries of Christian era, more detailed descriptions of the ports of the South West Coast of India were recorded by several travellers. The *Periplus Maris Erythrei* written by an unknown author provides detailed accounts of ports and markets along the Indian Ocean including Tyndis, Muziris, Bakare, Nelcynda, Balita, Komor and Kolchoi. It was the first foreign work to reference the ancient Kottayam region through the mention of its ports. Later, Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* wrote about the significance of pepper from India in the Roman Economy. Ptolemy, an Alexandrian based Egyptian scholar, in his work *Geography*, also recorded the ports along the Western Coast noting their emergence as important cities

The connectivity has always brought prosperity to societies and the region was no exception during the early historic period. The socio economic, political, and cultural life

¹ E.H. Warmington. M.A. *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India*. Cambridge University Press.1928. p.129.

² H.C Hamilton and W. Falconer (eds) *The Geography of Strabo*. London .1912. p. 178.

of this era is vividly reflected in the Sangam corpus. Works such as the *Pathittupathu*, *Akananuru*, *Purananuru*, and *Silappathikaram* provide valuable details about society and its spice trade with the Yavana's. In addition to these literary sources, archaeological sources from the Pattanam excavation, Roman coin hoards from different inland trade routes and several Tamil Brahmi inscriptions from Madurai and its surrounding regions mentions the merchant class further illustrating the vibrant economic life of the time. Together these sources portray the busy ports of the Western Coast and its imports and exports of a variety of goods.

Early Historic Locations in the Region

The extensive trade activity was the result of the continuity of early inter-regional exchanges supported by hinterlands and coastal routes that had been developing as early as 5th century BC. In the following centuries, these exchanges accelerated the growth of transactions which led to the emergence of centres during the early historic period. The non-indigenous literary sources of the early Christian centuries mentioned the names of three locations in the ancient Kottayam region such as Nelcynda, Bakare, and Cottanara. According to the *Periplus*, these were part of the third circuits of the major maritime outlets which connected to the regional economies of the Western Coast³.

Because of the abundant availability of pepper, the foreign sources were frequently mentioned about Nelcynda alongside with the Muziris as a major centre on the Western Coast. Nelcynda was an ancient port site that appears under various names in classical sources. According to Schoff, the name 'Nelcynda' may have been an appellation. The *Periplus* referred to it as Nelkunda and Pliny referred to it as 'City of Nelcyndi'. Ptolemy names it Melkunda which Caldwell translated as 'Western Kynda' while *Tabula Peutingeriana* lists it as Nelcynda and the geographer Ravenna records it as Nilcinna.

³ Lionnel Casson. *The Periplus Maris Erythrei*. Princeton University Press. 1989. pp. 22-7; 224-225

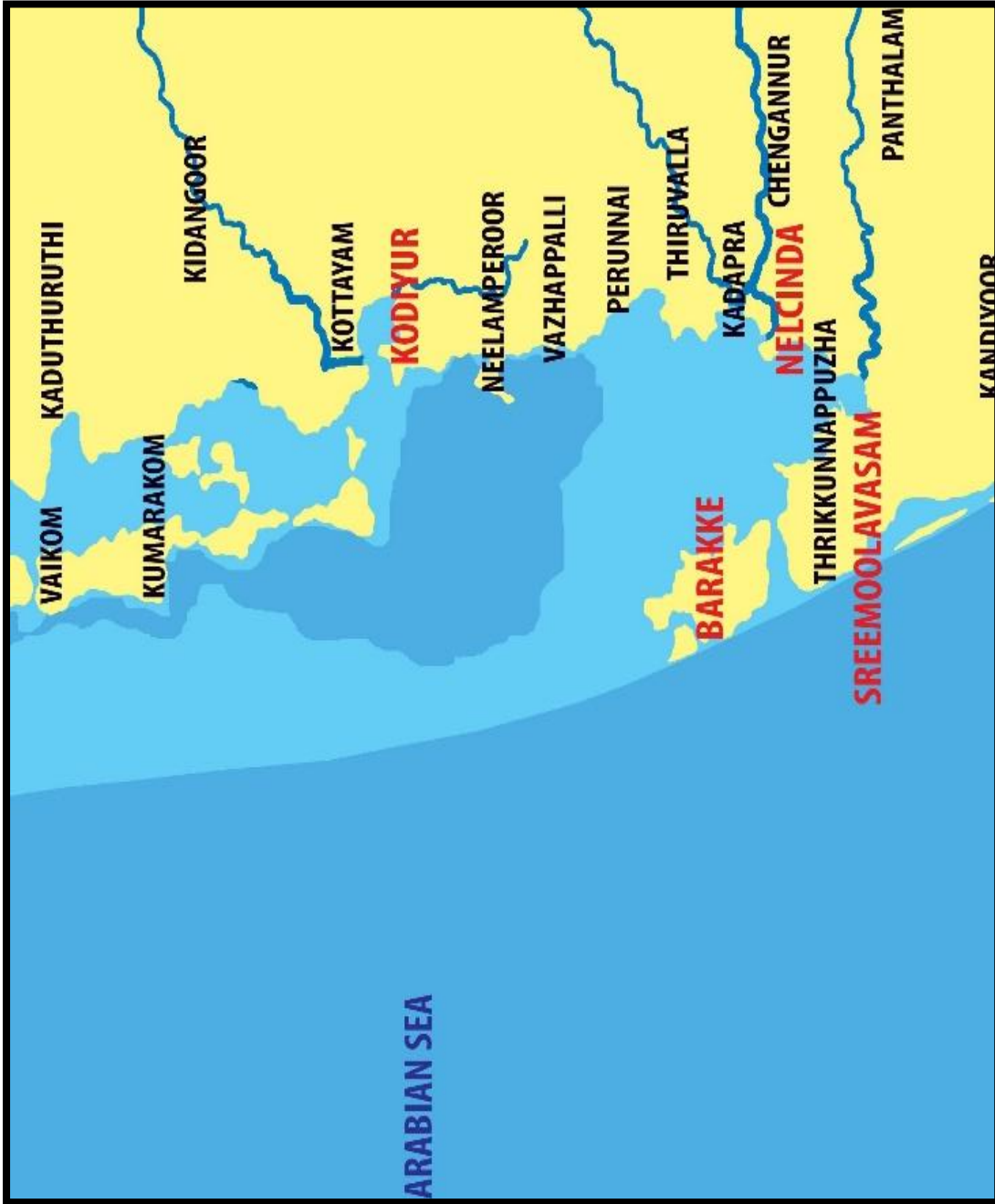


Fig 4.2: Illustration of early historic centres (not in scale) (Courtesy: Pallikkonam Rajeev)

The second site Bacare is described as a loading port associated with Nelkynda and the Cottanara identified in literary sources as a ‘pepper producing land’. Like other port sites along the Western Coast, these three locations remain subjects of scholarly debates and differing interpretations.

Historical Locale of Nelcynda

During the early historic period three key port locations emerged in the region, among which Nelcynda stood out as the most significant, enjoying a status equal to that of the renowned port of Muziris. The *Periplus of the Eritrean Sea* provides the earliest reference to Nelcynda in chapter 53 where it describes the major trading marts of the Western Coast⁴.

‘Then Naoura and Tundis, the first mart of Limurike; and after them Mouziris and Nelkunda, which are now busy places; ’Nelkunda is nearly 500 stades from Mouziris and likewise, the same distance by river or by sea. It belongs to another kingdom, that of Pandion, and it too stands on a river⁵ about 120 stades from sea.

According to the *Periplus*, Nelcynda was situated approximately 500 stadia (around 92 km)⁶ south of Muziris and was accessible by both sea and river routes. It belonged to a different polity, under the rule of *Pandion* and was located on a river about 120 stadia (22 km) inland from the coastline. The account also implies that Nelcynda and Bakare lay along the same bank river⁷ emphasizing its status as a flourishing port with advantageous inland and maritime connections. Later Plini the Elder reinforce this view in his *Natural History* referring to another commodious harbour belonging to the ‘Nation of *Necanidon*’ with

⁴ G.W.B. Huntingford. (ed). *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea by an Unknown Author*. The Hakluyt Society, London. 1980. p.50.

⁵ *Ibid*. This river is probably lake Vembanad, Through the place is beside a river which enters the lake.

⁶ Rajan Gurukkal and Dick Whittaker. “In Search of Muziris”. *Journal of Roman Archaeology*. No.14. 2001. p.30.

⁷ Wilfred H. Schoff. *PME* 55. Translation. Longmans, Green and Co. Network. 1912. p.44.

Bacare also under the rule of *Pandion*. He further notes the existence of the inland town of Madurai pointing to a well-developed and interconnected regional network.

*There is another harbour that is more commodious,
belonging to the nation Necanidon,
which they call Becare: the king's name at present is Pandion:
far off is another town of merchandise within the land Modusa*⁸.

According to Ptolemy,

*the Cheran port of Naura had become an emporium and
Tyndis had developed into a coastal city.
Muziris was still a leading trade centre
but the nearby Pandian port Nelcynda had lost its status as an emporium.*

Together the accounts of the *Periplus* and Pliny highlight Nelcynda's strategic location, its wide-ranging trade in high quality commodities especially pepper. Although its prominence had diminished by the time of Ptolemy, its earlier status as a leading port underscores its central role in the early historic maritime trade. Ptolemy's account suggests that the importance of Nelcynda was lost⁹, possibly due to the Pandyas shifting their focus to other emerging ports along the Southern and Eastern Coast. The exact location of Nelcynda remains uncertain. Based on the Greco Roman literary references and subsequent scholarly interpretations several locations along the Western Coast have been proposed including Niranam, Kottayam on the Meenachil river, Nakada near Thiruvalla and Neendakara in Kollam.

Kanakasabhai identified Nirkunnam near Kottayam town as the site of Nelcynda during his boat journey from Alappuzha to Kottayam¹⁰. In the same journey he proposed

⁸ Pliny. *Natural History*. Vol. I. Wernerian Club, Holland. 1847. p.136

⁹ J.W. McCrindle. *Ancient India as Described by Ptolemy*. Trubner & Co., London. 1885 p.180.

¹⁰ V. Kanakasabhai. *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*. Asian Educational Service, New Delhi. 1904. p.19.

Vaikarai in Kottayam as the location of Bakare and identified Baris with Palai river (misinterpreted Meenachil river as Palai river). The Vaikarai he referred to is a laterite hill near Kottayam town, where the Diwan Peishkars courthouse was located. The Meenachil river which flows nearby was misinformed by the locals as the Palai river, with Palai begins an inland city situated along its course. Kanakasabhai concluded that, during Ptolemy's time the sea extended along the eastern shore of the backwaters, which now reach over 40 miles from Changanassery to Pallippuram with a long strip of land forming the western bank¹¹. His views continue to be followed by some local historians, although others have challenged them. According to Pallikkonam Rajeev a history enthusiast argues that Kanakasabhai was misinformed by his boatman and that Baris could not be located along the Meenachil river. He contends that the name 'Palai' was a misunderstanding and that the Meenachil river was historically known as *Gauna* not Pala. Wilfred H. Schoff, in his translation work of *Periplus* also suggests that Nelcynda was probably located in the backwaters behind the Cochin. He noted that the exact location remains uncertain due to the frequent shifting of river beds, sand bars and islands but he affirmed that it was likely near Kottayam¹² which is 500 stadia or 50 miles from Crangannur.

The next is Niranam near Thiruvalla, which is first mentioned by Casson¹³. His argument was based on the distance measured on the *Periplus* that Nelcynda was Niranom which about 500 stades from Muziris is on Pambiyar river (Pamba) 12 miles east of Pirakkad (Purakkad). Later this was supported by T. K Joseph and he strongly opposed the idea of location of Kottayam. According to him, the Meenachil river is hardly ever navigable except during the monsoon, so river Baris should not be river Meenachil. He added that Vaikarai was never a port site and it had no capacity to be a port. So Bakare will never be Vaikkarai. He supports the theory of Pamba-Niranam because he mentioned that

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Wilfred H. Schoff. 1912. *Op.cit.* p.208.

¹³ Lionnel Casson. *Op.cit.* p. 298.

there are several Roman coins were reported in the Niranam area belongs to Augustus Caesar period (27 BC – 14 AD)¹⁴ and also reported from Puthenkavu and Ranni area of Pathanamthitta¹⁵. Such a coin was discovered in the region by the locals and kept secret because they were unaware of its importance. In 2017 Don Bosco in his book support this Niranam with the explanation of the distance of 500 stadia with a connection between the Thiruvandoor temple near Niranam with the Kochal in Valluvalli near Muziris where the Roman coin hoard was found¹⁶. The field explorations by the research scholar Ambily. C.S found that Niranam church kept various kinds of storage jars and manuscripts but their origin was unknown even to the church authorities. The Niranam was supported by the later historical evidence such as the similarity in the name Niganda which among the 32 brahmin settlements in the early medieval period¹⁷. It also strengthened with the later Syrian Christian settlements in the region which were believed as to have developed due to the trade and communication network in the region.

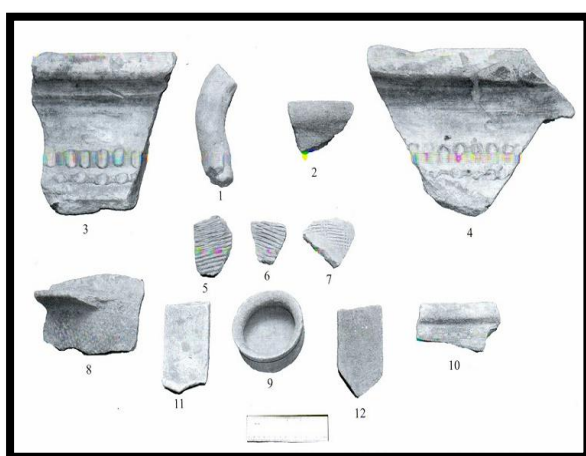


Fig 4.3: Potsherds- Kadappra Alamthuruth region. Fig 4.4: Storage Jar from Kadappra.

(Courtesy: Ajit Kumar)

(Courtesy: Ambily. C. S)

¹⁴ Alex Mathew. and Raju. "Inching Towards Nelcynda". *Rational Discourse, Vol. XII*, Thiruvalla. 2006. p.15.

¹⁵ P.J Thomas. "Roman Trade Centres in Malabar". *Kerala Society Papers. Gazetteer Department*, Trivandrum 1932.p.266

¹⁶ Don Bosco. *Muzirisinte Kalpadukaliloode. Grass Roots Mathrubhumi Books*. Kozhikode. 2017.p.59.

¹⁷ In Keralolpathy one of the southernmost of the 32 brahmin grams of Malabar called *Niganda*. cited in Ambily. C. S. *Holocene Archaeology of Pamba Basin*. PhD Thesis. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2017.p.261. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/414073>. Accessed on 23/05/2024.

Later in 2020 Ajit Kumar conducted a field survey that strengthened this argument with the archaeological materials. He discovered a rich variety of early historic potsherds and tiles from the Niranam, Kadappra and Alamthuruth region. It includes red ware, fine red ware and an amphora handle and probably a neck of the same ware and terracotta tiles¹⁸.

Alex Mathew found some archaeological material from the Nakkida close to Thiruvalla and he argued that Nakkida is located in a strategic location that can be collected large quantities of pepper from nearby production centres in the high ranges and Western Ghats and it is connected the river Manimala and Pamba River as well as link with Achaenkovil river. Ambily. C.S collected much more information from the region including Roman coins. They have been accidentally discovered by local people in areas such as Valajavattom, Nakkida, Alamthuruth and Kadappra. Unfortunately, they are unwilling to show the findings and are secretly selling them to antique dealers¹⁹. She also reports that from the Kadappra region a storage vessel was found during the construction works and the owner said that lots of coins and different types of potteries were found from the Kadappra region in last 50 years²⁰. Compared to Thiruvalla region, Pamba River is very shallow in the Kadappra area, but much wider, and most of the Kadappra region is now covered by paddy fields²¹. Archaeological evidence supports that Niranam had more potential, though it is connected only by small canals and streams. Nakkida on the other hand, has a broader channel linking the Achancovil and Manimala rivers, but only limited archaeological material evidence has been found there.

Apart from Meenachil, Niranam and Nakada, several other locations have been proposed by scholars. Earlier the Muziris and Nelcynda were identified in Mangalore and

¹⁸ Ajit Kumar. "A Probe to Locate Kerala's Early Historic Trade Emporium of Nelcynda". Sunil Gupta. eds. *Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology*. No. 5. New Delhi. 2008. p.103.

¹⁹ Ambily. C.S. *Op.cit.* p.263.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.264.

²¹ *Ibid.* p.265.

Nileswar both in south Canara²² but later studies placed them further South. Yule located the Nelcynda near the Kallada river and Fabricius referred to it as Cyncilim. Caldwell later classified this as a ‘Western Kingdom’. More recently, Anto George placed Nelcynda in south of Trivandrum. He argued that the name was misunderstood due to transliteration and that is actually refers to *Nancilnatu*²³ (*Nanjilnadu*) which ‘Nancil’ means plough and ‘nadu’- country, signifies agricultural activity of the region. Based on etymological and geographical similarities, he placed both Nelcynda and Muziris in present Kanyakumari District of Tamilnadu.

Identification of Bakare

The second important place in the region is Bacare, identified with Bakare in the *Periplus*, Becare of Pliny and Bakarei in Ptolemy. It was later referred to as Poracca/ Porga or Purakkad, the loading site for Nelcynda. It is first mentioned by the author of the *Periplus* like after Nelkynda,

*“There is another place at the mouth of this river, the village of Bacare:
which ships drops down on the outward voyage from Nelcynda and
anchor in the roadstead to take on their cargoes;
because the river is full of shoals and the channels are not clear.”²⁴*

later Pliny records,

*there is another harbour that is more commodious,
belonging to the Necandion, which they call Becare:
the region from where they transport pepper in small lighters
made of one piece of wood to bacare, is named Cotona²⁵.*

²² Wilfred H Schoff. “Proposed Identification of two South Indian Place names in the *Periplus*”. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. 1919. p.130.

²³ Anto George. *The Discovery of Muziris*. Anto Geoge. 2023. p. 103.

²⁴ Wilfred H. Schoff. 1912. *Op.cit.* p.44.

²⁵ Pliny. Vol. I. *Op.cit.* p. 136.

Ptolemy's Bakarei he put near the Quilon

This bar of red laterite which, a short distance south of Quilon, cuts short the backwater navigation, and is thence called the Warkalle barrier. It forms abrupt cliffs on the sea, without beach and these cliffs are still known to seamen as the red cliffs. The word Bakarei may represent the Sanskrit dvaraka 'a door'.²⁶

All these ancient references to Bacare describe it as a suitable starting point for the journeys, where vassals drop down the river from Western Ghats to Nelcynda. The *Periplus* notes that the port of Nelkynda was about 22 km from the coastal town of Becare.²⁷ It describes Bakare as a loading site located at the mouth of a river with sandbanks and shallow channels²⁸. The author further added the presence of black snakes- shot in size with dragon- shaped heads and blood red eyes as a distinctive landmark of the Bakare site. Pliny later added that Bacare became a more serviceable port during the time due to frequent pirate attacks on Muziris and he explains that pepper was transported by wooden boats to this loading site.

Unlike the Nelcynda, the Bacare has generated less academic confusion, as most scholars agree that it corresponds to Purakkad on the Western Coast. Purakkad, located in Alappuzha district was once a notable port. In the modern period, it lost its prominence with the rise of Alappuzha port. During the Portuguese and Dutch periods, the region saw the establishment of several foreign settlements. In addition to Purakkad, other proposed locations include Vaikkarai, Varkkala and Parakkai South of Trivandrum. Ptolemy associates Bacare with a location near the red cliffs of Varkkala close to Quilon while De Romanis places Bacare in the southern part of Vembanad lake. Among these, many scholars support Vaikarai in Kottayam district. V. A Smith identified it as a coastal settlement in the

²⁶ J.W. McCrindle. *Op.cit.* p.53.

²⁷ V. Selvakumar. "Ancient Ports of Kerala: An Overview". K.S. Mathew. eds. *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris*. Routledge. 2017.p. 289.

²⁸ Wilfred H. Schoff. 1912. *Op.cit.* p.44.

west of Nelkynda serving as a landing site for Kottayam²⁹. Kanakasabhai also identified Bakare with Vaikkara or Vayaskara during her boat journey to Kottayam. In his translation of *Periplus*, the J.B.W. Huntingford supports the smith's identification of Bacare with Vaikarai. Other than this. Anto George places Bacare at Parakkai, near the Parakkai lake in Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu³⁰ while T. J Thomson locates it in the Kolothunadu³¹ in Northern Kerala.

Both the Bacare and Nelcynda are mentioned as situated in the same river Baris. Romanis explained it as Pambiyar river³² which is better to transport goods down river on small crafts and then load heavy spice cargoes abroad at Bacare. The scholars generally believed that the Baris is the Pamba River. Kanakasabhai reported it as river Palai³³ or Pala which is modern Meenachil, flows through the Kottayam which comes from the Pala in the upper Kottayam. The Meenachil also supported by the Champakalakshmi³⁴ where Purakkad and Nelkynda were located. Ptolemy says Baris must be a stream that centres the backwater in the neighbourhood of Quilon³⁵. It is also mentioned that a place called Kottanarike was the only place for pepper connected with these ports.

It is possible that the Bacare is Purakkad. Several Roman coins were accidentally discovered by the local people. But unfortunately, there were no reported hoards or collections rather than secret personal collections.³⁶ Several explorations by researchers found potsherds including Turcios glazed pottery and Chinese sherds. TGP was earlier reported from the site³⁷. Interestingly a place name in the Purakkad known as

²⁹ V.A. Smith. *Early History of India*. Oxford. 1924. p.477. cited in, T.K. Venkata Subramanian. *Environment and Urbanisation in Early Tamilakam*. Tamil University, Thanjavur. 1988. p.28.

³⁰ Anto George. *Op.cit.* p.106.

³¹ P.J Thomson. *Op.cit.* p.266.

³² Raoul McLaughlin. *Rome and the Distant East*. Continuum UK, London 2010. p.52.

³³ V. Kanakasabhai. *Op.cit.* p. 19.

³⁴ R. Champakalakshmi. *Trade, Ideology and Urbanisation: South India 300 BC to AD 1300*. Oxford University Press, Delhi. 1996. p. 139.

³⁵ J.W. McCrindle. 1885. *Op.cit.* p.53.

³⁶ Ambily. C.S. *Op.cit.* p. 268.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Pandyalakavu³⁸ which shows the Pandya affiliation of the site in the ancient period. but with these available sherds and etymology we can't fix this as Bacare.

In Search for Cottanara

Among the early historic locations, the third important location is Cottanara which is considered as the sub region of Limyrike, which served as the hinterland for the commodities especially for pepper. In the *Periplus*, it explained,

*“There is exported pepper, which is produced in quantity in
only one region near these markets, a district called Cottonara³⁹”*

Periplus identifies the bulk production of pepper is coming from Kottanarike and later Pliny writes,

*The region from where they transport pepper in small lighters
made of one piece of wood to Becare is named Cotona⁴⁰.*

According to him, the pepper transported in dugout canoes, suggest that the pepper originates in the highlands and was transported via river routes to the port of Bacare⁴¹. Further, Ptolemy refer it as a Kottiare located in the south of Melkynda⁴² and he called Metropolis, which is noted in the Peutingerian table.

All the mentions were exhibiting the importance of Cottanara served as the pepper producing hinterland region for the coastal emporia's of Muziris and Bacare⁴³. There are several locations identified as the location for Cottanara. The majority of them identified Kuttanad as the Cottanara. It is supported with the ancient geographical divisions by

³⁸ *Ibid* .269.

³⁹ Wilfred H. Schoff. *PME* 55. 1912. *Op.cit.* p..45.

⁴⁰ Pliny. Vol. I. *Op.cit.* p. 136.

⁴¹ Federico De Romanis. *The Indo- Roman Pepper Trade and the Muziris Papyrus*. Oxford University Press. 2020.p. 89

⁴² Claudius Ptolemy. *Geographia*.7.1.9.

⁴³ Federico De Romanis. *Op.cit.* p.88.

Tholkappiyam. According to it, one among the twelve districts of *Tholkappiyam* is *Kudam*, *Kuttam* denote ‘land of lakes’⁴⁴ which later mentioned by the *Periplus* and Pliny like Cottanarike and Cottonara. It also explained with the meaning of *Kuttam* in Tamil is depth tank or pond⁴⁵ classified as Vembanad Lake. According to Champakalakshmi, the Cottonara mentioned by Pliny in 77-79 AD, on the banks of river Baris (Pamba River) and Ptolemy during 150 AD placed Kottiare on the South of Melkynda. So, the different names such as Kottanarike, Cottonara, Kottiare are the different names of present Kuttanad which is a region lying on the banks of Pamba River⁴⁶. Later, Kanakasabhai also locates the region with *Kuddanadu* probably Kuttanad and Rajan Gurukkal suggest it is the interior part of Kuttanad which is Thiruvalla region⁴⁷. Adding to this Pius Melekandathil suggested that these names only a term used by the Mediterranean writers to denote a spice production zone in Central Kerala⁴⁸. He further adds that by the 4th century AD pepper production spread in too much of the Central Kerala region and this is why the *Tabula Peutingeriana*⁴⁹ places Cotiara south of Muziris. P.J Thomson argue that even though now it is a water lodging area due to the geo-physical changes, in the ancient period it was pepper growing area⁵⁰.

Besides Kuttanadu there were several other locations are mentioned. In the *Muziris Papyrus*, Romanis records, Cottanara must be in the mountainous region which east of Vembanad Lake⁵¹ possibly in Kottayam. According to Thomas it must have been located somewhere near Chengannur, Ambalappuza and Thiruvalla region⁵². Butchman identified

⁴⁴ V. Kanakasabhai. *Op.cit.* p. 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p.960.

⁴⁶ R. Champakalakshmi. *Op.cit.* p.120

⁴⁷ Rajan Gurukkal. *Rethinking Classical Indo- Roman Trade*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. 2022. p.106.

⁴⁸ Pius Melekandathil. “Muziris and the Trajectories of Maritime Trade in the Indian Ocean in the First Millennium CE”. K.S. Mathew. eds. *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris*. Routledge. 2017. p.343.

⁴⁹ A. Levi and M. Levi (eds) *Itineraria Picta: Contributoallo Studio della Tabula Peutingeriana*, Rome. 1967. Also mentioned in Pius Melekandathil. 2017. *Op.cit.* p.343.

⁵⁰ P.J Thomson. *Op.cit.* p.267.

⁵¹ Federico De Romanis. *Op.cit.* p.89.

⁵² P.J Thomson. *Op.cit.* pp. 266-267.

Cottanara with Kadathanadu in the Calicut region due to the pepper trade in the late medieval times and Burnell located it with the Kolothunadu near Thalassery noting with ‘Pepper district’⁵³. Anto George classifies the name Cottonara or Kottanarike is mistakenly used and the word *rike/ riki* means realm/ dominion/ jurisdiction. So, he said the it is not Kottanarike, it is Cottona/ Kotona and he locates it is with Kottar⁵⁴ in Kanyakumari.

Most of the scholars like Sreedhara Menon, were supporting the theory of the site with Kuttanad⁵⁵. From the analysis of present scholar Cottanara was not Kuttanad because of several reasons. Firstly, environmental and geographical reasons. Kuttanad is a marshy and waterlogging area even during the early historic period itself the formation of present Kuttanad was incomplete. Geological studies show that the region was still a low-lying area that was affected by floods and waterlogging. Therefore, its water has a salinity and the soil is peaty and clayish in nature. These lead to the second reason which is the need for pepper growing features. The best soil for the pepper growing is drained laterite or red loamy soil and it needs a warm and humid climate with good rainfall. These pepper vines need a supporting tree for climbing and it is a shade loving climber. Generally, these are all suitable for a forest and semi forest region in the upper midland or high ranges So the Kuttanad is not having these features for the pepper growing facilities.

Thirdly the references such as *Periplus*, Pliny were noted that the pepper were transported on small craft downstream to a shore station Bacare and the Sangam literature also mentions the pepper gardens in the hills. These were shown that the location of Cottanara must be in the upper lands rather than Kuttanad. Finally, the absence of botanical and archaeological evidence for the pepper from the Kuttanad region. It further adds that

⁵³ V. Kanakasabhai. *Op.cit.* p.20.

⁵⁴ Anto George. *Op.cit.* p. 115.

⁵⁵ A. Sreedhara Menon. *A Survey of Kerala History*. DC Books, Kottayam. 2019. p. 62.

the pepper residues have been found from Pattanam site in a storage jar in 2007⁵⁶ denoting it imported from the uplands via river routes.

All this available evidence suggests that Cottanara may not correspond to Kuttanad, but rather to a region around the uplands of Kottayam. Some local traditions also associate Cottanara with Kottayam Kara, a name derived from its older form Kottaykakam (interior fort) which later evolved into Kottayakam and was later shortened to Kottayam. The town developed around Thaliyil Fort and Thazhathangadi, known in revenue records as Kottayam Kara further strengthening these arguments. According to the present author, Cottanara might have denoted a wider region in the lowlands of the Western Ghats, situated between the Meenachil and Manimala rivers. Since pepper was predominantly cultivated on the slopes of the high ranges and the adjoining midlands. This region likely extended across the intermediate tracts between Meenachil and Manimala.

Pepper Gardens of Kurinji.

Pepper was one the most valued commodities during the early historic time. It was not a wild plant, but rather indigenously cultivated in the slopes of Western Ghats. The pepper plant is a perennial climbing vine that requires support from other trees, producing small beads like fruit. It was commonly used as a dietary ingredient among the people of early South India. The classical Sangam work *Purananuru* describes, a typical meal including,

‘Eating rice cooked with pepper meat thuvaial and chunks of fresh meat roasted in fire with flower fragment smoke⁵⁷.

This reflects not only the culinary uses of pepper but also its availability and value in everyday life. Pepper vines are often described in these texts as growing on supporting

⁵⁶ P.J. Cherian. (ed) *Pattanam Excavations Interim Reports of the First season 2007*. KCHR, Thiruvananthapuram. 2015. p.44.

⁵⁷ Vaidehi Herbert. *Purananuru*. Poem 14. Sangam Poetry Translation website, Hawaii. USA.

trees such as coconut palms, sandalwoods and jackfruit trees⁵⁸. *Akananuru* poem 2 mentions

*‘Stretches on a fragrant flower bed in bliss, unable to
climb a sandal tree on which pepper vines grow’⁵⁹*

It indicates the intimate ecological relationships between pepper and its supporting trees. These pepper vines grow in tropical climates with specific environmental conditions such as moderate rainfall, uniform temperature and high humidity as a feature characteristic of the Western Ghats. There are multiple poetic references to pepper cultivation in mountains.

*‘Oh lord of the sky, touching mountains
my folks do not know that you unite with her love
in the pepper growing mountains slop where male deer grunt’⁶⁰.*

These lines were from *Akananuru* poem 112 which refers to ‘pepper growing mountain slopes. While, poem 182 of *Akananuru* and poem 168 of *Purananuru* also highlights the presence of pepper vines on the slopes of the mountains.

*‘Please come here during the day to the slopes near the
lofty mountains where hating to eat tender pepper leaves’⁶¹.*

and in *Purananuru*,

*‘Oh lord of kuthirai mountain where waterfalls roar vast slopes
have dense bamboo groves and pepper vines’⁶².*

⁵⁸ K.K Sesha Aiyar. *Cera Kings of the Sangam Period*. London.1937. p.142.

⁵⁹ Vaidehi Herbert. *Akananuru*. Poem 2. Sangam Poetry Translation website, Hawaii. USA.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*. Poem 112.

⁶¹ *Ibid*. Poem 182.

⁶² Vaidehi Herbert. *Purananuru*. Poem 168. Sangam Poetry Translation website, Hawaii. USA.

Several scholars have argued that pepper, originally a wild plant which was collected by tribal communities, unaware of its market value. They exchange it for foreign goods such as wine and other luxury commodities. Here the poem 272 refers to ‘pepper gardens’ which were grown near huts or houses within the settlement areas. This clearly suggests that whether it was wild in ancient time, during the early historic period the people intentionally grew pepper gardens near their dwelling areas which indicates that at least some of them were aware about its value and demand.

*‘Mother saw him come with joy and enter our hut with short eves,
near boulders where pepper vines have spreaded’⁶³.*

Among the Sangam poems *Kurinji tinai* represents the hilly terrain of the Western Ghats, which is characterised by evergreen forest, wild groves, cool climate and high rainfall. This ecological setting is ideal for the cultivation of spices such as pepper, cardamon, ginger etc. In other words, the Kurinji region was well suited for the production of spices, especially pepper. Interestingly in the Meenachil basin one of the place names *Kurinji* is particularly relevant in this context. The area was historically inhabited by tribal groups as evidenced by the clusters of megalithic burials indicating early settlements. Additionally, the towns mentioned by Johann Philip Wesdin during his travels such as Ramapuram and Pala were noted for pepper cultivation regions⁶⁴. Ramapuram lies within the Kurinji area and Pala is situated along the route from the Western Ghats to Coastal plains. So, these references connect that this region too was part of the broader pepper producing areas of the ancient Cottanara.

In the accounts of Pliny, the Elder, he mentions that pepper grew in interior regions and was carried by small hollowed out boats to ships⁶⁵. From the Western Ghats five major rivers such as Periyar, Muvattupuzha river, Meenachil, Manimala and Pamba rivers flow

⁶³ Vaidehi Herbert. *Akananuru*. Poem 272. Sangam Poetry Translation website, Hawaii. USA.

⁶⁴ Federico De Romanis. *Op.cit.* p. 140.

⁶⁵ Sesha Aiyar. 1937. *Op.cit.* p.91.

westward towards the coast. Pepper was abundantly grown in the basins of all these rivers. Among them special attention is given to the Muvattupuzha river, Meenachil and Manimala Pamba as they empty into the Vembanad lake, thereby facilitating the inland trade and maritime connectivity from the Kottayam region. Firstly, the Muvattupuzha river, located north of the Meenachil river. The region was under the rule of the lord of Vadakkumkoor who was referred to as the ‘Pepper King’⁶⁶ during the later period. The upland town of Thodupuzha situated along the Muvattupuzha river hosted a prominent pepper market, reportedly sell around 1,000,000 pounds of pepper annually to European trading companies⁶⁷.

In the broader Kottayam region, the areas historically known as Thekkumkoor and Vadakkumkoor during the pre-mediaeval period, extending across the river basins of the Meenachil and Manimala and in to the part of Western Ghats are mentioned in later records as major pepper production zones. Among these, Kanjirappally referred to as ‘Quanhara Pee’ hosted a monthly pepper fair where a significant quantity of pepper was traded⁶⁸. In addition, Erattupetta and Erumeli emerged as notable centres during the early modern period. These historical records highlight that the slopes of the Western Ghats were the primary areas of pepper cultivation, while the river system facilitated the transport of pepper to the Vembanad lake and onward to inland markets and coastal ports.

Coming to the ports, black peppers were typically collected in sacks and stored in large ceramic jars for transport. A vivid description from *Purananuru* 343 illustrates this trade activity.

*‘Paddy traded for fish is heaped on boats making houses and
boats look the same and black pepper sacks heaped in houses*

⁶⁶ Cousas Da India. 46. Also referred to by Federico De Romanis. *Op.cit.* p. 89.

⁶⁷ Gollennesse. “Memorandum by Julius Valentyn Stein Van Gollennesse” in A. Galletti. A.J Van der Burg. *The Dutch in Malabar*, Madras. 1911. pp. 58-59.

⁶⁸ Cousas Da India. 47. Also referred to by Federico De Romanis. *Op.cit.* p. 90.

*make them appear like the uproarious ocean shores*⁶⁹.

Archaeological evidences further support these narratives with the excavations about 7.5 kilogram of black peppercorn stored in an Indian terracotta storage jar uncovered from Serapis Temple trench in Bernike (Egypt)⁷⁰. This, along with literary sources, indicates that the pepper trade was actively conducted by the *Yavanas*, a term broadly referring to foreign traders including Phoenicians, Greeks and especially Romans, between India and Mediterranean world. *Akananuru* 149 refers to this exchange.

‘Musiri town of Cheran, where causing to become muddied,

*the fine ships of the Yavana’s come with gold and leaves with pepper*⁷¹’.

Pepper was in high demand in Roman markets. The *Periplus* lists pepper as one of the chief export commodities and identifies Cottanara as a primary production centre of black pepper within the Limyrike region⁷².

There is exported pepper, which is produced in quantity

*in only one region near these markets, a district called Cottonara*⁷³.

Initially, black pepper was primarily used for medicinal properties. The historical references to the pepper begin with the *Arthasasthras* written by Kautilya dated around the 3rd century BC, which mention the use of various spices including pepper, cardamom and ginger⁷⁴. Later by the 1st century BC, Strabo in his *Geography* noted the significant volume of ships arriving in Rome carrying large quantities of Indian spices, especially pepper. The term *Yavanapriya*⁷⁵ (Yavana’s Passion) refers to the Greek delight, indicating the high

⁶⁹ Vaidehi Herbert. *Purananuru*. Poem 343. Sangam Poetry Translation website, Hawaii. USA.

⁷⁰ Roberta Tomber. *Indo Roman Trade; From Ports to Pepper*. Bristol Classical Press, London.2008. pp.76-77.

⁷¹ Vaidehi Herbert. *Akananuru*. Poem 149. Sangam Poetry Translation website, Hawaii. USA

⁷² Wilfred H. Schoff. PME 55. 1912. *Op.cit.* p.45.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 45.

⁷⁴ Khan M.T. *Spices in Indian Economy*. Academic Foundation, Delhi. 1990. pp.25-27.

⁷⁵ De Romanis. Rome and the Notia of India. 1997.p.100 also in his, *Muziris Papyrus*. 2020. p.124.

demand of pepper among the Greco Romans and later in West Asian and Chinese markets. Pepper was commonly used to spice up food and acted as a preservative especially vital for preserving meat in regions far from its origin. It was also valued for its medicinal values, particularly used as an antidote for poisoning and a cure for impotence. Additionally, black pepper was often used as a ballast in returning journey by the Greco Roman ships⁷⁶. When its value increased, pepper began to be exchanged for gold at ports along the Western Coast of India. The archaeological findings from the excavation site Quseir al Qadhim (ancient Myos Hormos) on the Red Sea Coast of Egypt revealed substantial quantities of black pepper⁷⁷. In fact, almost all major sites at the Red Sea port excavations have yielded evidence of black pepper in notable quantities.

Although locally cultivated, pepper was never merely a local or regional spice but it became a globally traded and highly sought after the commodity. Its distinctive flavour, preservative qualities and medicinal values contributed to its high demand. By the early centuries of the Common Era, the spices were regularly exchanged for gold in coastal trading towns. During the time of *Periplus*, the total production of Limyrike region was estimated between at 4,000 to 5,000 tons, with 80% of exports shipped from the ports of Muziris and Nelkynda⁷⁸. According to Pliny, pepper and ginger grew abundantly in the region and were traded like gold and silver⁷⁹ contributing to a significant outflow of Roman gold into India.⁸⁰ Ptolemy also listed several trading centres within the Limyrike region that played key roles in this exchange⁸¹. During the 2nd century BC Muziris Papyrus, a loan contract document which financed a ship and its cargo identifying pepper as a major commodity.

⁷⁶ K.N. Choudhury. *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean*. Cambridge University Press, 1985. p.191.

⁷⁷ Van der Veen and Morales. "The Roman and Islamic Spice Trade: New Archaeological Evidence". *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, Vol.167. 2015.pp.54-63.

⁷⁸ Federico De Romanis. *Op.cit.* p.93.

⁷⁹ H. Rackham. Trns. *Pliny's. Naturalis Historia*. Harward University Press. London 1945. pp. 19-21.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* Chapter 12.p.84.

⁸¹ Ptolemy. *Geographia*. 7.1.85-85.

Even today, Kerala remains a global leader in black pepper production with around 97% of India's output⁸². Within Kerala the Kottayam region alone contributes approximately 14% of the total area under pepper cultivation⁸³. These historical and modern references suggest that the area identified as Cottanara serves as a crucial link between the highland cultivation zone and coastal trade ports such as Bacare. The *Periplus* mentioned that pepper was transported using boats carved from out of a single tree⁸⁴ which facilitated movement from the hilly terrains to the ports. This sustained international demand not only led to the expansion of pepper cultivation but also spurred the development of well-organized trade routes, market centres, port hubs, hinterland networks along India's Western Coast.

Other Exports from the Region

After Pepper, there are some other commodities that were exported from the ports of Western Coast. According to the *Periplus*, fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, spikenard from the Ganges, malabathrum from interior, transparent stones of all kind, diamonds, sapphires, tortoise shell from Chryse and from nearby Islands were the items exported from the Muziris and Bacare⁸⁵. Other than these betel leaves, frankincense and spices like cardamon, cinnamon and ginger also export during the time. These commodities included both locally produced items and non-local commodities which came to these ports for export from far away regions. The local products mainly include spices such as pepper, cardamom, ginger, malabathrum and ivory, woods like sandal and teak; they were primarily produced in the Western Ghats.

Besides pepper, *Malabathrum (cinnamom tamala)* was exported in large quantities from Bacare⁸⁶. There are varying opinions regarding this commodity, but the generally

⁸² A. Sreedhara Menon.1975. *Op.cit.* p.114.

⁸³ *Ibid.*p.100.

⁸⁴ Wilfred H. Schoff. *PME.56*. Translation. 1912. *Op.cit.* p. 234.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p. 287.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.44.

accepted theory is, this refers to one of the three varieties of cinnamon leaves which specifically the type that grows exclusively in the Southern Malabar mountains⁸⁷. The other two types of malabathrum were produced in the Himalayan region and they were primarily used in unguents and medicinal drugs⁸⁸. However, rather than name malabathrum, classical sources do not explicitly mention the word ‘cinnamon’. In addition to malabathrum, the Western Ghats were also rich in cardamom and ginger, both of which were likely included in the region’s exports. Kottayam still has exclusive markets for the ginger.

Frankincense, a resin obtained from trees of the genus *Boswellia* had its main markets during early historic period at the Island of Socotra and the port of Cane⁸⁹. According to *Periplus*, its trade was under a royal monopoly controlled by the king of Hadramaut of Quana or Cana⁹⁰. Although frankincense is listed among the exports from the Western Coast of India, and unfortunately there is no evidence to suggest that it was sourced from the Western Ghats. Excavations at Pattanam have found traces of frankincense at various stratigraphical levels, indicating its presence and use at the site. It is likely that the resin was brought by sea from Southern Arabia, particularly from ports such as Khhorori and Cana and reached in Pattanam⁹¹.

Ivory is mentioned in the Sangam literature and is known to have been sourced from the mountainous regions⁹². It is possible that both raw tusk and carved ivory objects were shipped abroad the Hermapollon as referred in Muziris papyrus⁹³. Although ivory was locally available along the Malabar coast, the *Periplus* states that its primary source was

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p.84.

⁸⁸ Pliny. *Naturalis Historia*. Chapter 12. p. 129 and chapter 23.p.93.

⁸⁹ Wilfred H. Schoff. *PME.32. Op.cit.* p. 35.

⁹⁰ Steven. E. Sidebotham. *From the Mediterranean to South Asia*. K.S. Mathew. eds. *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris*. Routledge.2017 p.80.

⁹¹ P. J. Cherian with Jaya Menon. *Unearthing Pattanam*. Catalogue for the 2014 Exhibition, KCHR. p.86.

⁹² Vaidehi Herbert. *Akananuru*. Poem 267. Sangam Poetry Translation website, Hawaii. USA.

⁹³ Ranbir Chakrabarti. “Hinterland and Foreland of the Port of Muziris”. K.S. Mathew. eds. *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris*. Routledge. 2017. p.329.

Dosarene identified with modern Orissa⁹⁴ particularly the Krishna Godavari basin. The teak and sandal woods were not specifically mentioned in the *Periplus*, but they may also be part of Western Coast exports due to their high demand in foreign markets and their natural abundance in the Western Ghats. These commodities were not restricted to a single locality but were sourced from various regions across the Western Ghats.

After spices **pearls** were among the most valuable exports from the region. The *Arthasasthras* refers to pearls as precious stones stoked in royal treasuries⁹⁵. According to *Sangam* poems, pearls fishing was centred in the coastal town of the Korkai,⁹⁶ which located along the Southern Ocean⁹⁷ and the shore was under the protection of Pandya rulers who were celebrated in the '*lord of the clear ocean with pearls*'⁹⁸. According to Pliny, 'these pearls were commonly used in the Roman Empire as early as 3rd century BC. During the period of the *Periplus*, pearls became a highly demanded export item. The *Periplus* records that the pearl fisheries located beyond Komari in a region called Colchi⁹⁹ were under the control of the Pandya kingdom and operated by condemned criminals. The harvested pearls were collected in an inland city named Argaru which is identified with modern day Urayur and were exported from there along with fine Muslins¹⁰⁰.

Muslin is a plain cotton fabric that is included in the list of important ancient textiles. It primarily originated from regions such as Bengal, Ceylon and South East Asia including parts of present Malaysia. A special variety known as Argaritiuc muslin was produced in the Urayur, Tanjore region of the Tamilnadu¹⁰¹. Apart from Muslin, **silk** was another significant textile mainly sourced from the prime silk producing region of North

⁹⁴ Wilfred H. Schoff. *PME* 62. *Op.cit.* p. 253

⁹⁵ T.K. Venkata Subramanian. *Op.cit.* p.55.

⁹⁶ Vaidehi Herbert. *Akananuru*. Poem 27 and 201. Sangam Poetry Translation website, Hawaii. USA

⁹⁷ Vaidehi Herbert. *Purananuru*. Poem 380. Sangam Poetry Translation website. Hawaii, USA

⁹⁸ Vaidehi Herbert. *Akananuru*. Poem 137. Sangam Poetry Translation website. Hawaii, USA

⁹⁹ Wilfred H. Schoff. *PME*.59. *Op.cit.* p. 46.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p.241.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p.242.

West China¹⁰². Chinese silk was traded as early as the 29th century BC during the time of Emperor Fu-Hi. It reached in South India through the Brahmaputhra river valley, passing through Assam and Eastern Bengal parts¹⁰³. In India a notable silk market known as Thinae which also known as ‘land of silk’¹⁰⁴, exported raw silk and silk yarn to South India via the river Ganges.

After textiles, the Eastern Coast of India also supplies valuable items such as **Spikenard**, Gangetic nards and tortoise shell from regions like Chryse to South India. Spikenard is a fragrant resin mainly originated from the Himalayan regions between Nepal and Sikkim¹⁰⁵. Gangetic nard, a more refined and highly valued variety was also sourced from the Himalayas and was one of the prime commodities exported from the port of Nelcynda¹⁰⁶. According to Papyrus, it was 60 containers of Gangetic nard were exported from Muziris aboard the ship Hermapollon¹⁰⁷. **Tortoise shell**, though found in several regions, was most prized when sourced from Malacca and was considered as the best in the Erythraean Sea trade. It was used by Romans for making ornaments, inlay furniture and decorated wooden items¹⁰⁸.

Last but not least the precious stones from different parts of India also included prominently in the export list of the West coast. The **transparent stones** including beryl which mainly came from the Coimbatore region were especially valuable. Excavations in Coimbatore region have founded six-sided beryl prisms which indicating active mining activities in the Coimbatore region particularly two major sites¹⁰⁹ such as Padiyur near Erode and Vaniyambadi in Salem. A large number of Roman coins found in this region may

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p.263.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p.264.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p.260.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p..188.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p.256.

¹⁰⁷ Susmita Basu Majumdar. “Money Matters”. K.S. Mathew. eds. *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris*. Routledge. 2017.p. 419.

¹⁰⁸ Wilfred H. Schoff. *PME. Op.cit.* p.48.

¹⁰⁹ S. Suresh. *Symbols of Trade*. Manohar Publication, Delhi. 2004. p.31.

reflect the exchange of beryl for Roman coins¹¹⁰. In addition to beryl, diamonds from the Krishna Godavari and Bellari regions¹¹¹ were also exported. According to Pliny, the sapphires as a distinct variety of amethyst and the *Periplus* notes that the Southern Malabar served as a natural market for sapphires¹¹².

According to Rajan Gurukkal, most of the ships concluded their voyages on the South Western Coast of India due to the navigational challenges and unsuitability of large ships to travel the narrow sea between India and Sri Lanka¹¹³. This observation is supported by the references in the *Periplus*, which mention the use of local ships and boats to transport goods from the East and South East Asia to the port of Dimiria. According to *Periplus*,

very large vessels made of single logs bound together, called sangara:

but those which makes the voyage to Chryse and

*to the Ganges are called colandia, and are very large*¹¹⁴.

This shows that during the early Christian centuries itself; the coastlines of South India were actively used for the transportation of goods and commodities from the Eastern Coast to Western Coast for the shipments were ultimately reaching to the ports like Muziris and Bacare. These exports were sustained not only through the maritime connections, but also through a well-established hinterland route.

Two main overland channels facilitated this movement such as the Palakkad pass and the high ranges of Western Ghats. Among the key export items, the spices held a prominent place. These were sourced from various ecological zones of Western Ghats, including dense forest, evergreen and shadow forests, wooded slopes, river valleys and hill slopes. The spice producing regions were especially concentrated along river valleys such

¹¹⁰ E.H. Warmington. M.A.1928. *Op.cit.* p. 251.

¹¹¹ Wilfred H. Schoff. *Op.cit.* p.224.

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 226.

¹¹³ Rajan Gurukkal. 2022. *Op.cit.* p.108.

¹¹⁴ Wilfred H. Schoff. *Op.cit.* p.46.

as the Periyar, Muvattupuzha river, Meenachil, Manimala and Pamba. These rivers originating in the highlands enabled the transport of goods by boats through their tributaries to the port towns on the Coast. However, during the summer and monsoon seasons when river navigation became difficult, traders depend on the land routes running through the valleys.

A second major route connected the Western Ghats with the Madurai region. Pearls, muslin and goods from the Ceylon areas arrived at the Coromandel Coast particularly at Nagapattinam, and were transported inland to Madurai by caravans. From Madurai, these commodities were carried westward across the Western Ghats, especially through the Cumbum Theni pass. Once they reached the Western slopes the rivers helped carry them down to coastal port towns. A third important route was via Palakkad pass, which served as a crucial channel for overland trade. These routes facilitated the movement of goods from the Eastern Indian Coast, including Chinese silks, tortoise shell from the Malacca, Gangetic nard, spikenards from the Himalayan region, ivory and diamonds from the Deccan. In the Deccan Prathishtana (modern day Paithan), the capital of Satavahana played a vital role in inland trade. Commodities from Pathisthana were transported across the Deccan plateau to the lower Krishna Godavari region and then Southward through trade hubs like Kanchipuram, and Coimbatore. From there they were moved to the ports via the Palakkad pass.

Hinterland Trade Routes

It is evident that the early historic trade routes were a continuation of the migration routes established during the Iron Age megalithic period even though they underwent several transformations over time. During this period the ports such as Nelcynda, Bacare and Muziris functioned as active satellite ports along the Western Coast. These ports were connected to inland market centres through both land and water routes. However, it is very difficult to trace these historical routes due to the scarcity of reliable historical records.

Apart from the Greco Roman sources and Sangam literature, there were no other sources available for reconstructing these inland trade routes. Even within these texts, identifying the exact locations mentioned is challenging due to the changes in the landscape over the time, changes in the place names and shifting the boundaries. Sangam works provide limited direct evidence regarding place names, while foreign literary sources cannot be fully relied upon, as the identification of the places they mentioned, remains incomplete.

However, the present study attempts to trace these ancient routes by exploring the possibilities of overlapping trade routes and examining the distribution of the Roman coin hoards found along these routes. As discussed in the previous chapter, early migrations in this region primarily took place through various highland routes, especially the mountain passes. These routes remained active during the early historic period as well. The key routes include firstly, the Kumily- Sabarimala- Konni- Thiruvalla route, secondly the Cumbum Theni- Kumily- Mundakkayam- Kanjirappilly- Kottayam route, thirdly the Vagamon- Erattupetta- Pala route and fourthly, the Munnar- Devikulam- Kothamangalam Route and finally the Thodupuzha- Velliyamattom- Idukki route. All these served as corridors across the Western Ghats facilitating both migration and trade.

The development of trade routes and market centres in these regions was largely driven by the availability and movement of valuable goods and commodities. In the Western Ghats, the cultivation of pepper and other spices was closely tied to terrain, climate and soil conditions. In case of pepper, it was extensively grown in the Udumbanchola, Peerumedu, Devikulam and the Thodupuzha regions of Idukki district, as well as in Meenachil and Kanjirappilly taluks of Kottayam¹¹⁵. Cardamon was primarily cultivated in the highland's areas of Vandanmedu, Bodinaikur, Kumily, Nedumkandam and Santhanpara¹¹⁶. Ginger was largely produced in the Kattappana region of Idukki while

¹¹⁵ Jhon. K.G. *A Study of the Export and Trade of Kerala*. Ph.D. Thesis. Department of History. University of Kerala. 2000. p.105. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/394596>. Accessed on. 25/07/2024.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*.

market such as Meenachil, Vaikom, Pala and Ponkunnam emerged as important trading hubs in was the one in Kottayam¹¹⁷. The availability of these spice resources played a significant role in the emergence and growth of trade centres and attached settlements which become a concentration of population¹¹⁸ in the region.

Centre	Ghat Routes from Western coast to Tamilnadu
Thodupuzha	Rajakkad – Pooppara- Bodinayakanur- Theni- Usilampatti -Madurai. Thodupuzha- Adimali – Devikulam - Munnar- Pollachi
Erattupetta	Kottayam – Erattupetta – Vagamon – Kattappana- Nedumkandam- Theni- Madurai
Kanjirappilly	Kottayam – Kanjirappilly- Mundakkayam- Kumily – Cumbum- Theni- Madurai
Erumeli	Kottayam - Changanassery, Thiruvalla- Erumeli - Kumily - Cumbum- Madurai.

Table. 4.1 Ghat Routes from Western coast to Tamilnadu

The medieval and modern historical sources provide evidences for the major market centres in the region such as Thodupuzha, Erattupetta, Kanjirappilly and Erumeli. Interestingly these markets were situated along four rivers that eventually empties into the Vembanad lake. Among them, Thodupuzha emerged as a significant centre on the bank of the Muvattupuzha river which might have connected the inland markets of the region with Muziris rather than Purakkad.

¹¹⁷ A. Sreedhara Menon. 1975. *Op.cit.* p.113.

¹¹⁸ Pius Melekandathil. *Portuguese Cochin and the Maritime Trade in India 1500-1663*. Manohar Publication, Delhi. 2023. p.56.

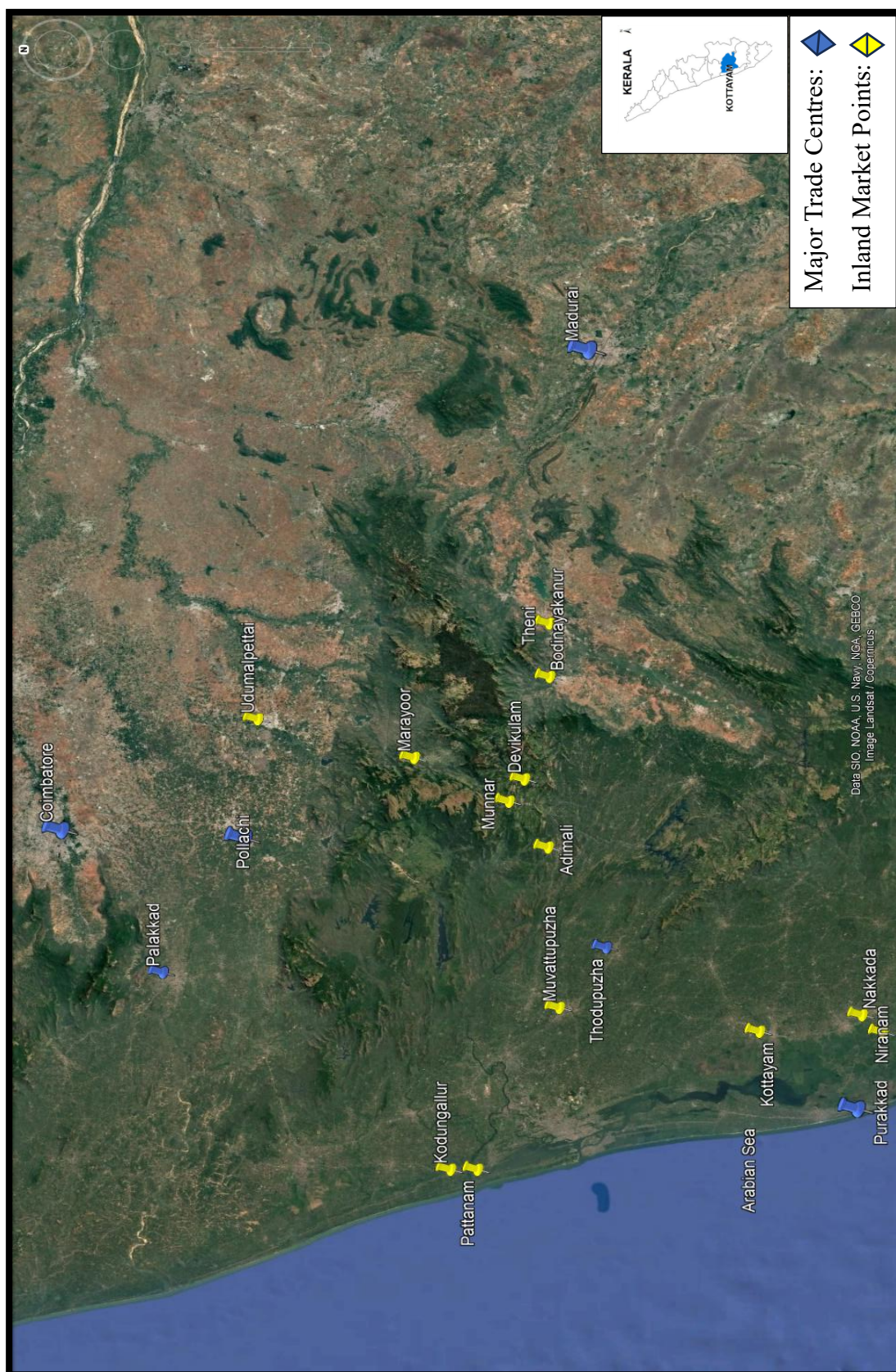


Fig 4.5: Possible two routes from Western Coast to Tamilnadu via Thodupuzha. (not in scale)

Early modern sources mention it as an active bazaar and Karikkod¹¹⁹ near Thodupuzha was identified as one of the important markets under the Vadakkumkoor kingdom. Thodupuzha also functioned as a transit point connecting the Udayamperoor to the Western Ghats particularly the Devikulam Munnar route which connects to Tamilnadu and it formed a link route to the Erattupetta through the Muttom, Pala route.

The second major centre is Erattupetta which is located in the Meenachil valley. It was a prominent spice cultivation centres area even during the medieval period¹²⁰. The name 'Erattupetta' derives from the word *Erappuzha* which means the confluence of two tributaries of Meenachil river¹²¹. In the Iron Age megalithic period, this region was significant due to the concentration of megalithic burials. One of the possible habitation sites which was proposed by the present author Kunnoni, is situated near to the Erattupetta. Nearby, the burial clusters at Neeloor yielded a rich assemblage of burial goods, further supporting the area's early habitation and these burials were particularly concentrated along the route between Thodupuzha and Erattupetta. Additionally, three-coin hoard¹²² have been discovered in the vicinity of Erattupetta, reinforcing its role in the early hinterland trade. The Poonjar hoard reported by Sathyamurthy in 1965 contained 5 Roman Aurei. The Idamaruk hoard which was reported by Turner in 1987 included coins from the early Julio Claudian period. Additionally, a punch marked coin was recovered from the Elikulamkara also known as Elikulam is also located not far from the Pala-Erattupetta route. These findings suggest that the Erattupetta functioned as an early inland centre which linked to the hinterland trade routes.

¹¹⁹ Johnsy Mathew. *Economy and Society in Medieval Malabar*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. School of Social Science, MG. University, Kottayam. 2015 p. 50.

¹²⁰ Kesavan Namboothiri N.E. *Thekkumcore Charithravum Puravarithavum*. National Bookstall, Kottayam. 2015. p.68.

¹²¹ Arjun. V.M. *History of Erattupetta as a Trade Centre*. Unpublished M.A. Dissertation. School of Social Science. MG University. 2017. p.09.

¹²² Paula J. Turner. "Roman Coins from India". *University College London Institute of Archaeology Publication, Vol. 21*. Routledge. 2009. p.74.

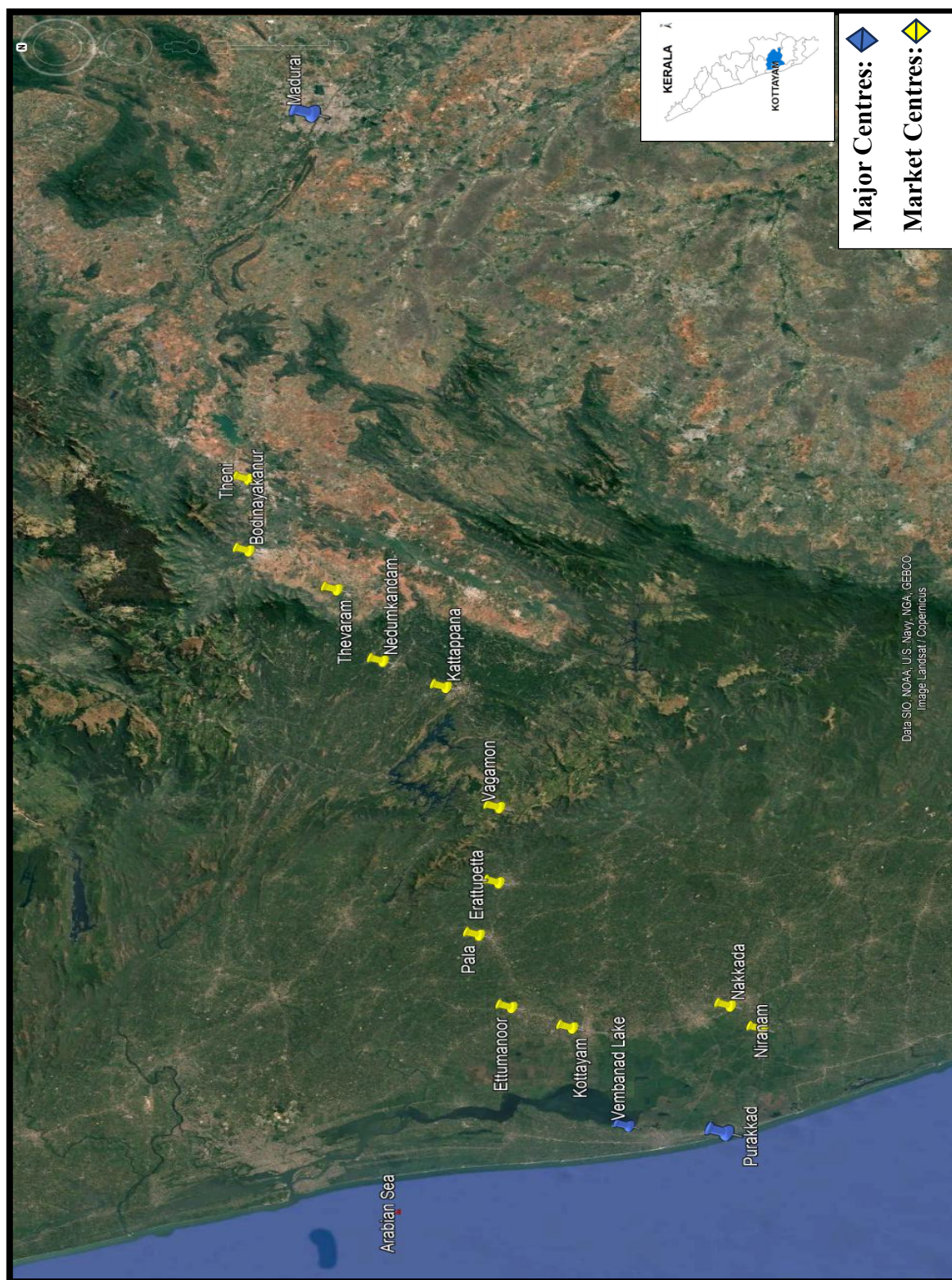


Fig 4.6: Possible Route from Purakkad to Madurai via Erattupetta. (not in scale)

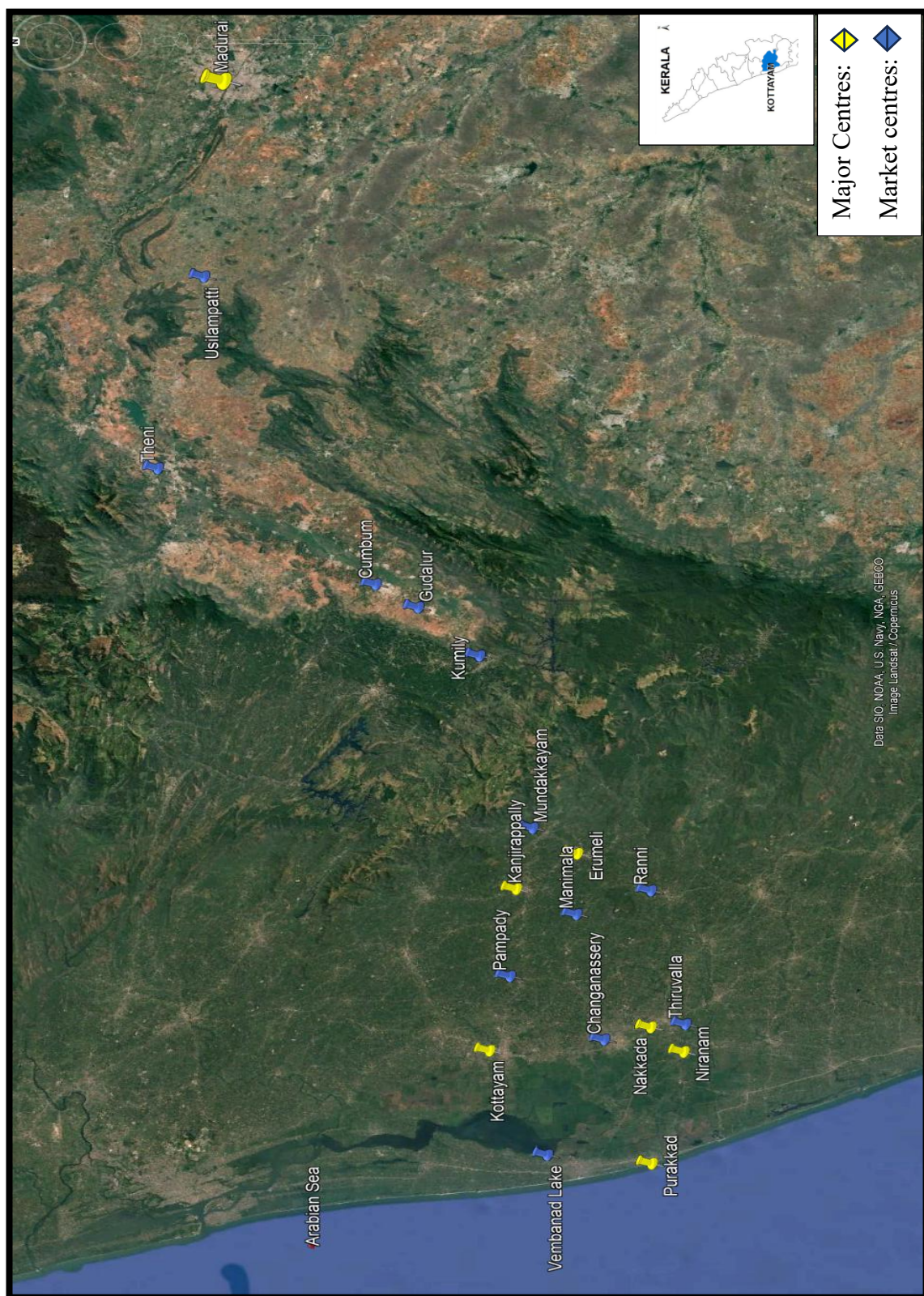


Fig 4.7: Possible Route from Purakkad to Madurai via Kanjirappilly and Erumeli. (not in scale)

The third set of centres were Kanjirappilly and Erumeli which are located along the Manimala and Pamba rivers. Historically Kanjirappilly was renowned as one of the best pepper-producing regions and it still continues to serve as a key transit route to Tamilnadu. The Kanjirappilly route connects Kottayam town to Cumbum via Kumily and Mundakkayam while, the Erumeli route connects the Changanassery, Thiruvalla region in to Tamilnadu also via Kumily and Cumbum. There is a popular belief among the people that the early plantations in the region developed in areas where the Christian communities had migrated. Kanjirappilly, which remains a Christian majority area, continues to be an important centre for pepper and rubber cultivation within the Kottayam district.

In the discussion of hinterlands trade routes, it is important to note that several place names mentioned in the Greek classical literature remain unidentified yet but mistakenly located in the Kottayam region. Many of these identifications are based on the translated interpretations, etymological similarities, speculative assumptions or a desire to bring historical attention to the region. Such mislocutions made serious challenges to historical studies. When modern place's names are forcefully linked to classical references without proper linguistic archaeological or historical evidence, it will misguide historical narratives and lead to widespread misconception. In the region several such misidentifications continue to be repeated in local history books and popular articles.

A prominent example is the identification of 'Pounnata' a place mentioned by Ptolemy in his *Geography*¹²³ which is identified recently as the 'Punnada dynasty'¹²⁴. In his work Ptolemy described Pounnata as a source for beryl¹²⁵, a gemstone of significant value in the Greco Roman world. Based on this references, Henry Yule, located Pounnata, approximately 70 miles south east of Srinagapattinam¹²⁶. Kanakasabhai mentions from the

¹²³ J.W. McCrindle.1885.*Op.cit.* p.180.

¹²⁴ P.J. Thomas. *Op.cit.* pp. 263-265. cited in Arjun. V.M. 2017. *Op.cit.* p.07.

¹²⁵ J.W. McCrindle.1885.*Op.cit.* p.181.

¹²⁶ *Indian Antiquary*- Vol. XII,p.13. cited in. *Ibid.* p.181.

Tholkappiyam, identified Punna-nadu one of the 13 divisions of Tamilakam as corresponding to Poonjar in the Meenachil river basin of the Kottayam district¹²⁷. Because Ptolemy places Pounnata between Muziris and Bacare and due to the etymological similarities in names this identification has been widely accepted by some historians. However, more recent research by Dhiraj. M. S identified that Pounnata more likely refers to the Punnada dynasty which was located in the South of Mysore¹²⁸ and included a large part of present Malabar region including the entire Wayanad with its southern boundary extending up to Palakkad. The present author also supports this identification as the Coimbatore region which close to Palakkad is the only known ancient sources for Beryl¹²⁹ in South India.

The other places mentioned by Ptolemy such as Koreour, Semne and Adarima were subject to various interpretations by the people those who are interested in local histories. Koreour is often identified with Korayur located on the basin of Kodoor river. Semne is identified with Chempu or Chemnamkari and Adarima is associated with Athirampuzha which are all situated within the Kottayam district. Caldwell equated Koroura as the Karur, which was the capital of Cheras. In contrast, Kanakasabhai argued that this identification relies only on the similarities in the names between Karur and Koroura and instead he suggested the location might be Kothora¹³⁰ which is near the present day Vaikom, on the eastern side of the Vembanad Lake. According to local historians, this might correspond to Kodyur, a small region near Kottayam town. They support this interpretation by pointing out that the term ‘Kodi’ denotes an extension towards water, and Kodyur is geographically situated near paddy fields believed to have once formed part of an ancient backwater region.

¹²⁷ V. Kanakasabhai. *Op.cit.* p.12.

¹²⁸ *Epigraphia Carnatica*. Vol: I. 1914. Introduction 7. Also, Dhiraj. M.S. “Political and Cultural dynastic of the Supra- Region: Punnada Country in the History of Jainism in Kerala”. *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology. Department of Archaeology*. University of Kerala. 8. 2020.p. 422.

¹²⁹ Ranbir Chakrabarti. “Hinterland and Foreland of the Port of Muziris”. K.S. Mathew. eds. *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris*. Routledge. 2017.p. 326.

¹³⁰ V. Kanakasabhai. *Op.cit.* p.19.

Recent studies have proposed alternative possibilities. For Dhiraj. M.S, Koreour might refers to Gudallor¹³¹ which was located on the Wayanad Ghat route or possibly another Gudallor near the Cumbum pass, both of which were significant inland trade centres along the ancient Ghat route still in use today. The identifications of Semne and Adarima largely rely on etymological similarities, which Semne as Chempu or Chemnamkari near Vaikom and Adarima as Athirampuzha in the Kottayam. McCrindle proposed that Semne may derive from the sanskrit term for a Buddhist Sramana¹³² which is not identified yet. There is some uncertainty about Chempu 's status in the early historic period, as some believe it may have been submerged under the backwaters. In the case of Adarima, there is no substantial explanation available beyond local traditions and toponymic speculations.

There are numerous locations along the Coastal region and backwaters which have been linked to early trade networks based on etymological interpretations and local legends. While some of these linguistic associations may be true, they often lack supporting material evidence, historical references or even the geographical positioning. A popular trend persists particularly among those fascinated by historical narratives to associate these places with the ancient past through stories. However, rather than the potential of Erattupetta there is no direct or indirect evidence for any inland centre within the Meenachil basin that connected the ports of Bacare or Nelkynda with the inland capital centre of Madurai.

Capital Role of Madurai under Pandyas

The early historic period of the region is incomplete without discussing the Madurai and its rulers, the Pandyas. Madurai is an inland city that emerged as a prominent urban centre under the political authority of Pandyas. The *Arthasasthras*, is among the earliest texts to mention Madurai as a source of pearls and the *Ramayana* describes it as a greatest

¹³¹ Dhiraj. M.S. 2020. *Op.cit.* p.422.

¹³² J.W. McCrindle. 1885. *Op.cit.* p. 52.

city with gates adorned with gold and inlaid with gems¹³³. By 3rd century BC, the early *Brahmi* inscriptions¹³⁴ had appeared in and around the Madurai city indicating its significance during this period. Sangam literature is rich with references to Madurai city as mentioned to as the ‘city of Koodal’. Texts such as *Pattinapalai* (verse 6) and *Maturaikkanchi* (verses 453-5) mention the temples and urban landscape of the Madurai city. Additionally, the Indo Roman literature sources also mention like

*Bacare, the King’s name at present is Pandion; far off
is another town of merchandise within the land called Modusa¹³⁵.*

Pliny’s *Modusa* refers to the Madurai which he mentioned as an inland city connected to the ports of Nelcynda and Bacare. References from the Sangam literature portray Madurai as a large urban centre with palaces, temples, fortified towers, ramparts and a surrounding moat. Its geographical position made it strategically suitable to serve as a capital city. While the coastal ports of Korkai gained prominence during the period due to its flourishing pearl fisheries, Madurai functioned as the political and administrative core. The surrounding hinterlands served as a vital resource zone for supporting both trade and communication with coastal ports and other inland centres.

As a capital centre, Madura relied heavily on its hinterland trade routes to maintain communication and exchange networks. The hinterlands of the ports Nelcynda and Bacare were extended towards inland capital city Madurai possibly through riverine routes along the three rivers, Meenachil, Manimala and Pamba rivers. These river basins may have functioned as an extensive trade corridor, facilitating the movement of valuable resources from the Western Ghats and the exchange of commodities with the Western Coast. Interestingly, a local legend links the Madurai with the Meenachil river which is believed

¹³³ Wilfred H. Schoff. *PME* 55. *Op.cit.* p. 238.

¹³⁴ K. V. Subramania Iyer. “The Earliest Monuments of the Pandya Country and their Inscriptions”. *Proceedings and Transactions of the 3rd Oriental Conference*, Madras. 1924. pp. 280-282.

¹³⁵ Pliny. *Natural History*. Vol.1. *Op.cit.* p.136.

that the river's name Meenachil derives from goddess name 'Meenachi' (Meenakshi) of Madurai. According to popular belief, the Goddess Madurai Meenakshi used this river route to travel from Madurai to the Kodungallur temple. To support this tradition there is a Madura Meenakshi temple in Poonjar which the local people consider as an ancient temple, but it is likely dated to the modern period.

The hinterland routes not only facilitated the movements of goods and commodities but also played a crucial role in maintaining political integration which enabled the Pandyas to extend their influence into the Western ports through the valleys of the Western Ghats. This is evident in Sangam literature and corroborated by Greco Roman sources which suggest that the port Nelcynda and Bacare were under the Pandya control.

Murukans Thirupparakunram with endless festivities

and victory flags with peacocks with many spots, west of Koodal city,

Where flags sway, belonging to the victorious Pandiyan king¹³⁶.

Sangam literature provides numerous references to the Pandya as rulers of Korkai, *Pothikai* hills and the city of Koodal (Madurai). Foreign records describe the extent of the Pandya territory as stretching from beyond Muziris down to Comari. However, it might be that their influence extended only between Muziris and Nelcynda. The earliest known reference to the Pandyas appear in the edicts of Asoka, dated to the 3rd century BC where they are mentioned as one of the independent counties of South India. The *Avasyakachurni* also refers to regular maritime journeys from Madurai to Saurashtra region and recounts a story involving the *Pandusena* who were identified as the rulers of Madurai¹³⁷. In the early period Pandyas conducted extensive trade with distant regions. Korkai served as their initial economical centre, particularly noted for active pearl fisheries, and Madurai became their administrative capital centre. In later period, Coromandel ports on the Eastern Coast gained

¹³⁶ Vaidehi Herbert. Poem 149. Sangam Poetry Translation website, Hawaii. USA

¹³⁷ Moti Chandra. *Trade and Trade routes in Ancient India*. Abhinava Publication, Delhi. 1977. p.165.

prominence, with the ships were started to load from the and Coromandel ports. By the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD, the Pandyas began to shift focus to the Eastern Coast of South India, while the Western Coast ports like Nelcynda Bacare and Muziris gradually lost their glory partially due to the decline in Roman trade. This was later led to shifting towards further north of Muziris, in Malabar region, which refers as Male as ‘pepper production region’ by the Cosmos period.

Discussion and Conclusion

This section presents a detailed discussion and analysis of the Early historic social networks in the Meenachil river basin. It is already discussed about the geographical advantages of the region, emergence of the early social formations, and the initial developments of communication networks. Building upon this foundation, the early historic period witnessed the expansion of these networks, particularly through trade and the exchange of commodities produced in the Western Ghats. Unlike the megalithic period, the archaeological materials to discuss the early historic period remain sparse. While the Sangam literature does not provide any direct references to the Meenachil region, it offers details of a broader socio-political and economic landscape of the ancient Tamilakam during the early historic period. In addition to literary sources, Greco Roman classical works mention certain locations that remain unidentified, largely due to the landscape transformations and inconsistencies in historical accounts. The limited archaeological evidence from the region includes a few hoards of Roman and punch marked coins. Along with these coin hoards, the presence of carnelian and glass beads recovered from megalithic burials in the valley also hold significance as they were brought to the region through the trade networks. So, with this limitation, this section explores the role of the Meenachil river in connecting the interior pepper production zones of the Western Ghats to emerging trade centres and market points within the Meenachil basin. It also incorporates a comparative

analysis with the neighbouring river basins for a broader understanding of the early historic developments in the region.

The early historic period roughly dated between 3rd century BC and the 3rd century AD reflect a phase of gradual and significant social transformation. Prior to this the region was in the final phase of the Iron Age megalithic period. As discussed in the previous chapter, megalithic traditions continued well into the early historic period and up to 10th century AD and in some cases even into the present day among certain communities such as the *Cholanaikers*. The Meenachil river basin was no exception to this pattern, where the transition was characterised more by continuity and gradual change than by sudden shift. There are evidences for the continued construction of megalithic burials into later periods. Finds such as beads of carnelian, glass and gold leaf found from these megalithic burials suggest their usage extended into slightly later historical phases which indicates an overlap between megalithic tradition and early historic developments.

It has already been discussed that the Western Coast participated in the trading activities even before the early historic period. Recent studies have shown that Sri Lanka had maintained trade relations with Western countries as early as the 3rd century BC primarily through the Indian merchants who were worked as intermediaries¹³⁸. The introduction of Buddhism during the 3rd century BC further accelerated the growth of such transactions. The material evidences including coins, inscriptions and archaeological evidences particularly Carnelian, Lapis lazuli beads¹³⁹ or raw materials shows that Sri Lanka had an active connection with regions such as Afghanistan, the Northwest, the Deccan and South India even before the early historic period. Interestingly, the studies of K. Rajan and Osmund Bopearachchi have identified similarities between the megalithic

¹³⁸ Ariane de Saxce. "Local Networks and Long-Distance Trade: The Role of the Exchanges between Sri Lanka and India During the Mediterranean Trade". K.S. Mathew. eds. *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris*. Routledge. 2017. p. 53

¹³⁹ Von Rosen. Lissie. *Lapiz Lazuli in Geological Context and in Ancient Written Sources*, Partille. 1988. p.11.

burials in Sri Lanka and those sites in Tamilnadu, particularly at Kodumanal¹⁴⁰. Inscriptions from the Madurai region also provided evidence of social changes or development occurring before the 3rd century BC even though many of these are Buddhist related. The literary references such as the Ramayana identified Korkai as the gateway to the Pandyas¹⁴¹ and Asokan inscriptions mentioning the ‘*Muventar*’s of South India’ further support the notion of early trade and political networks. These references are significant to the present study because they indicate that early trade and communications in South India along with hinterland centres like Kodumanal and capital centre Madurai were already prominent by the 3rd-4th centuries BC.

From Muziris to Bacare

There is plenty of primary and secondary literature available for the understanding of the whole of South India during the period of early history. Unfortunately, apart from references to the locations of Nelcynda, Bacare and their inland capital Madurai and its rulers, no detailed information is available about the specific regions such as Meenachil basin and hinterlands even in the Sangam texts. In order to understand the role of Western Coastal ports, and their inland connections, particularly hinterlands of Meenachil river, it must begin with the port Muziris. Muziris emerged as a premium export centre during the early centuries of the Common era, though it was likely active even earlier. Port and market centres do not arise suddenly, hence, Muziris may have already been functioned as a spice trading hub during the Megasthenes who mentioned in the *Indica* to the ‘Southern parts’ as a source of the Spices for the Ganga valley¹⁴². During the first century BC, the geographer Strabo mentions an ‘Indian Emporium’ likely referring to Muziris, highlighting its association with the spice trade. This suggests that Muziris was the first known port to

¹⁴⁰ Bopearachchi, Osmund and K. Rajan. “Graffiti Marks of Kodumanal and Ridiyagama. A comparative study”. *Man, and Environment XXVII* (2): pp. 97-105

¹⁴¹ Ramayana. *Kishkindakandam: Adhyaya*. 4: 41-8. Rajan Gurukkal. 2022. *Op.cit.* p. 51

¹⁴² E.H. Warmington. 1928. *Op.cit.* p.129.

the Greco-Roman writers. On the other hand, the Pandyas were renowned for their pearl fisheries at Korkai and for the city of Madurai even during the time of *Arthasasthras*, which notably does not mention the Nelcynda or Bacare even the pepper. So, it is plausible that the ports of Nelcynda and Bacare began to develop only in the later part of the first century BC, and eventually emerged as a significant port's centre by the time of the *Periplus*.

There are several factors that contributed to the emergence and development of the ports of Nelcynda and Bacare. Firstly, the primary reason was the Strategic motivation for establishing a Pandya controlled port to operate in parallel with Muziris. Initially Muziris functioned as the central node in the international trade network especially during the peak of Indo-Roman traffic. Its prominence was largely due to its advantageous geographical position along the Arabian sea, proximity to monsoon wind routes, and access to the Palakkad gap which facilitated the movements of goods and commodities from China, the Central Deccan and even from the North Eastern parts of India. However, the authority of Pandyas located further Southeast was also a major producer and distributor of commodities highly valued in Mediterranean markets most notably pearls from Korkai, fine textiles, ivory aromatic substances sourced from both locally and from its hinterland regions. As Indo Roman trade began to active inland production zones for their exports, the Pandyas likely saw the need to develop their own port parallel to Muziris to directly participate in the trade networks. It also mentioned that early maritime routes did not involve circumnavigating the Southern tip of the subcontinent. So, this situation led to the increasing necessity for a port which carried their goods to manage outbound shipments. The hinterlands of Nelcynda and Bacare were rich in spices such as pepper, cardamom and cinnamon and it also made them ideal locations for export hubs. These ports also provided an outlet for goods from Madurai, and facilitated internal trade networks extending towards the East and the far from Bay of Bengal.

Secondly the geographical advantages of Bacare significantly contributed to its development as a port. These advantages were two-fold: first, the presence of a navigable backwater system with direct coastal access and second, a strong hinterland network extending to the Western Ghats and the Pandya capital Madurai. The coastal topography of Bacare helps maritime vessels to anchor safely and also facilitates inland navigation. Goods could be easily transported through natural waterways facilitating the movements of goods between coastal and interior collection centres such as Cottanara and Nelcynda. According to Pliny, Bacare was a more serviceable port than Muziris, primarily due to these advantages and easier loading and unloading of ships. Secondly, the connectivity of Bacare with hinterlands via the river system. There are three major rivers such as Meenachi, Manimala and Pamba linked with the Vembanad Lake and the coastal plains to the Western Ghats and the interiors of Pandyas especially the Madurai region. These rivers functioned as an important gateway to the Ghats facilitating the movement of people and their goods especially spices. They also enabled the exchanges of local products such as fish, salt, rice etc which are essential commodities of the inter-tinai based subsistence and exchange system. However, the coastal port of Bacare helps to access maritime trade and more economic profit and the river system helps the Pandyas to extend their political and economic control deep into the region, which integrates both coastal and inland zones under their influence.

Thirdly, the resource wealth of the interior regions. The hinterlands of Bacare and the interior of Western Ghats were the natural hub for the highly demanded commodities for both domestic and international trade. The most important among these was black pepper which was exchanged for gold in Indo Roman trade. Other valuable products included spices such as cardamon, cinnamon, aromatic woods and ivory all of which were abundantly available in the interior forest of the Ghats. Additionally, the renowned pearl fisheries of the Pandyan coast and the fine textiles of Madurai further enhanced the region's trade potential. Beyond the local resources, these ports also facilitated the transshipment of

goods arriving from Southeast Asia via the Eastern ports along the Bay of Bengal, linking them to the westward maritime route. Finally, the growing concern over the pirate threats near Muziris.

According to Pliny,

*‘Muziris is not to be Ventured in, because of the neighbouring pirates,
which keep ordinarily about a place called Hydrea;
and it is not richly stored with merchandise¹⁴³’.*

It posed a serious risk to merchant ships and cargo vessels which forced them to anchor the ships offshore. It again made it difficult for loading and unloading of cargo from the ships. In contrast, Pliny referred to Bacare as a more serviceable port which suggested it offered better natural protection and trade operations easier and more secure. All these above discussing factors such as the rich resource base of the hinterlands, connectivity to inland and transregional networks, and the safety and efficiency of Bacare and Nelcynda likely explain their emergence and growth as important market centres on the Western Coast during the early centuries of the Common Era.

Problem of Nelcynda and Cottanara

The identification of the port of Nelcynda remains difficult due to the limited field work and material evidence and it continues to be a subject of scholarly debate. There are two probable locations along the Pamba River which are Nakada and Niranam and both are exhibiting geographical and topographical features for an ancient port settlement. As seen in the case of Muziris, even more than two decades of extensive research and excavations at sites Pattanam have not yielded a definitive historical identification or precise geographical location. It is still under debate. The situation with Nelcynda is even more complex, due to geographical challenges such as seasonal flooding, the absence of

¹⁴³ Pliny. *Natural History*. Chapter. 6.24. *Op.cit.* p. 135.

systematic archaeological excavations and a lack of extensive surveys and explorations. The discovery of Roman coins in private collections and as stray finds in the region indicates potential long-distance activities. Preliminary studies particularly by Ajit Kumar and Ambily. C. S provides valuable information and highlights the potential of the region for future systematic archaeological investigations. So, in the absence of proper and verifiable evidence, it is currently not possible to confirm either Nakada or Niranam as the historical site of Nelcynda. Accordingly, the present study does not attempt to make a conclusive location for the port Nelcynda.

Unlike Nelcynda, the port of Bacare has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years and it is widely accepted as corresponding to present day Purakkad in the Alappuzha district. This identification is supported by both geographical suitability and later historical references. Purakkad continued as a settlement into the medieval and modern periods and is still active in coastal trade even today. The site offers natural anchorage, a well-connected backwater network, and access to inlands of the interior regions via the Meenachil Manimala and Pamba rivers. On the other hand, the identification of Cottanara remains a subject of debate. In earlier phases of the academic research, it was commonly considered as Kuttanad and that interpretation is still continued among the local historians. However, the present study challenges the Kuttanad theory on ecological and agricultural grounds. Kuttanad is a low-lying wetland region and pepper cultivation requires well drained elevated terrain. Thus, Kuttanad is unsuitable for identification as Cottanara which is described in classical sources as a 'Pepper producing area'.

During the field work and regional observations of present scholar, this study tentatively suggests that Cottanara is more likely to be located somewhere in the uplands of Kottayam region. There are some observations that support this hypothesis. Firstly, Kottayam has extensive hinterlands suitable for the pepper production and it could have served as a centre for the collection and storage of spices in bulk from the Western Ghats

before their transport to coastal ports. Secondly, the position of Kottayam on the Eastern side of the Vembanad Backwater made it a strategic location for inland waterway transport allowing goods to be ferried from small jetties within Kottayam itself.

Early Historic Period of Meenachil Basin

Sangam literature provides valuable sources for the reconstruction of the socio-economic- political and cultural life of early South India. The changes described in these poems were not uniformly affected across the entire region. Information specifically related to the present-day Kerala region is quite limited. Place names such as Muziri, Thondi and Kuttanad are among the few place names that direct reference areas within Kerala. Most place names in Sangam literature are expressed through *tinai* concept and the poets rarely identified locations on the Western side of the Western Ghats. This lack of clear place names reference to Kerala during that time may be due to the geographical constraints faced by the poets, which many of the poets hailed from Madurai and the Eastern slopes of Tamilnadu. The dense forest and steep terrain of the Western Ghats likely made travel difficult, restricting access primarily to traders and merchants. And also, temporal mismatches must be considered while the Sangam poems are generally dated between 3rd century BC to 3rd century AD and the port towns like Nelcynda and Bacare rose to prominence around the beginning of the Christian era and declined by the second half of 2nd century AD. So, this potential temporal disjunction between the poems and the peak of maritime trade may be the reason for this absence of Kerala related verses in the Sangam texts. The absence of Kerala specific place names made significant challenges in the reconstruction of the early history of the region.

Social Life: To understand the social conditions of the early historic period, Sangam literature remains the primary source. These texts portray urban characteristics such as political formations, ruling elites, social classes, poets, marketplaces, palaces and organized armies in prominent urban centres like Madura, Karur and Kaveripoompattinam. However,

such forms of urbanism were largely confined to select areas either political capitals or port centres¹⁴⁴. Beyond these zones, there is neither literary nor archaeological evidence to suggest the existence of inland administrative centres, monuments, infrastructure or formal political divisions in regions like the Meenachil basin, especially the present-day Kottayam region. According to Rajan Gurukkal, early historic society retained a semi-tribal in character and Champakalakshmi similarly argued that it had not fully transitioned out of its tribal foundations¹⁴⁵. The present study of the Kottayam region supports these arguments. In its early phases, the early historic society likely operated within a semi-tribal form where kin-based leadership structures dominated sociopolitical organisation. Over time, when maritime trade began to influence the region, it brought gradual transformations in society. Specialized communities emerged around trade and production centres lending to a shift from egalitarian tribal society towards a chiefdom-based system, marked by distinctions rooted in control over resources, involvements in trade commerce and increase in social stratifications.

As communities started to exchange their surplus productions, a distinct class of traders emerged who later specialized in inter-tinai exchanges. These interactions between different ecological zones facilitated the movement of forest products such as spices, ginger, cardamom, honey, timber making these goods reach in every part of South India. Through these traders, remote areas like the Meenachil basin became increasingly integrated into wider trade networks. These traders acted as intermediaries between the local producers and external merchants and there emerged a specialized group who were involving cultivation, gatherers, animal handlers and packers. Over time, many of these communities began to settle along trade routes and river pathways to access goods more

¹⁴⁴ R. Champakalakshmi. *Op.cit.* p.16.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

easily. These settlements were gradually developed into small trade stations, market areas or exchange points.

However, it is important to note that while some areas underwent socio economic transformation through trade, several pockets remained largely unchanged with retaining characteristics of earlier hunter- gatherers or tribal societies. In such areas including the parts of present day Meenachil region followed subsistence agriculture and slash and burn cultivation continued to dominate. Unfortunately, unlike the megalithic burial goods, which offer some archaeological insights, there is insufficient material evidence to the understanding of broader subsistence strategies or social structures of these communities. The region lacks signs of formal architecture, administrative systems or urban features seen in the Sangam literature and those associated with the city of Madurai which is geographically located far away from the Meenachil basin.

Economy: From the megalithic period itself, the Meenachil region experienced significant transformations in its economic landscape primarily through a system of surplus redistribution which evidenced by the burial goods. This early and fundamental system involved the collection of goods which were produced within the tribal communities by the head of the clan or family who then redistributed them internally. Surplus items were exchanged externally, giving rise to a rudimentary barter system that facilitated both inter - and intra-regional trade. They exchanged goods salt, fish, honey and pepper which were primarily for daily use and immediate consumption items rather than profit¹⁴⁶. These transactions fostered economic transactions between communities across different ecological zones, from the coastal plains to the Western Ghats.

¹⁴⁶ Rajan Gurukkal, M.R. Raghava Varier. *Cultural History of Kerala. Vol. I*. Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. 1999. pp. 176-178.

The Sangam texts describe five ecological zones or *tinai*s such as *Kurinji* (hilly), *mullai* (pastoral) *marutham* (agriculture) *neithal* (coastal) and *palai* (arid or wasteland)¹⁴⁷. Each of these is associated with a specific mode of subsistence, social life and economic activity. These divisions were likely influenced initially by the tribal affiliations and informal exchange system based on the natural resources available in each *tinai*. Over time these evolved into a more structured and interconnected trade networks. Among these the *Kurinji tinai* representing hilly and mountainous regions inhabited by hunters and gathers who were producing the forest goods and spices, particularly relevant to the Meenachil region. In the Meenachil taluk, the place known as Kurinji kavu bears a direct connection to this *tinai*. There are several similarities between Kurinji *tinai* and this region. Firstly, Kurinji kavu is situated on the slopes of the Western Ghats, aligning with the geographical definition of Kurinji landscape found across both the Eastern and Western Ghats. Secondly the Kurinji kavu area is noted for megalithic burials and ancestral worship which indicate deep antiquity and thirdly the region Kurinji in the Ramapuram Village was mentioned by Johann Philip as a region known for pepper cultivation¹⁴⁸ highlighting its role in early spice trade. However, this suggests a long-term continuous habitation and economic relevance in the Meenachil valley. The Marutham *tinai* characterised by fertile agricultural lands which supported the cultivation particularly rice and sugarcane making it a crucial area for settled agrarian communities. The *neithal tinai* representing coastal regions, could be accessed from Meenachil through the Vembanad backwaters. Inhabitants of these areas were traditionally engaged in fishing and salt making and later became participants in coastal trade, indicating their increasing economic influences.

A third system of exchange evident in the early historic period was the gift economy, which played a significant role along the Western Coast particularly in the context of maritime trade. In this system luxury items were exchanged as gifts rather than

¹⁴⁷ T.K. Venkata Subramanian. *Op.cit.* p. 55.

¹⁴⁸ Federico De Romanis. *Op.cit.* p. 140.

through formalized commercial transactions. The traders and rulers from foreign regions, especially the Mediterranean world, offered luxury goods such as Roman wine, gold, silver, glass ware and fine textiles in return for valuable commodities. This form of exchange gained prominence due to the limited circulation of a regular coinage and absence of a fully developed monetary economy. However, by the later stage of the early historic period, the monetary instruments such as metallic coins began to be used in South India. As early as 2nd century BC, the Satavahanas issued coins and archaeological excavations at sites like Pattanam in Kerala and various locations in Tamilnadu have unearthed Pandya and Chera coins. The Sangam texts also make references to monetary terms such as *kasu*, *kanam* and *pon* which suggest a localized system of value exchange. The *Akananuru* refers the exchange of pepper for gold at ports¹⁴⁹ while Pliny also records that gold was traded in return for pepper in its production regions which highlights the integration of South India into long distance trade networks through both gift and barter systems.

However, with the expansion of trade, a rudimentary monetary system began to emerge in the region. The limited number of coins found in archaeological excavations and the references in Sangam works suggest that coin circulation was not widespread across all regions. Instead, monetary usages appear to have been concentrated in specific pockets such as trade centres, coastal ports and areas associated with craft production where elites, merchants and traders were more likely to be familiar with coinage.

In the Meenachil region the numismatic evidence is scarce and largely consists of isolated hoards rather than coins linked to market contexts. Notable finds include five Roman Aurei coins was discovered from Poonjar, early Julio Claudian coins from Idamaruk¹⁵⁰ which are close to Poonjar and punch marked coins from Elikulangara. These hoards were typically found buried in the soil or stored in earthen vessels called *lota*¹⁵¹. The

¹⁴⁹ Vaidehi Herbert. *Akananuru*. Poem 149. Sangam Poetry Translation website. Hawaii. USA

¹⁵⁰ Turner Paula. J. "Roman coins from India". *Royal Numismatics Society Publication No. 22*. London. 1989, p.74.

¹⁵¹ S. Suresh. *Op.cit.* p.26.

nature of these hoards suggest that the coins functioned more as stored wealth or symbolic valuables rather than as instruments of daily commercial exchanges.

Polity: The emergence of long-distance trade networks, the cultivation of spices, surplus accumulation and inter-regional exchanges would have been difficult to sustain without some form of leadership, even if rudimentary. The need for social regulations and resource management necessitated the presence of authority structures to oversee the distribution and exchange. While there is archaeological or inscriptional evidence for a centralized authority in the Meenachil region, this absence does not indicate a lack of political organisation. Following the megalithic phase, the region appears to have a transitioned form of clan-based system to more structured chiefdoms. They likely functioned as territorial and economic units that controlled specific settlement regions and resource zones. The Sangam literatures refer to three types of chieftains such as *Kizhars*, *Velir* and *Vendars*. The *kizhars* represented the most basic level of leadership, like tribal in nature. They control local resources and redistribution networks within the smaller tribal units. Their engagements in trade were primarily through gift-based exchanges.¹⁵² The *Velirs* were regional headmen like *satyaputhras Athiamans* who were in control over the strategic settlements in plains and hill regions. They controlled key transit points, highways and upland centres. At the highest level were the *Vendars* who were known as Chera, Chola and Pandya. They occupied the coastal trade centres and inland capitals which served as a central node that accumulated wealth from trade, tribute and surplus productions.

The Sangam texts provide valuable information into political institutions such as kingship, warfare and standing armies. However, these accounts largely pertain to specific regions especially capital cities, major production centres and coastal port towns and cannot be generalized to all of South India. In the Meenachil region during the period when the ports of Nelcynda and Bacare were active, the area is believed to have been under the

¹⁵² Raoul McLaughlin.2010. *Op.cit.* p.50.

influence of Pandyas who ruled from Madurai. However, the absence of references to local rulers or chieftains in the literary sources suggest that the region operated under a more localized small-scale polity rather than being directly governed by centralized monarchies.

The nature of these polities was not static; they evolved in response to changing economic and political dynamics. As trade expanded in to larger economic scale, these chieftains increasingly sought more exotic and luxury goods to enhance their prestige and status¹⁵³. They led to territorial competitions, conflict and warfare for the control over more lucrative trade routes, fertile agricultural lands, inland production centres and forest resources. According to *Periplus* and Pliny the Pandyas controlled the important ports of Nelcynda and Bacare during the early historic period. In later times the Cheras emerged as a dominant power in the Kuttanad region. The earliest known Chera ruler associated with this area is Palyanic Celkelu Kuttuvan, celebrated as the hero of the third decade of the *Pathittupathu*. He may have been the first Chera king to be referred as ‘Kuttuvan’ a title which poets used to denote him as the ‘lord of Kuttanad’¹⁵⁴.

The political organisation of the Chera Chola and Pandyas gradually evolved into a dual capital system, with distinct administrative and economical centres during the early historic period. The Pandyas established Madurai as their political and administrative capital centre and Korkai functioned as their primary economic hub. During the peak of West Coast trade, when the region served as a major emporium for foreign commerce, the Pandyas also utilized ports like Nelkynda and Bacare as their key economic centres. Later, that pattern shifted with the decline of Roman trade, lending to a reorientation of trade towards the Southeast coast and eventually the Malabar region as the pepper trade found new routes and markets.

¹⁵³ G.L. Hart. *Poets of Tamil Anthologies- Ancient Poem Love and War*. Princeton. 1979.p.176.

¹⁵⁴ *Pathittupathu*. 22.27, 23.10. also, Federico De Romanis. *Op.cit*. pp. 154-155.

Possible Early Centres on Meenachil Basin

The Meenachil river served as a natural channel for the movement of goods from the Western Ghats and midlands regions to the coastal plains. While, navigation was challenging during the monsoon due to the heavy water flow in the main river channel and in other seasons it provides a vital connection between the interior and the back waters of the Vembanad lake. In addition to water routes, a well-established land routes which traversed midland slopes helps to linking the interior market centres such as Erattupetta, Bharananganam, Pala, Kidangoor, Ettumanoor, Kaduthuruthy and Athirampuzha regions. During the early historic period these land routes supported by pack animals, bullock carts and foot trails while dugout canoes which mentioned in the literary sources were commonly used along the river. Meenachil river basin also provides access to the he Western Ghat passes particularly through the Erattupetta- Vagamon region which connected to Madurai via Cumbum Theni route. These routes had played a crucial role in channelling high value commodities from the Western Ghats and their foothills into the Coastal plains.

The identification of early historic centres in the Meenachil basin is best understood as a layered and evolving process rather than through a static or fixed model. The lack of sufficient archaeological, inscriptional and architectural evidence makes it difficult to definitively mark such centres. So, based on the recent explorations in the Meenachil river basin, the present scholar identifies several potential centres by analysing the distribution of available material remains, geographically suitability and their continuity into historically attested periods. These sites can be broadly categorised into three groups. The first of which includes strategically located centres such as Kaduthuruthy and Athirampuzha.

Kaduthuruthy is located in a low-lying region of the Meenachil basin and holds strategic position near the probable line of the ancient backwaters, suggesting its potential role in facilitating inland and coastal connectivity. According to local people, the name

Kaduthuruthy is believed to have originated from ‘*Kadal Thuruthi*’ (Sea Island) indicating its possible significance as an ancient market centre. Based on the field work conducted by the present scholar, the site shows potential to have functioned as an early centre due to its strategic location and geographical advantages. Several pepper producing pockets such as Kadaplamattam, Kuravilangad, Ettumanoor Kothanallor and Muttuchira are located in the uplands of Kaduthuruthy and in later periods, a network of manmade canals was constructed to facilitate the transportation of commodities to the ports via Vembanad Lake. But there is currently no direct evidence to confirm its status as such. One of the key limitations is that Kaduthuruthy is not situated on the main course of the Meenachil river, and it is linked only by small, narrow tributaries. Moreover, there is no definitive evidence to prove that these tributaries existed during the early historic period, they may have formed in a later period.

From the historical perspective, the region demonstrates a continuity of settlement and function, particularly in relation to trade and political organisation. The Thiruvalla copper plates (line155) refer to a wealthy trader named ‘*Uthamachetti*’ who is said to have come from Kaduthuruthy¹⁵⁵. Several local legends also associate Kaduthuruthy with the capital of Thekkumkoor Rajas in the late medieval history. Furthermore, it also mentioned in Unnuneelisesandesam, a literary *sandesha kavya* during the 14th century as a place for exporting pepper and pack¹⁵⁶ (*Uthara sandesham Sloka- 7*). The works related with the geographical and cultural landscape of Kerala and it mentioned Kaduthuruthy as an active market centre¹⁵⁷ located near Ettumanoor temple. The references collectively suggest that the selection of Kaduthuruthy as a capital may have been influenced by its earlier significance as a centre of communication and trade.

¹⁵⁵ Kari Katel. *Sthalanama Charithram. Kottayam District*. SPCS, Kottayam. 2023. p. 249.

¹⁵⁶ K. Siva Sankaran Nair. *Pracheena Keralathinte Charithram*. D.C Books, Kottayam. 2006. p.39.

¹⁵⁷ Suranad Kunjan Pillai. *Unnuneelisesandesam*. V.V Book Dipo, Chala Thiruvananthapuram. 1955.p.171.

The next probable early historic centres in the Meenachil basin are Ettumanoor, and Kidangoor, both are located in a midland region and surrounded by fertile paddy fields. These areas may have marked the beginning of organized agricultural production in the valley, as they were part of early brahmin settlements during the early medieval Kerala. Among them Ettumanoor has a longer historical trajectory, with evidence tracing back to the megalithic period. Numerous megalithic burials have been reported in the surrounding areas, and during field work the present author gathered information from the local residents regarding the presence of many urn burials from the region. The coexistence of megalithic remains and early medieval brahmin settlements along with the agricultural prosperity suggest that this area experiences a superimposition of new political and economic structures upon older cultural landscapes. This continuity and transformation indicate that Ettumanoor and Kidangoor likely functioned as a centre of trade or exchange during the early historic period.

Pala and Erattupetta were two other probable early historic centres which were both strategically located along the course of river Meenachil, in the upper midland region. Pala functioned as an urban centre that connected key areas such as Thodupuzha to the north and Kanjirappilly to the south which were both known for pepper production. Erattupetta, as previously discussed, is located in the upper basin of the valley between two rivers. It offers a significant geographical advantage for the collection and aggregation of commodities from the various interior regions. In addition to its location, Erattupetta likely evolved into a market settlement or trading hub, serving as a point of interaction between different social groups including traders, cultivators and forest dwellers. Although Erattupetta itself lacks direct material evidence from the early historic period, the nearby site of Poonjar located just 5 kilometres away, holds significant archaeological materials that support this early historic context.

The Poonjar, located in the upper basin of the Meenachil river. It emerges as a significant site with the evidence of long-term human occupation. The village of Kunnoni, within the Poonjar region has yielded material evidence which indicates habitation from the neolithic period itself. It includes neolithic celts, and megalithic burials which points to early settlement activity. Ecologically the surrounding areas of Pala and Erattupetta regions are well suited for spice cultivation, suggesting a continuity of settlements into the early historic period. Notably, a Roman coin hoard which is commonly referred to as Poonjar hoard was found in 1945 which included an Aureus of Augustus reported by Mortimer Wheeler¹⁵⁸. Additional information indicates that several Roman coins were found in Poonjar and nearby villages including a Gaius and Lucius Caesars Denarius of Augustus and an aureus of Claudius and a group of four aurei, one each of Claudius and Nero and two of Antoninus Pius¹⁵⁹. These coins may have belonged to a single hoard though unfortunately they remain unpublished. Such material evidence from multiple periods suggest that Poonjar was not an isolated settlement but rather an active participant in both regional and long-distance trade networks.

Conclusion

This chapter discusses about the early historic period in the Meenachil river basin. The scarcity of direct archaeological material evidence made significant challenges to drawing definitive conclusions. With the available literary sources and theoretical frameworks from historical geography, certain observations about the region's early historic period can be made. The process of trade and exchange both internal and external played a formative role in shaping the region. Internally, trade influenced the pattern of settlement, leading to the emergence of specific areas as centres of activity and the establishments of permanent cultivation sites. As populations increased, a shift towards

¹⁵⁸ Paula J. Turner. 2009.*Op.cit.* p.74.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

more stable and permanent settlements occurred which gave rise to increasingly complex social hierarchies and stratifications. Economically, the region appears to have transitioned from the primitive mode of production to a more specialized and subsistence-based production system. The inter - tinai exchanges and the growth of spice cultivations facilitated the expansion of trade networks. Politically, clan-based an egalitarian society was gradually transformed into a chiefdom-based system, where the local leaders sought control over the trade routes, surplus production, strategic locations and critical resources in order to consolidate more power. These changes did not happen uniformly across the region. While some pockets remained relatively unchanged due to the problems in the region's geography, resource availability and restricted access to trade networks.

The places like Nelcynda and Cottanara have not yet been definitively identified, but the attempts have been made for further interdisciplinary research. The region's involvement in the external trade particularly in high demanded commodities such as black pepper and cardamom had a significant impact on the local societies. This trade accelerated the growth of production, specialization and integration of the region into a broader commercial circuit. During the 3rd century AD, the pepper trade in the region witnesses a marked decline due to the internal civil war in Rome and the dislocation of pepper exports shifted towards northern Kerala. Comparative analysis with the established port Muziris helped to know about the intensity of the trade and transactions in the region. Even in the absence of substantial material remains the cultural evidence such as ideas, technologies and possibly even the religious and artistic influences are visible throughout the period of early history.

The trade routes brought not only goods and commodities, but also people from different regions, making cultural interactions which is another significant outcome of the trade in the region. Over time this led to the gradual settlements of people from various regions which had different cultural, linguistic and religious traditions. Among these

Buddhist and Jains played prominent roles. Their presence in the region was not initially as religious missionaries but they came as merchants and intermediates who were actively engaged in commercial activities in the major trade centres. Following the early historic period the region witnessed the spread of Buddhism and Jainism along with the establishment of early brahmin settlements. These developments marked the beginning of a transformative phase in the region's social and religious landscape. The following chapter will discuss the pre-medieval society of the Meenachil river basin in detail.

Chapter V

‘The Dawn of a New Era’

The Presence of Jainism Buddhism in the Meenachil River Valley

Introduction

This chapter explores the later Sangam period in the Meenachil valley which roughly spans the 3rd century AD to 7th century AD. As previously discussed, trade played a transformative role in reshaping the socio economic and political landscape of the region. This transitional phase between the early historic and medieval periods in Kerala history is often labelled as a so - called ‘dark age’ due to the absence of written records, inscriptions, or other substantial evidence. However, most of the historical narratives of Kottayam¹ jumped from the early historic trade directly to the emergence of brahmin settlements and medieval inscriptions. This section challenges that view, by highlighting an earlier and significant wave of migration which was Jain and Buddhist groups. These communities were already well established in South India were not only as a religious sect, but also active as traders, merchants and intermediaries. As early as 3rd century BC cave inscriptions from Madurai and its surrounding regions attest to the presence of the Jain and Buddhist monks, suggesting their early spread into the region. Historical accounts suggest that the eventual decline of Jainism and Buddhism in the region was mainly due to the rise of brahmin settlements.

According to K.V Krishna Ayer, Buddhism was more popular along coastal areas, while Jainism was concentrated on the inland trade routes². But it is very rare that they coexisted with each other as a settlement. This pattern is particularly relevant to the Meenachil river basin and Kottayam region, where both religions were present along active

¹ Apart from the Ph.D. thesis of P.C. Alexander and B. Padmakumari Amma from the late 90’s, only a few recent works such as Ajay S. Sekhar’s *Puthan Keralam: Kerala Samskarathinte Boudha Adithara* (2018) and Hari Katel’s *Sthalanama Charithram Kottayam District*. (2023) have discussed the Jain and Buddhist cultural heritage of Kottayam.

² K.V. Krishna Ayer. *A History of Kerala*. Coimbatore.1965. p.113.

trade routes connected to the Western Coast. Although direct archaeological evidence for Jainism in the region remains limited, etymological clues and place names offer indirect support for its presence. In contrast, material evidence suggests a stronger and more tangible influence of Buddhism. Several hindu temples in the region appear to incorporate remnants of earlier Buddhist viharas, including sculptures that clearly reflect Buddhist iconography. In addition to archaeological and etymological evidence, oral traditions and local folklores have also contributed to reconstructing this formative period of the region.

Jainism in the Region: Traces, Possibilities and Cultural Overlaps

Historically Jainism is believed to have entered the Kerala region through the two main routes. The first was from the Andhra region into Tamilnadu and from there westward into Kerala. The second route was through Karnataka, which linked to the Southward migration of the Jain leader Badrabahu to Shravanabalgola during a famine in North India around 3rd century BC³. Based on the available evidence, the presence of Jainism in Kerala is mainly associated with inland migration routes particularly, Wayanad in north, Palakkad and Kodungallur in central Kerala region and Chitharal in the south. Among them Kodungallur stands out as coastal centre, where the Mathilakam (identified with *Thirukunavay* or *Thrikkanamathilakam*) is traditionally believed to have functioned as a Jain vihara in a coastal setting.

The presence of Jainism in the Kottayam district remains speculative, primarily due to the absence of direct archaeological evidence. But several factors make it relevant to discuss Jain influence in the region during the post Sangam period. Firstly, the presence of Jainism in the neighbouring areas such as Perumbavoor and Kodungallur in Central Kerala as well as in the Madurai regions. Kodungallur and its surroundings identified with the early historic trade centre of Muziris were significant nodes in maritime exchange, and the Perumbavoor occupied a strategic position along the route connecting the Western Ghats

³ P.B. Desai. *Jainism in South India and Some Jaina Epigraphs*. Sholapur. Jaina Samraksha Sangha. 1957. p.26.

with the Western Coast. The Madurai which functioned as the early historic capital and cultural centre under the Pandyas is particularly important as inscriptions dating as early as 2nd century BC attest to Jain affiliations in the region. These contexts suggest a high probability that Kottayam, situated between these centres and linked through trade routes connecting Nelcynda and Bakare with the Ghats and the coast could have host a Jain presence. Secondly the cultural landscape of the region itself preserves certain traces. Place names, etymological survivals and sculptural motifs such as depiction of *Naga*, *Yakshi* *Yaksha* and the conceptual associations with *Bhattaraka* were indicate the older cultural layers that may be linked to Jainism.

Tracing the presence of Jainism in a specific geographical context such as the Kottayam region requires to connecting some pieces of multiple types of evidence together. The most important among these are epigraphic records from the Madurai region. Madurai held particular importance in this regard as it was one of the prominent urban centres of the early historic Sangam period with extensive connectivity to port centres and inland markets. During the early centuries of the Common Era, Madurai also functioned as a capital centre linked to the ports of Nelcynda and Purakkad thereby establishing indirect ties with the Kottayam region. The earliest Jain affiliated inscriptions in the Tamil region appear in the Madurai area by the 2nd century BC. Notable among these are the Mangulam inscription⁴ of Nedumchezhiyan, the Kongar Puliyankulam⁵ record associated with Chera king Chera Athan and Mattupatti record⁶ connected to the Chera prince from *Muciri*. Dated between the 2nd and 1st century BC, these inscriptions attest to an established Jain presence in the Madurai region during the early historic period.

⁴ Iravatham Mahadevan. No. 1. *Early Tamil Epigraphy: From the Earliest Times to the Sixth Century AD*. Harvad University, The Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Chennai.2003. pp.315-317., Dhiraj M.S. *Jainism in Kerala. A Historical Perspective with Special Reference to Wayanad*. PhD Thesis. Department of History. Pondicherry University. 2018. p.432. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/298648>. Accessed on 05/10/2024.

⁵ Iravatham Mahadevan. No. 12. *Ibid*. p.334. Dhiraj M.S. *Ibid*. p.432.

⁶ Iravatham Mahadevan. No. 56. *Ibid*. p.395. Dhiraj M.S. *Ibid* p.432.

The Aalagarmalai inscription of Madurai dated to the 1st century BC⁷, records the presence of various Jain affiliated occupational groups including gold smiths (*Pon Kollan*), salt merchants (*uppu vanikan*), chief scribes (*kana athikan*) and accountants, jaggery traders (*paanita vanikan*) cloth merchant (*aruvai vanikan*) and ploughshare dealers (*kolu vanikan*)⁸. As discussed earlier, Madurai in the early historic period functioned as the political centre for regions connected to Nelcynda and Bacare, thereby maintaining direct and sustained links with the Western Coast. These networks of exchanges facilitated the migration of Jain merchant communities into the Kottayam region, where they participated in commerce and gradually established a foothold in local markets. Merchant guilds, caravan leaders and itinerant ascetics travelling along the overland routes through the passes of the Western Ghats found small religious establishments at strategic trade centres and inland market towns. Such centres functioned not only as hubs of economic activity but also as points of cultural religious transmission enabling Jain traditions to take root in the region over years. Apart from the Madurai region, the wider ancient Chera territories yield as many as twenty-two inscriptions with Jain affiliations dated between the 2nd century BC to 4th century AD⁹. These records further attest to the widespread influence of Jainism and highlights the prevalence and prominence of Jain communities as trading groups in South India.

Apart from epigraphic evidence, archaeological traces are largely absent in the region most likely due to the social transformations. During the early historic period, Jainism in this area seems to have existed only in its formative, infant stage represented mainly by merchants and traders rather than by organised religious congregations. Such early communities were probably small with temporary shelters and relied on minimal perishable materials which left little for the archaeological record. Even if structures such

⁷ Iravatham Mahadevan. *Ibid.* No. 36, 39-40, 42-44, 46,48. PP. 369, 372, 373, 376, 378, 381,383.

⁸ Iravatham Mahadevan. *Ibid.* No. 36, 39-40, 42-44, 46,48. PP. 369, 372, 373, 376, 378, 381,383 cited Dhiraj M.S. 2018. *Op.cit.* p.75.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.168.

as cave shrines or inscriptions once existed, they may have been destroyed over time, either by the region's tropical climate with heavy annual rainfall and other natural hazards or through human activity.

During the medieval period, prevailing local beliefs led to the intentional destruction of ancient sculptures especially idols of the Buddha and *naga* etc. as they were viewed with fear and superstitions. People often destroyed these artifacts or discarded them into waterbodies such as ponds, wells and rivers. As a result, most of the surviving idols were recovered from such submerged contexts. It was widely held that finding stone idols particularly those in meditative poses or served heads found from one's property would bring misfortune. Such objects were feared as harbouring evil spirits, leading people to destroy them or dispose of them in ponds, lakes and rivers further erasing the materials of these religions

Certain iconographic features such as idols in *padmasana* posture and the presence of *Yaksha* and *Yakshi* figures on either side of the shrine are observed. However, these idols cannot be closely examined as many may have been reshaped or re-ornamented over time, with their surfaces now covered by *Chandana*, flowers and other decorative elements. As a result, the original features are obscured and not visible from outside. From the medieval period onwards, the growth of brahmin settlements in the area likely contributed further to the assimilation and eventual disappearance of much of the Jain archaeological materials.

Yaksha Yakshi in Jainism

One of the third important elements in Jainism is the concept of *Yaksha* and *Yakshi*. It is generally believed that the *yaksha yakshi* cult was closely associated with Jain religious practice¹⁰. In the Kottayam region their presence is visible in the sculptures from the temples, inscriptions and mythical stories too. Among the popular Jain *Yakshis* were

¹⁰ V.V Haridas. *Yakshi Sankalpam*. S.P.C.S, Kottayam. 2020. pp. 6-10.

Chakreswari, Ambika, Siddidayaka and Padmavati and notably an image of Padmavathi *yakshi* has been identified from the Neelamperoor bagavati temple in form of *soumya* (calm)¹¹. Beyond these, several *yakshi* deities continued to be worshiped in the hindu temples of both medieval and modern periods in Kottayam. The word *Yakkan* appears to be derived from the word *Yakshan*, the male form of *Yakshi* and is founded in the Thrikkodithanam Temple record where it is used as a personal name as *Yakkan Srikantan* of *Manalmanram*, the chief of the Nanrulinadu¹². Similarly, an individual named *Iyakkan Kovinnan* of Mulakkadu is recorded as having made certain gifts to the Thrikkodithanam Temple¹³.

The origin of the concept of *Yaksha* and *Yashi* is unknown and over time they developed in various names, forms and narratives which became associated with multiple religious traditions. Historically the *yakshi* cult is often linked with the tree worship and the evidence found in prehistoric rock paintings¹⁴ as well as vedic references. The *rigveda* provides the earliest mention of *yaksha*, though not as a deity¹⁵. In later *Puranas* they appear as secondary deities often connected with higher gods. Within brahminical traditions, the *yakshas* came to be regarded as guardians of wealth, with Kubera as their principal figure. In Buddhist texts, the *yakshas* are describing as being possessing spiritual powers both benevolent and malevolent reflecting their ambivalent characters¹⁶ and some are portrayed as converted protectors of the faith. On the other side, Pali texts also assign

¹¹ M.R Ragava Varier. "Socio- Economic Functions of Jain Temples in Kerala". *Svastisri. Dr. Chandra Facilitation Volume. Agam Kerala Prakashan*, Delhi.1974. pp. 21-22.

¹² T.A Gopinatha Rao. *T.A.S.* (ed) Vol. V. Part-II.1925. NO.55. Department of Cultural Publication- Government of Kerala, Trivandrum. pp. 172-176. Dhiraj. M.S.2018. *Op.cit.* p. 208.

¹³ M.G. S Narayanan. *Index A.38.* 2013. p.454. *T.A.S. Vol. II&III.*1992. NO.71.

¹⁴ S.K. Pandey. *Development of Archaeology.* University of Saugan. He collected a number of rock paintings from Madhya Pradesh having indications of the idea of natural worship.

¹⁵ Ramnath Misra. *Yaksha cult and Iconography.* Munshiram Manoharlal Publishing, Delhi. 1981.p.05.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.37.

them royal and courtly roles which describing the *yakshas* as chefs and rulers of territories¹⁷.

In South India, the *yakshi* cult was largely practiced by the Jains. *Silappathikaram* provides the earliest reference to *yakshis*, while later works such as *Unnuneelisesandesam* and *Sukasandesam* also mention their concepts of *yakshis*. *Yakshi* were regarded as favourite deities closely associated with the Tirthankaras, often held a status almost equal to that of the main shrines. Jain literary traditions refer to them as *Jhakhas* and *Jhakhis* and it is believed that there were 24 *yakshis* each serving as the protectors of 24 Tirthankaras¹⁸. In Jain iconography, *yakshas* are usually depicted on the right side of the Tirthankaras, while *yakshis* are shown on the left¹⁹. This pattern is evident in the sculptures of Jain temples at Chitharal, Wayanad and Kallil. Interestingly some temples in the Kottayam region also seem to possess similar idols, which they cannot be examined in detail.

Historians like M.R Ragava Varier, V.V Haridas have suggested that the *yaksha yakshi* concept was of Jain origin and that their presence in Kerala is evident in temple sculptures as well as personal names of rulers recorded in inscriptions. From the 9th century AD onwards, inscriptions mention more than twenty individual names bearing *Yakkan* and *Iyakki*. Many of whom were chiefs or rulers made grants and donations to the temples²⁰ such as Kandiyoor temple inscription of 947 century AD²¹, Kollam Rameswaram inscription of 1102 AD and Peruncellur inscription of 1145 AD²². Over time, however *Yaksha*, *Yakshi* figures in Kerala also became associated with the vampire legends and were regarded as supernatural beings endowed with extraordinary powers. The term *Yakshi* is

¹⁷ Ramnath Misra. *Op.cit.* p.36.

¹⁸ Shantilal Nagar. *Iconography of Jaina Deities*. Vol. I. Delhi. 1999. pp.247-313.

¹⁹ B. Padmakumari Amma. *Jain- Buddhist Centres in the Early History of Kerala*. PhD Thesis. Department of History, University of Calicut.1995. p. 267. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/43608>. Accessed on. 26/11/2024.

²⁰ K.R. Ajitha, V.V Haridas. "Historicising the Personal Names: Anthroponomastical Analysis of Inscriptions in Medieval Kerala". *Indian Historical Studies*. Vol. XVI (2). 2020.p.107

²¹ Puthussery Ramachandran. *Kerala Charithrathinte Adisthana Rekhakal*. Trivandrum.2007. pp. 106-108.

²² Kesavan Veluthat. *Brahmin Settlements in Kerala*. Cosmo Books. Thrissur. (1978), 2013. pp.165-180.

sometimes interpreted as meaning ‘to move quickly’ or ‘flash upon’ and in Kerala folklore they were often linked with rakshasas²³. Folk ballads and oral traditions portray them as malevolent female spirits typically clad in white sari who sought vengeance especially against *namboothiri* brahmins, believed to be responsible for her death²⁴ in previous life. Interestingly *Yakshis* were never said to harm women but instead targeted the individuals who had wronged them. some of the trees like *Pala* (*Alstonia scholaris*) and palm (*Phoenix dactyifera*) were traditionally considered as their abodes. In Kerala temples, *Yakshi* idol are frequently found as sub deities, where they came to symbolize both protective and ominous aspect often associated with impending misfortune²⁵.

During the medieval period, many Jain temples were converted into Bhadrakali/ Bagavati temples and the present-day Bagavati kavus may have originated as ancient *yakshi* shrines. The legends consistently describe *Yakshis* as being afraid of iron²⁶ suggesting their roots in very early forms of natural worship where they functioned as protectors of sacred groves against those who attempt to clear or destroy them. These narratives are often linked to brahmins who, during the medieval period sought to clear forests and *kavus* for agriculture, thus becoming the prime targets of *Yakshi* lore. Furthermore, the recurring element of the *yakshi* clad in a simple white sari²⁷ may symbolically echo to the Svetambaras sects of Jainism whose adherents wore white garments. In this way, folklore and legends appear to preserve and validate historical layers of religious and cultural transformations.

Toponymy in Jainism

It is generally believed that place names beginning or ending with *palli* indicate early Jain or Buddhist settlements, though both traditions claim the term as part of their

²³ Ramnath Misra. *Op.cit* p.09.

²⁴ V.V Haridas. 2020. *Op.cit.* p.06.

²⁵ Dhiraj. M.S. 2018. *Op.cit.* p.290.

²⁶ V.V Haridas. 2020. *Op.cit.* p. 07.

²⁷ M.R. Ragava Varier. *Jaina Matham Keralathil*. S.P.C.S, Kottayam. 2016.pp.57-58.

heritage. In Kottayam numerous place names contain palli such as Kunnamballi, Mariyappally, Puthupally Vembally, Vellilappally, Kanjirappally, Pallikkandam, Pallikkal and Pallikkathodu. In the Jain tradition palli is associated with hermitage or ashramas. There are several Jain inscriptions from Tamilnadu especially from Madurai region mention to the palli in this sense for instance, Mangulam inscription²⁸ records the establishment of a hermitage (*palli*) by *Kantan Valuti*, where the cave itself is designated as a palli.

Similarly, Mannarkovil inscription of the 3rd century AD²⁹ mentions ‘*Kunavin ilanko Ceypitha Palli*’ referring to the gift of a hermitage. In Kerala the Alathur inscription identifies a Jain temple as palli while, Kinalur inscription designating a Jain centre as ‘*Kunavaynallur Vijayaragiswarampalli*’³⁰. Iravatham Mahadevan notes that the literal meaning of palli as a ‘*sleeping place*’ was originally applied to cave shelters with stone beds and later extends to hermitages or brick and mortar temples³¹. MGS Narayanan further observed that in Tamil and old Malayalam, palli also denotes a small hamlet, drawing parallels with Pali and Prakrit usages. In subsequent periods the term palli came to denote *Agraharas* or *brahmadeya* (brahmin settlements) in inscriptions and literature sources³² reflecting a shift in its meaning over time.

Similar to the term palli, other expressions connected with Jainism include *Pallichandam* and *Pallikkar*. The word *Pallichandam* combines palli (hermitages) with *chandam* meaning *swantham*³³ or own which denoting tax free lands or land grants made in favour of Jain institutions or *pallis*. This usage is attested in several inscriptions from both Tamilnadu and Kerala including Pallankovil copper plates³⁴ and Nagercoil Nagaraja

²⁸ Iravatham Mahadevan. No: 1. *Op.cit.* p.315.

²⁹ *Ibid.* No: 89. p.447.

³⁰ M.G.S Narayanan. *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala*. Kerala Historical Society. Thiruvananthapuram. 1972. pp. 76-77

³¹ Iravatham Mahadevan. *Op.cit.* p.133.

³² B. Padmakumari Amma. *Op.cit.* forward by MGS Narayanan.1972. *Op.cit.* p.77.

³³ Joseph. P.M. *Jainism in South India*. ISDL, Thiruvananthapuram.1997. p.77.

³⁴ T. V. Mahalingam. (ed.) *Inscriptions of Pallavas*. Indian Council for Historical Studies, New Delhi. 1988. pp. 89-93 and Iravatham Mahadevan. *Op.cit.* p.137

inscription record that ‘the land and garden near the tank Punakkulam in *Kottaruparru* were gifted as *Pallichandam* to *Gunaveerapandita*³⁵. Another related term is *Pallikkar* is also claimed to have Jain associations. It is generally understood as referring to the administrators or protectors of Jain *pallis*. M.R. Ragava Varier noted that the Neelamperoor temple, the designation *Pallikkari* was applied to the property of Goddess Palli bagavati³⁶. Furthermore Diraj. M.S in his study of Hoysala records, pointed out that *Pallikkar* denoted a kind of a militia³⁷ functioned as protectors of Jain Pallis.

Another Jain affiliated term is Kattamballi³⁸. One of the Chitharal inscriptions refers to ‘Uttanandi Adigal of Kattamballi³⁹. There are several inscriptions from both Tamilnadu and Kerala mention Kattamballi and even today, place names such as Kattampalli in Kannur, Kattampully and Kattakambal in Thrissur and Kattamback in Kottayam preserve its legacy. The term appears to denote specific groups of Jain Pallis in these regions. Etymologically it combines ‘*kadu*’ (forest) with *palli* (hermitage) signifying Jain settlements established in forested areas⁴⁰. These settlements may also have functioned as resting places for caravan traders traveling along important highways⁴¹ reflecting both their religious and economic significance.

Bhattara / Bhattarika

The term *Bhattara*, *Bhattarar* or *Bhattari* is closely associated with Jainism. In South India, especially in Kerala Tamilnadu and Karnataka⁴² the term Bhattara was commonly used to denote a deity with inscriptions referring to both male and female forms.

³⁵ Roufia. Malik. A. *Archaeology of Jainism in Kerala*. PhD Thesis. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 2023.p.36. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/570788>. Accessed on. 14/10/2024.

³⁶ M.R. Ragava Varier. “Yakshi Cult in Kerala”. *Mahavir Nirvan Souvenir. Department of History*. University of Calicut.1974. pp.21-22.

³⁷ Dhiraj. MS. 2018. *Op.cit.* p. 362.

³⁸ M.R. Ragava Varier. *Keraleeyatha Charithramanagal*. Studies in Kerala History and Culture, Sukapuram. 2009. p.65 and Dhiraj. M.S. 2018. *Op.cit.* p.106.

³⁹ T.A. Gopinatha Rao. *T.A.S.* Vol. II & III. Department of Cultural Publications, Trivandrum.1992. p.126.

⁴⁰ Dhiraj. M.S. 2018. *Op.cit.* p. 337.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p.431.

⁴² *Ibid.* p.198.

For instance, the Kinalur inscription mentions ‘*Tirukkaliay Pattarar*’⁴³(*Bhattarar*) and the Chitharal inscription refers to *Bhattariyar* as a female deity⁴⁴. The title was applied in various ways across Southern India and in later period it came to be used more broadly for educated or learned members of the brahmin community. In the Kottayam region, *Bhattara* also appears as a suffix in the personal name of Jain saints and followers who were served deities. Significantly, a 13th century Malayalam Vaṭṭeluttu record from Kumaranellor designates the temple goddess bagavati as the *bhattariyar*⁴⁵, indicating both continuity and transformation in the usage of terms.

Khadika Sthanam

According to the local traditions, Thrikkodithanam in the Kottayam region is remembered as an important Jain centre and is believed to have once functioned as an ancient *vedasala* known as *Ghatikasthanam*, literally meaning ‘the place of three flags. In Jain tradition, a *khatika* or *ghatika* serves as a centre of learning and as an assembly place where monks, scholars and community leaders gather to deliberate on matters such as temple management, records and endowments. The *Sthalanamapraavisika* of Thrivikraman, notes that only after the construction of the present temple did the name evolve ‘*Thiru*’ in Thrikkodithanam becoming ‘*Thru*’ in Malayalam. This changed altered the interpretation of the name: *thri* as three, *kodi* as flag, and *thanam* as *Sthanam* (place), thus rendering the meaning ‘the place of three flags’ Although there are no direct epigraphic or archaeological evidences to confirm Thrikkodithanam as a Jain centre, the toponym strongly suggests a connection to the idea of a ‘*thiru ghatika sthanam*’ at once. The Tamil ‘*Khatika*’ itself derived from the sanskrit *ghatika*⁴⁶. M.G.S Narayanan further observes that institutions known as *salais* in Kerala which as those at Kanthallur and Parthivapuram performed

⁴³ MGS Narayanan.1972. *Op.cit.* pp.77-78.

⁴⁴ *T.A.S.* Vol. I.1988. p.284. Vol. IV Part II. 1923.p.148.

⁴⁵ *T.A.S.* Vol. II and III. No: 49. 1992. p. 192.

⁴⁶ Dhiraj. M.S. 2018. *Op.cit.* p.175.

functions similar to *khatikas* in Tamilnadu, serving as centres of learning and assemblies during the medieval Kerala⁴⁷.

The present author observed that the route from Kottayam town to the Thrikkodithanam temple passes through a corridor marked by several settlements whose names bear traces of Jain etymology such as Channanikkad⁴⁸, Pathiyapally, Perumbanachi, Madappally, Manikandapuram, Pathamuttam, Pakkil, Nattakom, Mariyappally, Panachikkad, Nattakom, Eravinallur, and Muttambalam. The notable concentration of such place names along this stretch is unlikely to be coincidental. Instead, it suggests the existence of an early communication or trade route that may have linked various Jain settlements or centres of activity in the region. This distribution of sites further strengthens the argument that Thrikkodithanam may once have been part of a larger Jain cultural and the commercial landscape.

***Naga* Worship in Jainism**

Another concept associated with Jainism is that of the *naga*. In the Kottayam region, *naga* sculptures are commonly found in temples, with *nagaraja* worship being particularly prominent. Several local place names, such as Nagambadam, Nagapuram, and Panagam Thodu (*pannagam* means snake) also attest to the prevalence of serpent worship. The site of Panachikkad Perumbanachi also attests to the prevalence of *naga* worship in the region. Owing to its distinctive features, Panachikkad is believed to have once been a Jain abode. The goddess presently worshipped there as Saraswathy enshrined in a pond overgrown with wild creepers, is associated with an ancient sacred grove traditionally protected by *naga yakshi* known as Panachikkad.

In Kerala, the term *naga* frequently appears in both place names, reflecting its cultural significance. The cult of serpent worship, popularly known as *naga* worship, is

⁴⁷ MGS Narayanan. 2013. *Op.cit.* p. 135.

⁴⁸ Velayudhan K.P. *Buddhism in Kerala*. Journal of Kerala Studies. 1983.p. 220.

often represented in temple iconography as a cobra hood emerging from behind the head of a human-like figure⁴⁹. In the Kerala context, *nagas* appear to have been linked with Jain tradition. The epigraphic evidences such as the Muthupatti records⁵⁰ which mention a place called ‘Nakaperur’ identified with present day Pambra⁵¹ in Wayanad. While a *Vattezhuthu* inscription from Poothadi in Wayanad refers to Nagapura⁵². Together, these suggest a strong historical association between Jain settlements and *naga* worship in the region.

Other Etymological Connections

Etymological connections hold equal importance in understanding geographical locations. Many place names were derived from the social cultural influences of the earlier period. In the Kottayam region a number of toponyms appear to reflect Jain associations. Significantly, the Kottayam itself is sometimes interpreted in relation to Jain traditions. According to popular beliefs, Kottayam can be classified in two ways as *Kottam + Ayam* or *kottam + akam*. In the first case, *ayam* means pond making Kottayam signify a pond by the *kotta* and secondly the *akam* means interior, which implying the interior of a *kotta* or *kottam*. Both derivations highlight the association of *kotta* or *kottam* with Jain affiliated place names. For an example, *Kottam* is a familiar term, as seen *Kottambalam*⁵³ a known Jain centre during the Sangam period⁵⁴. The Malayalam poet Ulloor also supported the argument that the name Kottayam is connected with Jain traditions⁵⁵. It is further believed that before the emergence of a temple centred society in the medieval period, the region was an important abode of Jains.

⁴⁹ Lowell. W. Bloss. “The Buddha and the *Naga*: a study in Buddhist folk Religiously”. *History of Religions*. Vol.13, University of Chicago Press. 1973. p.37.

⁵⁰ Iravatham Mahadevan. No. 56. *Op.cit.* p 395.

⁵¹ Dhiraj M.S. 2018. *Op.cit.* p.85.

⁵² M.G.S Narayanan.1972. *Op.cit.* p. 75. Index.B1, Dhiraj M.S.2018. *Op.cit.* p.178.

⁵³ Hari Katel. *Op.cit.* p.15.

⁵⁴ Vaidehi Herbert. *Akananuru*. Poem 168. Sangam Poetry Translation website. Hawaii. USA.

⁵⁵ Ullor. S. Parameswara Iyer. *Ulloorinte Prabandhangal*. University of Kerala. 1979. p.03.

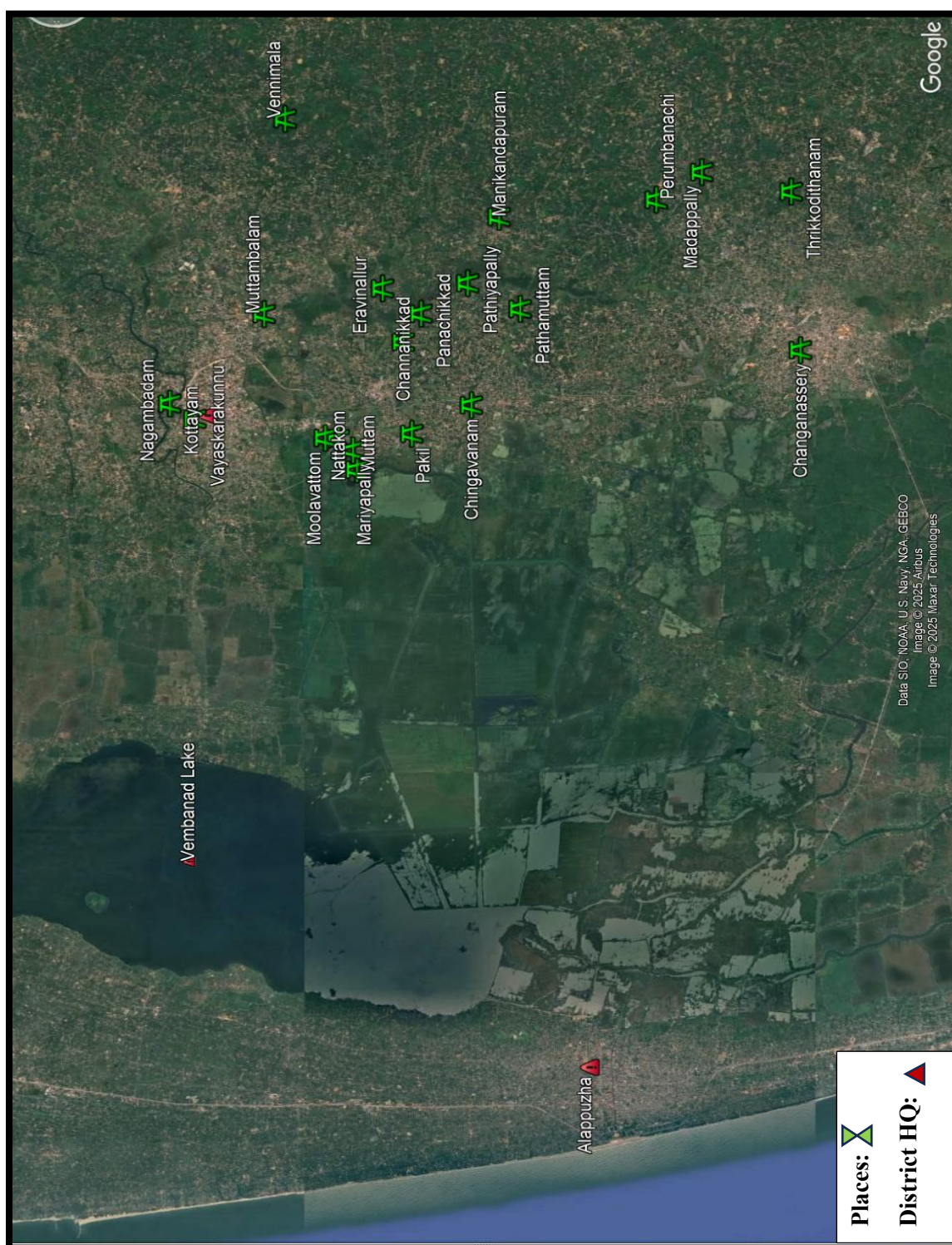


Fig- 5.1: Jain Etymological Places in Kottayam. (not in scale)

The place Thirunakkara or Nakkara Kunnu is located in the centre part of Kottayam. The term ‘*nakkara*’ is linked to the word *Nakkan* or *Nagnan* (meaning naked). The ‘*Nakkan*’ can also be understood as a personal name as seen in the case of Nakkan Pothanar who was a Jain poet of the Sangam period⁵⁶. Some of the local traditions hold that Nakkara Kunnu may have derived from its association with Jain monks. Interestingly, several other places in Kottayam also preserve the name *Nakkan* such as ‘*nakka Thuruth*’ near Vaikom, ‘*Nakkaraputhuval*’ at Perunna near Changanassery and ‘*Nakkara Mukku*’ near Kurichi in Kottayam.

According to local belief, Lalamthuruthy near Thiruvalla was once known as ‘*Athanthuruthy*’ a place mentioned in the Thiruvalla copper plates. Hari Katel has argued that the Changanassery may etymologically point to Jain connection, suggesting that the word ‘*changam*’ represents the personal name of a Jain trader⁵⁷. He supports this view with literary evidence from the *Silappathikaram* which refers to a person named etti *changaman* a flourishing merchant at Madura.⁵⁸ Based on these sources, Hari Katel proposed that the name Changanassery could have derived from the *Chenganar* + *cheri*. Similarly, the nearby place name Chingavanam, located between Kottayam and Changanassery and it is believed to have originated from Changa Vanam (a forest occupied by *Changas* probably Jains) which later evolved into ‘*Chingavanam*’. The other toponyms such as Muttom, Vattom and Kottam are also noteworthy as they are often associated with the surroundings of shrines or monastic establishments⁵⁹. In Kottayam the local traditions further strengthened this argument as sites like Muttambalam, Moolavattom and Kottayam itself are remembered as ancient Jain settlement areas in the region.

⁵⁶ *Purananuru* poem 332. author Viriyur Nakkanar. *Purananuru* Poem 198. Author. Vadama Van Nakkan peri Sathanar.

⁵⁷ Hari Katel. *Op.cit.* p.55.

⁵⁸ V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar. *Silappathikaram*. Oxford University Press, London. 1939.p. 40.

⁵⁹ Ajay S. Sekhar. 2018. *Op.cit* p.111.

Buddhism in the region: Traces, Possibilities and Cultural Overlaps

Buddhism originated in the Magadha region of Northeastern India during the 6th century BC and is believed to have reached South India through Ceylonese missionaries particularly in the Tamil country with Madurai as an early centre. Evidence for the presence of Buddhism in the Madurai region is attested as early as 3rd century BC through inscriptions and architectural remains. One of the earliest sites is Pancha Pandava Malai⁶⁰ which functioned as a Buddhist monastic abode during this period. The inscriptions and architectural features of the caverns at this site closely resemble contemporary monastic establishments in Ceylon particularly in terms of script and structural design. The *Mahavamsa*, the Sri Lankan chronicle further supports this connection by recording the missionary activities of Ceylonese monks abroad. Taken together, these sources strongly suggest a well-established Buddhist presence in the Madurai region during the early historic period. To evidence from Madurai is particularly useful in establishing the early spread of Buddhism into the Kottayam region, since during the early historic period the port of Nelcynda, Purakkad was under the control of the Pandyas of Madurai, facilitating frequent contacts between the two regions and their people. It is generally believed that Buddhism spread to different parts of Kerala primarily through coastal ports, with Buddhist communities becoming especially visible in coastal towns and market centres. According to Padmakumari Amma, twenty-two sites in Kerala preserve Buddhist traditions, most of which are concentrated in the central and southern coastal regions of Kerala⁶¹. These include sites in the Kottayam region such as Kiliroor and Ramapuram as well as Neelamperoor, Srimoolavasam, Karumadi and Mavelikkara Bharanikkavu in Alappuzha district, Adoor- Pallikkal in Pathanamthitta and Karunagappilly in Kollam district.

⁶⁰ K.V Subramaniya Iyer. "The Earliest Monuments of the Pandya Country and their Inscriptions". *Proceedings and Transactions of the 3rd Oriental Conference*, Madras. 1924. pp.275-300. PC Alexander.1949. *Op.cit.* p. 27.

⁶¹ B. Padmakumari Amma. *Op.cit.* p. 15.

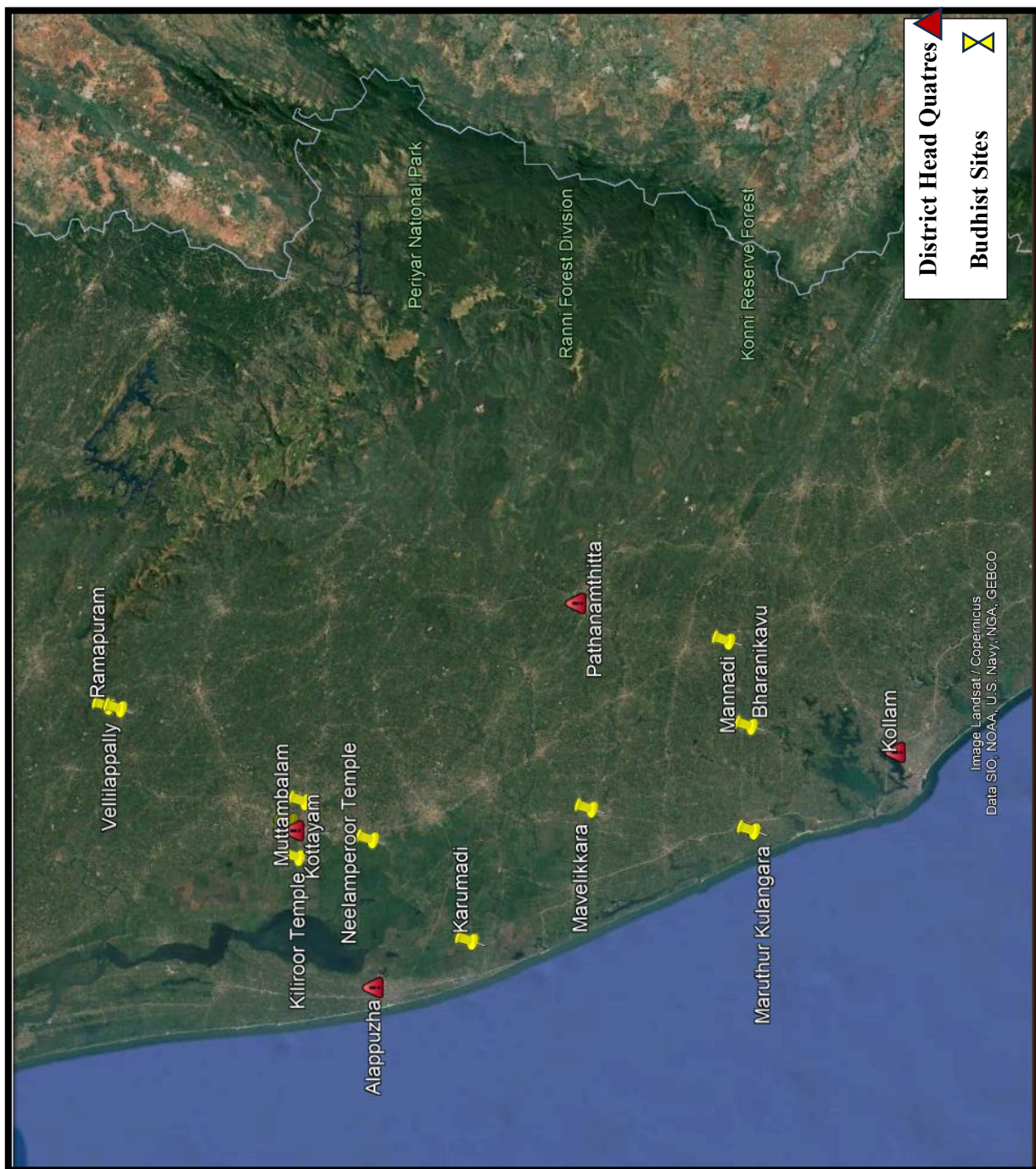


Fig - 5.2: Locations for Buddhist sites. (not in scale)

The history of Buddhism in the region is often linked to Pallibana Perumal who is traditionally regarded as a Buddhist sovereign. Historical traditions and local legends portray him as a significant figure in spread of Buddhist influence in Kerala. It is believed that during the last years of his life, he spent his time in spiritual devotion and two temples in the region are traditionally associated with this period⁶². According to the *Keralolpathy* there were twenty-five neighbouring kings once ruled over Kerala and Pallibana Perumal was one among them. The text also incorrectly claims that the Bana Perumal was brought to Kerala by brahmins from 'Bana Puram' which Logan later identified as Mamallapuram. In subsequent period, the Chera royal title 'Vanavaramban' was reinterpreted as Banavarman and this reinterpretation was adopted in some of the Malayalam translations, leading to the identification of the Chera ruler Vanavaramban with Palli Bana Perumal. P.J Thomson has further suggested that Pallibana Perumal may be identified with the Bana Varman Cheralathan the predecessor of the renowned Chera ruler Cheran Chenguttuvan⁶³.

It's commonly believed that Perumal converted to Buddhism and built temples at Kiliroor and Neelamperoor where he is said to have spent his last days in Kottayam⁶⁴. However, there are several conflicting theories and interpretations regarding the Pallibana Perumal and his religious conversion. William Logan supporting the *Keralolpathy* tradition⁶⁵ which claimed that the Perumal undertook a pilgrimage to Mecca. He mistakenly interpreted the term 'Buddha' as a reference to the Muslim Mappila of Mohommadan⁶⁶ community. K.C Cherian, by contrast, observed that the cross motif on a bronze statue from Neelamperoor resembled the St. George cross on the British Union flag and argued that the Perumal had converted to Christianity. Similarly, P.J Thomson suggested a Christian

⁶² P.C Alexander. 1949. *Op.cit.* pp.50-51.

⁶³ P.J Thomas. "Boudhayana Perumal". *Bashaposhini*. Vol. 23. 1919. p. 410.

⁶⁴ P.C Alexander. 1949. *Op.cit* p.50.

⁶⁵ Herman Gundert. *Keralolpathy*. Basel Mission Press, Mangalore. 1868.p.13.

⁶⁶ William Logan. *Malabar Manual*. Vol.1. 1887.p. 230.

affiliation citing the Portuguese author Fariya- Y- Souza⁶⁷, who recorded that the Perumal rulers of Kerala had accepted Christianity and visited the Mylapore ashrama, where the traditional burial site of St. Thomas. The Keralolpathy also states that the Perumal embraced Buddhism before departing to Mecca. Some scholars further believe that the later converted to Islam in his final years. While others such as PC. Alexander argues that the Perumal first adopted Buddhism and subsequently embraced Christianity⁶⁸.

There are many vestiges in both temples that are traditionally associated with Pallibana Perumal. It is widely believed that the Kiliroor Bhagavathi temple and the Neelamperoor temple were constructed under his patronage, with the idol said to have been brought from Kodungallur. According to P C Alexander both temples may have been built by the same architect during Perumal's reign, as they exhibit notable similarities in design and appear to be imitations of one another.

Kiliroor Kunninmel Bagavathy Temple

According to tradition the Perumal left his capital and reached Kiliroor by boat along the lake route. The village of Kiliroor is located to the west of Kottayam on the bank of the Meenachil river and it is situated on a small laterite hillock extending about five acres along the route to Thiruvapp. The presiding deity of the main temple is worshipped as Karthyayani devi, a form of *Badrakali* and the complex also contains another shrine known as *Thevarnada*. It is traditionally believed that the temple was originally a Buddhist shrine which was later converted into hindu temple during the medieval period. Evidences suggesting its Buddhist affiliation includes two ancient idols and references to the *Sapta*

⁶⁷ Farisa-Y-Souza. "Asia- Portuguesa". *Madras Journal of Literature and Science*. Vol.I.p.100. Also, P.C Alexander. "Pallibana Perumal". *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*. Vol. 10. 1947. pp. 159-163.

⁶⁸ P.C Alexander. 1949. *Op.cit* pp.56-57.

Magilar Viharas who were the female followers or dedicated nurses associated with Buddhist monastic tradition⁶⁹.

P.C. Alexander reports that the temple houses two idols in yogasana posture and both depicted beneath a bodhi tree⁷⁰. One of these idols continues to be venerated as a sub shrine of lord Krishna. However, Padmakumari Amma later identified this figure as a *panchaloha* image of Vishnu placed in the *Thevarnada* and observing that the characteristics features of the Bodhi tree are absent in this depiction⁷¹. It is believed that this idol was brought from Kodungallur for his personal use. T. K Krishna Menon further describes the temple as possessing some unique architectural features, being designed in the form of a circle within a square. He also records the presence of a clay Buddha idol preserved in separate room, kept along with an image of Annapoorneswary⁷².



Fig – 5.3: Image of Idol Kiliroor Bagavati

⁶⁹ S. Jayashanker. *Temples of Kottayam District*. Directorate of Census Operations, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. 2015. p. 292.

⁷⁰ P.C Alexander. 1949. *Op.cit* p.60.

⁷¹ B. Padmakumari Amma. *Op.cit*. p. 61.

⁷² T.K. Krishna Menon. *Speeches and Writings of Sahithyakulsan*.1932. p. 20.

The second idol, located in the back room of the temple within the compound but outside the sphere of active worship, is not the object of rituals or offerings and this section of the temple is generally closed to the public. The large idol, carved in half-relief from limestone, depicts a seated figure in a meditative posture under a bodhi tree⁷³. At the base of the idol, the inscription ‘Pallibana Perumal’ is visible. The figure is adorned with a crown, bangles and other ornaments. There is considerable scholarly debate regarding the identity of this idol. P.C Alexander identifies it as a Buddha image, describing it as a bronze idol in a yogic posture beneath a tree housed in front of a shed⁷⁴. His view is supported by Sanku Aiyar, who noted its resemblance to the ‘*sugata*⁷⁵’ idol of Neelamperoor. In contrast, Padmakumari Amma rejects the association of Kiliroor with Buddhism. She observes that the limestone idol of ‘*Pallivanavar*’ seated in *padmasana* posture beneath a Bodhi tree and adorned with royal crown, bangles and other ornaments which clearly represents not the Buddha but a royal personage⁷⁶.

Neelamperoor Palli Bagavati Temple

According to traditions, the Perumal moved from Kiliroor to Neelamperoor, where he spent his last days⁷⁷. The village of Neelamperoor is now part of Alappuzha district, is surrounded by backwaters, paddy fields and lies about 14 kilometres from Kottayam town. The temple here is still referred to as the Palli bagavati temple and the place on which it stands is locally known as ‘*Palli Padikal*’ which means gateway of the *palli*.

The Palliyil temple, dedicated to goddess Durga is located on a laterite hill. The presiding deity also known as Vanadurga (a Badrakali *Sankalpa*) is represented in the form of ‘*Sundara yakshi*’. Sanku Aiyar identified this figure as Tara, the Buddhist goddess⁷⁸,

⁷³ B. Padmakumari Amma. *Op.cit.* p.194.

⁷⁴, *Ibid.* p. 194., P.C Alexander. 1949. *Op.cit* p.60

⁷⁵ Sanku Iyer. S. *Keralavum Buddha Mathavum*. National Books Stall, Kottayam. p.51.

⁷⁶ B. Padmakumari Amma. *Op.cit.* p. 195.

⁷⁷ P.C Alexander. 1949. *Op.cit.* p.50.

⁷⁸ Sanku Iyer. S. *Op.cit.* pp.49-50.

noting the close resemblance between her iconography and that of certain hindu goddesses. M.R Raghava Varier, interpreted the image as Padmavati *Yakshi* in her *soumya* aspect, leading him to suggest that the shrine may have originally been Jain in character⁷⁹. The temple also contains a sub shrine of Vishnu which some scholars identified as the Buddha, which given the clearly visible *ushnisha*⁸⁰ on the head portion. This idol is seated in *padmasana* with closed eyes, resembling that of Avalokitesvara with hands positioned in *vitarka mudra*. Another notable feature is the shrine of a snake goddess, located in the South East corner, behind the sanctum.

Within the temple compound, on the left side there is a dilapidated structure traditionally believed to be the tomb of the Perumal. During the renovation of the temple in 1893, a bronze idol was unearthed from this spot and is identified by some as the image of the Perumal. The idol measures about nine inches height and two and half inches thick, with a one inch long cross like emblem at the centre of a string of pearls hanging from the neck. In the right hand, there appears a motif surrounded by a cross. The figure is depicted in a standing posture, holding two knobs in its hands⁸¹. According to local information, the labourers also discovered a granite cross at the head of the tomb. Another idol was reportedly found in the compound when the floor was dug, but this was thrown into the pond. P.K. Padmanabha Panikkar further records that during his study he interviewed the supervisor of the renovations, who confirmed that yet another statue had been discarded into the northern tank of the temple⁸².

Padmakumari Amma records details of two additional idols discovered in the region which one discarded into the temple pond and the other into the northern tank of the

⁷⁹ M.R. Ragava Varier. *Keraleeya Charithramanangal*. Vallathol Vidyapeetham, Sukapuram.1974. pp.21-22.

⁸⁰ B. Padmakumari Amma. *Op.cit.* p. 202.

⁸¹ P.C Alexander. 1957. *Op.cit.* pp. 159-163

⁸² P.K Padmanabha Panikkar. "Perumal Pallibanavar". *Kerala Society paper series. 3*. Thiruvananthapuram, 1950. p.148

temple⁸³. The local tradition also holds that a nearby house known as '*kottaram*' was once the residence of the Perumal. Even today, the villagers continue the custom of seeking permission from this household before conducting the annual festival known as *kettukazcha*.

Buddha idols from Ramapuram

Ramapuram is a village surrounded by the small hill ranges of Kurian Kunnu, Kottamala and Kurinji Koomban hills, situated in the Meenachil taluk about 12 km from Pala town. Two idols have been reported from this area. The first is a yellowish granite idol of the Buddha, about four feet height, discovered around ten years ago⁸⁴ at Kondad. The region is located in Ramapuram village, approximately one kilometre from the Ramapuram Sree Krishna temple.



Fig 5.4: Ramapuram Buddha Idol (Sakthan Palace TCR)

The idol was recovered from the river bed and depicts the Buddha in *padmasana* posture, with curly hair and a clearly visible *ushnisha* and *uthariya* on the head. Although it appears

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *T.A.S.* Vol. 1 Part. II. No.22. p.50.

as a torso, both arms and the left legs are damaged⁸⁵. Based on its sculptural features, Padmakumari Amma dated this image to the 9th century AD⁸⁶. The idol is now preserved in the Thrissur Museum. The local Bagavati temple, associated with the *yakshi* cult is also linked in popular belief to the Buddha image, with traditions claiming that the Ramapuram Buddha was once used in the ritual *Jalanimanjam*.

The second idol was a head-like figure discovered at Vellilapally, near Ramapuram on a private property. It came to light in 2019 when the owner dismantled an old stone wall in order to construct a new wall. During the field exploration the author also recorded several place names in the region that indicate possible Buddhist association. Interestingly the name Vellilapally and Pallikkandam where the idol was found are linked with the term Palli, which in early usages referred to Buddhist or Jain shrines. In addition, nearby localities bear the names such as Palliyampuram Pallipparambu and Amanakara further strengthening the association.

Ramapuram is also surrounded by a number of temples that show possible connections with Buddhist or Jain traditions. The Sree Dharmasatha temple at Kondad is traditionally believed by villagers to be very ancient though actually dated to build in 16th century AD, which enshrines a deity in seated *padmasana* with two arms, the right hand raised and the left hand placed on the knee. The accompanying deities include his consort Sree Praba seated to the left and his son Sree Sathyaka Kumaran to the right. Interestingly in Jain iconography, the *yakshas* are usually placed on the right side and *yakshis* on the left. These suggest possible influence of Jainism in the temple and this temple also contains *naga* idols with raised hoods. Similarly, the Palliyamburam Mahadeva temple at Ramapuram enshrine a mutilated *sila linga* identified as Siva⁸⁷ along with the other deities such as *nagaraja* in seated posture with raised hood and a mirror type *yakshi* and

⁸⁵ B. Padmakumari Amma. *Op.cit.* p.30.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.196.

⁸⁷ S. Jayashanker. *Op.cit.* p. 157.

Brahmarakshas. Local belief attributes the foundation of this temple to Parasurama, though its features suggest older layers of worship.

The next place name Amanakara, is also important as the term *amana* has Buddhist affiliation. A potsherd inscribed with the word ‘*amana*’ was found during the excavation at Pattanam⁸⁸, which provides an interesting parallel. Moreover, numerous place names in the wider Ramapuram region such as Palliyamburam, Pallikkandam, Vellilappilly Monippally and Kattampack preserve the *palli* element. Taken together, these finds and toponyms strongly suggest that Ramapuram and its surrounding area once had a significant Buddhist affiliation.



Fig 5.5: Vellilapally Buddha Idol

Unreported Buddha Idols

Other than these reported sites, three unreported locations have also been found out from the Kottayam region. Edamaruk in his famous work, recorded the discovery of two idols from Kottayam town. One was accidentally unearthed at the site of the Ambassador hotel in front of Kottayam general hospital and the other from the premises of a private clinic opposite B.C.M College Kottayam. According to Edamaruk, these finds were likely

⁸⁸ *Unearthing Pattanam*. Catalogue for the 2014 Exhibition. KCHR, Publication. Thiruvananthapuram p.31.

remnants of a Buddhist vihara like structure. Unfortunately, no further evidence has been documented to substantiate these arguments.

The third site is at Muttambalam, first reported by Sanku Iyer. The area was originally inhabited by three brahmin families who maintained a sastha temple. Later, the entire property, including the sastha temple was sold to a christian family, who subsequently removed the idol from its original place and abandoned it. After some years, disputes arose between the two families. The idol which depicts the deity in dhyana mudra has been noted by both Edamaruk and Sanku Iyer who also suggest that the actual name of the place was Thrighauthamapuram, indicating a possible Buddhist connection. The present name Muttambalam is said to derive from the hemispherical shape of the *srikovil*. The rest of the temple was renovated in later periods.

Beyond the sculptural evidence, local traditions and place names also suggest the Buddhist affiliations, particularly through the recurring use of the term Palli. Many of the sites where idols have been found are associated with this element. In the Ramapuram region, for instance one idol was discovered from the Vellilapally and another at Pallikkandam. Nearby lies the locality of Amana kara. According to Iravatham Mahadevan, the word *Amana* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Sramana* and Tamil *Chamana* which the terms historically used to denote Jain ascetics⁸⁹. Thus, Amanakara is believed to be derived from *Sramanakara* which suggests that it may once have been an ancient settlement of a sramanic religious community. Similarly, at Neelamperoor, the presiding deity is still referred to as Palliyil bagavati while Perinjanathu Pallikkal remains the name of a prominent family living near by the temple.

Beyond the sculptural evidence and local traditions in the Kottayam region, several finds from neighbouring areas are also relevant to this study. One of the most significant is the famous ‘Karumadi Buddha’, regarded as the first recorded discovery of a Buddha

⁸⁹ Iravatham Mahadevan. *Op.cit.* p.563.

idol in Kerala. The idol popularly known as ‘Karumadikuttan’ is carved from black granite and was found in the village of Karumadi, located about four kilometres east of Alappuzha, a region largely dominated by paddy cultivation. The statue was discovered from a water canal which is locally known as ‘Karumadi Thodu’. The idol measuring about three feet in height, the image is now preserved on a masonry pedestal in a dry setting and remains under worship. The Buddha is depicted in yogasana posture with an *ushnisha* or *jvala* and a three-dimensional oval shaped protrusion found at the top of the head, symbolising spiritual enlightenment is clearly visible. Traces of an upper garment draped across the chest are also discernible. Based on these stylistic features, the image has been dated to around the 8th AD⁹⁰.



Fig 5.6: Karumadi Buddha idol and Temple (Website: way of Bodhi)

According to the local tradition, the Karumadi kuttan was originally a *parayan* who was transformed into stone⁹¹. For generations, the people worshiped the figure as a local deity, unaware of its Buddhist identity⁹². K.P. Padmanabha Menon wrongly identified this

⁹⁰ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai. *Studies in Kerala History*. National Books Stall, Kottayam. 1970. p. 180.

⁹¹ A. Sreedhara Menon. *Kerala Gazetteers Alleppey*. Trivandrum. 1975. pp.605-606.

⁹² According to villagers, in 1965 the Dalai Lama visited this place and offered some money for the construction of a stupa to preserve the statue.

image as a Jaina sculpture⁹³. A popular local belief further holds that the idol was once attacked by an elephant which caused the destruction of its left hand, a portion that currently is missing.

Following Karumadi, the Buddha idols of Mavelikkara and Bharanikkavu are among the most prominent discoveries. The Mavelikkara Buddha was found within a compound near the traveller's bungalow and is now preserved at Buddha junction close to the Sree Krishna temple in Mavelikkara. The idol is believed to have originally come from the temple pond of Kandiyoor Mahadeva temple. It is in a seated position, measuring about three feet high. In the photographs it is clearly visible the *ushnisha* and *Jvala* and traces of upper cloths across the chest⁹⁴. Although the image had been neglected for nearly two decades, it has recently regained ritual attention with devotees offering milk and flowers. The figures hands are positioned in dhyana mudra resting on the lap with the back of the right hand placed in the palm of the left hand⁹⁵.

The place Bharanikkavu is located about 8kilometers south of Mavelikkara in Alappuzha district. Within the Pallikkara Bagavathy temple compound stands a Buddha idol, approximately 3 feet in height seated in *badrasana* posture on the northern side of the temple compound⁹⁶. Its idol was reportedly discovered in the temple pond around 200 years ago and it is dated around 8th century AD⁹⁷. The local people called it Ilanjimootil Kanthan Kumaran. T.A. Gopinatha Rao, described the image as very elegantly executed and well preserved. The statue displays clearly visible features such as *ushnisha*, *jvala* and *uthariya* closely resembling the Mavelikkara Buddha. The upper robe is folded and draped over the shoulder which is a characteristic commonly observed in Kerala's Buddha sculpture.

⁹³ K.P. Padmanabha Menon. *A History of Kerala*. Cochin Government Press, Ernakulam. 1924. p.105.

⁹⁴ *T.A.S.* Vol. II. p.122 P.C Alexander. 1949. *Op.cit.* p. 70.

⁹⁵ P.C Alexander. 1949. *Ibid.* p.70.

⁹⁶ B. Padmakumari Amma. *Op.cit.* p. 206.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p.39.

Another Buddha image discovered at Pallikkal in Adoor also bears strong resemblance to the Bharanikkavu idol.



Fig 5.7: Mavelikkara Buddha and Worshipping Centre (Website: way of Bodhi)

The Pathanamthitta district also provides evidence of two Buddha idol discovered in its coastal region at Pallikkal in Adoor and at Mannadi. The Pallikkal Buddha is locally known as ‘Pallikkal Putharachan’ is a headless Buddha image⁹⁸ which recovered from a pond named Putharkulam. In a locality called Putharkattu, a name believed to have a Jain association. The site is located about 11 km west of Adoor in Pathanamthitta. The idol depicts a seated figure in *padmasana* posture with a clearly visible *ushnisha*. The lotus pedals are carved in low relief and the drapery is shown extending over the ankles, chest and the shoulders. A folded portion of the cloth is thrown over the left shoulder and descends down the chest. Based on these stylistic features, the Padmakumari Amma has dated the image to the 8th century AD. The Archaeology department later fixed a new head of the statue, which is now preserved in the Thiruvananthapuram Museum⁹⁹.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p.207.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p.209.

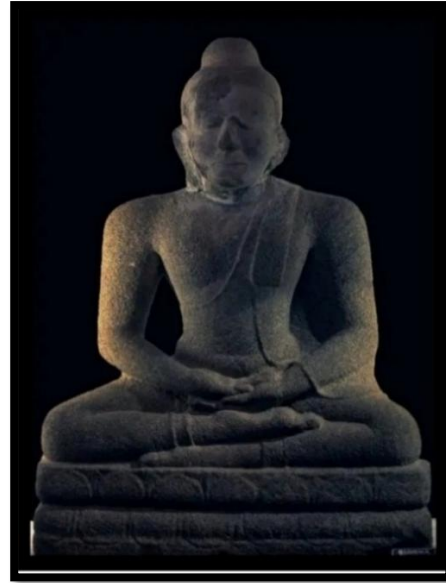


Fig 5.8: Bharanikkavu Buddha. Fig 5.9: Kunnathoor Buddha (Website: way of Bodhi)

The Mannadi Buddha was discovered by sand miners in the Kallada river. Initially it was placed on open ground near the Thazhathu Kulakkada public library, it was later taken over by the Archaeological department and is now kept at the Veluthambi Dalava memorial in Manadi. The statue measures about two feet in height and is seated in *ardhapadmasana* posture. It displays an *ushnisha*, elongated earlobes with earrings and a meditation belt, although the right hand is broken.



Fig 5.10: Manadi Buddha Fig 5.11: Maruthurkulangara Buddha (Courtesy: way of Bodhi)

Srimoolavasam

The Srimoolavasam is traditionally believed as a sacred Buddhist centre located on the Western Coast of Kerala¹⁰⁰, though its precise location and historical background remain the subject of debate among the historians. References to Srimoolavasam appear in three important sources. First, according to Monsieur Foucher a Buddha idol and an inscription were discovered in the Gandara region bearing the phrase ‘*Lokanatha of Mulavasa*’¹⁰¹. Secondly, a copper plate inscription dated to 30th December 868 AD, issued by Vikramaditya Varaguna of the Vrishnikula dynasty, provides another reference. It written in both Tamil and Sanskrit, the Tamil portion is lost, but surviving sanskrit section begins with an invocation of ‘*Suddodam, the Dharma and the Sanga*’ and records a land grant made by the ruler of Vikramaditya Varaguna to the *Bhattarika* of Srimoolavasam.

The *Mushakavamsa Kavya* offers yet another reference to Srimoolavasam through two passages. This first recounts the action of the Mushaka king Vikramaraman, who sought to protect the temple from sea encroachment by strengthening the shoreline with throwing large stone blocks. The temple is names refers to as dedicated to the Jina (Buddha)¹⁰². The second passage describes king Vallabha’s visit to Mulavasa¹⁰³ during his southern campaign against the Cholas, identifying the site as a sacred religious town dedicated to *Sugata*¹⁰⁴. Taken together, these sources strongly suggest that Buddhism once had a significant presence at Srimoolavasam and that the site functions as an important religious and cultural centre on Western Coast¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰⁰ T.A.S. Vol.II.p.117.

¹⁰¹ Monsieur Foicher. L. *Iconographie Bouddhique*. part. I. Paris Ernest Leroux, 1900. p.105.

¹⁰² T.A.S. Vol. II p.106.

¹⁰³ V. Narayana Pillai. “The Problem of the Location of Srimoolavasam. The Famous Buddhist Vihara of South India”. *Proceedings of Indian History Congress, Vol. 8*.1945. p.405.

¹⁰⁴ T.A.S. Vol. II. p.116.

¹⁰⁵ T.A.S. II.p.123. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai. *Chila Kerala Charithra Prasnangal*. National Book Stall, Kottayam. 1955. pp.223-224, MGS Narayanan.1996. *Op.cit.* p.337.

Discussion and Conclusion

This section presents a detailed discussion and analysis of the post- Sangam period in the Meenachil river basin. As discussed in the previous chapter, the trade during this era brought transformative effects in not merely the exchange of goods and commodities, but also the movement of people, ideas and cultural practices. In this context traders, merchants and intermediaries often settled in the port centres to facilitate commercial activities. The inscriptional evidence from the Madurai region suggests that many of these settlers were adherents of Buddhism and Jainism¹⁰⁶. A similar pattern is visible across Kerala, where Jainism appears to have been more firmly rooted in the inland trade centres and hill slopes while Buddhism maintained more prominence in coastal port towns.

By the early centuries of Common era at the height of Indo Roman trade, both religions likely maintained regular contact with the Kottayam region eventually developing into settled communities. In the post Sangam period, their followers may have formed a significant part of the population attracting new adherents through religious missions. During the post Sangam period these communities established monasteries, produced sculptural works and left toponymic traces in the landscape. However, the rise of brahmin settlements as dominant political powers coupled with spread of *Bhakti* oriented hindu movements, led to the gradual decline of sramanic institutions and the abandonment and destruction of many of their settlements. In some areas, elements of Jain and Buddhist heritage were absorbed into emerging brahminical temples with sculptures, shrines, architectural features and even certain customs being adapted to the hinduism

The primary objective of this chapter is to trace the presence of Jain and Buddhist traditions in the Meenachil region. The origins of both of the religions in South India can be traced back to the 3rd century BC with their early activities centred in the Madurai region, which was one of the most influential trades cum political capital centres in South India.

¹⁰⁶ Iravatham Mahadevan. *Op.cit.* pp.15, 126,127.

The Jainism in the Kerala mainly traceable through archaeological and epigraphic signatures such as rock shelters with Jain reliefs, Tamil Brahmi inscriptions and iconography along the inland trade routes such as Wayanad, Palakkad and Chitharal while Buddhism appears to have arrived mainly through maritime trade links with port of Muziris, Bacare and Nelcynda and archaeologically less visible in Kerala but survives through structural remnants and idols of Buddha.

Coming to the literary evidence, both religions are references indirectly in Sangam works, texts. One of the important is the concept of *Vadakkirikkal* which is sitting facing north to voluntary fast unto death. The poem about Cheraman Perumcheralathan says like

Since the ruler with martial courage is sitting facing north

With his sword, to die embarrassed that he took a wound

On this back from a spear thrown to his front by king¹⁰⁷.

And this same mentioned in *Akananuru* poem as king Cheralathan who lost to Karikal Valavan in the battle of Venni, sat facing north and starved to death¹⁰⁸. Another *Purananuru* song sang to Chozhan Karikal Peruvalathan (Karikalan) also mention this *vadakkirikkal* as

He is better person than you, the king who sat

Facing north to die, ashamed of the battle wound on

His back, who attained great fame in this world¹⁰⁹.

This *vadakkirikkal* is a practice of fast unto death is a Jain practice akin to *Sallekhana* and some of the rulers especially Chera rulers followed this. Another one is the reflection of four-fold noble truth of suffering of Buddhism indirectly mentioned in the

¹⁰⁷ Vaidehi Herbert. *Purananuru* Poem.65. Sangam Poetry Translation Website. Hawaii. USA

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* Poem.55.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* Poem. 66.

Purananuru poem¹¹⁰. Rather than these indirect connections there were very limited reflections of Jainism and Buddhism in the Sangam works. And it may be due to the infant stage of both religions in the Sangam period. and also, there is a chance to the purposeful elimination of the references by the later followers of hinduism.

Apart from Sangam works, the distribution of archaeological and epigraphical materials is particularly significant. Jainism is attested through Tamil Brahmi inscriptions from the rock shelters and cave temples of Madurai regions which record the activities of Jain monks, donors and merchants. This suggests that Jain ascetics settled along inland trade corridors and received support from local mercantile communities. In Kerala such routes passed through Wayanad, Palakkad and Chitharal where both inscriptional and archaeological remains such as *basadis*, temples and sculptural fragments have been found. In the case of Kottayam, the eastern part of the district functioned as a corridor linking the Western Ghats to Coastal port centres. Here too archaeological traces survive in the form of Jain affiliated *Naga*, *Yakshi Yakha* cult representations, along with inscriptional references to titles such as *Bhattaraka* and the position of the *Khadika Sthanam* which point to an established Jain presence. In contrast, Buddhism was more firmly rooted in the coastal belt with notable sites including Kiliroor, Neelamperoor, Mavelikkara, Karumadi, Adoor. The distribution of evidence suggests that Buddhist communities flourished near port towns and riverine centres closely connected to maritime trade. The most visible archaeological remains are Buddha idols discovered across several coastal and riverine sites particularly in southern Kerala which highlights the association between Buddhism and commercial urban networks of the western coast.

The local stories and local traditions are also important while discussing the presence of Jainism and Buddhism in the Kottayam. The oral traditions including the etymological connections, place names are very popular in the region. The Jain connections

¹¹⁰ T. Mahadeva Menon. *Handbook of Kerala*. ISDL, Thiruvananthapuram.2002. pp.138-140.

with the name Kottam *ayam*, *Cahngam*- Changanassery, Chinga vanam, Nagam-Nagambadam, Kumaran- Kumaranalloor and the plenty of places which have the palli. Interestingly the place name Amanakara is similar to a Tamil Brahmi potsherd recovered from the Pattanam from a storage jar having 5 letters ‘*ama na*’ as *sramana* also connection to Jainism and the Amana kara is surrounded by a number of places having the name palli. The recent studies about palli are affiliated with Jainism and the inscriptional evidence suggest that the *Pallis* were Jain hermitages.

Buddhism in the local traditions is mainly connected with the idols. The stories were more or less about the discoveries of idols, heads of Buddha, remnants of *viharas* in the region. People believed that many more idols were still under water bodies such as ponds, canals and river Meenachil, Vembanad lakes. And regionally there were many incidents connected to this like, people having evidence for the parts of idols which they saw during the time of underwater diving, at the time of summer, when the water is very low. So local traditions and stories were attesting their presence in the region.

During the field exploration, the present author observed that the lowlands of the Kottayam region particularly along the Kottayam Alappuzha border regions contain a number of islands locally known as ‘*Thuruth*’. Interestingly many of these islands preserve ancient groves or sacred sites that are presently associated with hinduism. Local traditions often connect these sites with the presence of *Rishis*, *Sages* and *Sannyasis*, which may suggest an earlier association with Jain or Buddhist traditions.

The traces of Jainism and Buddhism can be identified even in the cultural assimilations also. These are visible in the festivals in the temples especially *Kettukazcha*. Fa-Hien in his journey to India between 399-412 AD wrote about the Buddhism and Buddhist places in India among them he mentioned a festival in Pataliputra a region where Buddhism flourished. According to him,

‘Regularly every year on the eight days of the second moon they have a procession of images. They make a four wheeled car of five stories by lashing together bamboos, and these stories are supported by posts in the form of crescent laded halberds. The car is over twenty feet in height and in form like a pagoda.... They make images of Devas ornamented with gold, silver and four sides they make niches each with a Buddha sitting inside and a bodhisattva in attendance. There may be some twenty cars, all beautifully ornamented and different from one another’¹¹¹.

This same festival happens in many of the temples in Kerala especially in the Central Kerala region where Buddhism once flourished. *Kettukazcha* is an annual festival and a grand offering to the deity as well as a symbol of community pride and cultural heritage. Scholars believe that the tradition may have originated from Buddhist practices as its style of celebrations is different from the conventional hindu rituals.



Fig 5.12: Chettikkulangara Kettukazcha (Courtesy: Benyamin)

¹¹¹ H.A. Giles. *Fa-Hien account*. (Tr.) Cambridge University Press. 1923.p.47.

The architectural forms of *Kettukazcha* are similar to the architecture of Buddha tradition in square, rectangular and pyramid shaped structures¹¹². During the festival, the deity is carried on a decorated elephant accompanied by symbolic representation of horse and a chariot which are often interpreted as alluding to the Buddhist four-fold path. The people from different *Karas* (local region, islands) were brought to towering bamboo structures ranging in height from 25 to 150 feet. Among them smaller ones are called *Theru* (cars) and larger ones are known as *Kuthira* (horse)¹¹³. This festival bears striking similarity to the Buddhist festival described by the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hiens in Pataliputra, further highlighting its Buddhist roots.



Fig 5.13: Neelamperoor Padayani

Secondly, *Padayani* which means ‘line of infantry’ is a significant ritual festival performed in the Badrakali temples of Central Travancore. Among its various forms, the Neelamperoor *Padayani* stands out as unique and shows close resemblance to the *Kettukazcha*. In this festival, grand processions feature elaborately decorated effigies of

¹¹² P.C Alexander. 1949. *Op.cit.* pp.165-166.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

swans and elephants, which form the central attractions. Tradition holds that the festival originates to commemorate the arrival of Cheraman Perumal at Neelamperoor, and even today it begins with a symbolic sanction in the name of Cheraman Perumal¹¹⁴.

Over centuries, many festivals, ceremonies and art forms in Kerala came to reflect a long process of cultural adaptation and transformation. In their earliest forms, they carried remnants of older Buddhist and Jain ritualistic elements that once flourished in the region. Over centuries, such practices gradually declined with the decline of these *sramanic* religions and many of them reinterpreted, absorbed and given new meanings with the rise of brahminical hinduism.

Co-existence of the religions

During the field explorations and studies, the author observed the possibilities of the co-existence of the religions or sudden overlapping of Buddhism on Jainism. The both traditions were spread along the trade routes in the early Historic period and both had support from the same mercantile and artisan communities. Even though the philosophical and ritual practices were different, both of them emphasise on monastic institutions, non-violence and renunciation. So, several regions appear to have accommodated both Jain *pallis* and Buddhist *Viharas* in close proximity, with little evidence of sectarian conflicts. In Kerala, today the only region showing clear traces of both Jain and Buddhist affiliation is the Muziris Kodungallur and Mathilakam region. The Thrikkanamathilakam traditionally believed as the residence of Ilanko Adikal while composing the *Silappathikaram* and it functioned as Jain centre and Kodungallur has yielded evidence of Buddhist presence, including two Buddha images reported in recent years. One is a headless Buddha idol from Kottappuram region and second one is recovered from the pond of the Neeleswaram temple¹¹⁵ near Pattanam. Kodungallur is also identified with the ancient Buddhist centre of

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Ajay Sekhar. 2018. *Op.cit.* p.268.

Vanchi. Furthermore, the Neelamperoor Palliyil Bagavati temple is believed to be connected with the Palliyil Bagavati temple at Perinjanam near Mathilakam. However, these findings suggest that both Jain and Buddhist centres once coexisted in the wider Kodungallur Pattanam region.

The findings of present study shows that the Kottayam region reflects traces of both religious affiliations. Two possible explanations may account for this (i) periodical religious shifts and (ii) similarities between the two religions that helped their co-existence. By periodical changes it may be assumed that Jainism reached the region first, possibly through migration from Madurai area during the early centuries of Common era, coinciding with the flourishing of early historic trade. Buddhism, on the other hand, appears to have spread later, most likely arriving from Sri Lanka via coastal routes. The evidence for Jainism in Kerala remains sparse and iconographic and inscriptional material is minimal, especially in early historic trade centres such as Kottayam, Pattanam and Kodungallur region. This scarcity may be attributed to Jainism's initial phase, when idol worship was not strongly emphasised.

The extent of Jain inscriptions and material remains in Kerala largely date from after the 8th century AD¹¹⁶. In contrast Buddhism in Kerala, also lacking significant inscriptional evidence and it is represented by a relatively larger number of sculptures and images. This suggests that Buddhist presence became more prominent during the later Sangam period, when they began their religious congregations beyond purely- trade related contexts. Adding to this, the expansion of Buddhism into the Kollam region, which developed into a major medieval trading port centre likely contributed to its greater visibility and prosperity in later centuries compared to Jainism.

¹¹⁶ The Jain affiliated inscriptions such as Kinalur inscription calculated as 1083 AD., Thiruvannur inscription dated 1044AD. MGS Narayanan. 1996. *Op.cit.* pp. 465, 484.

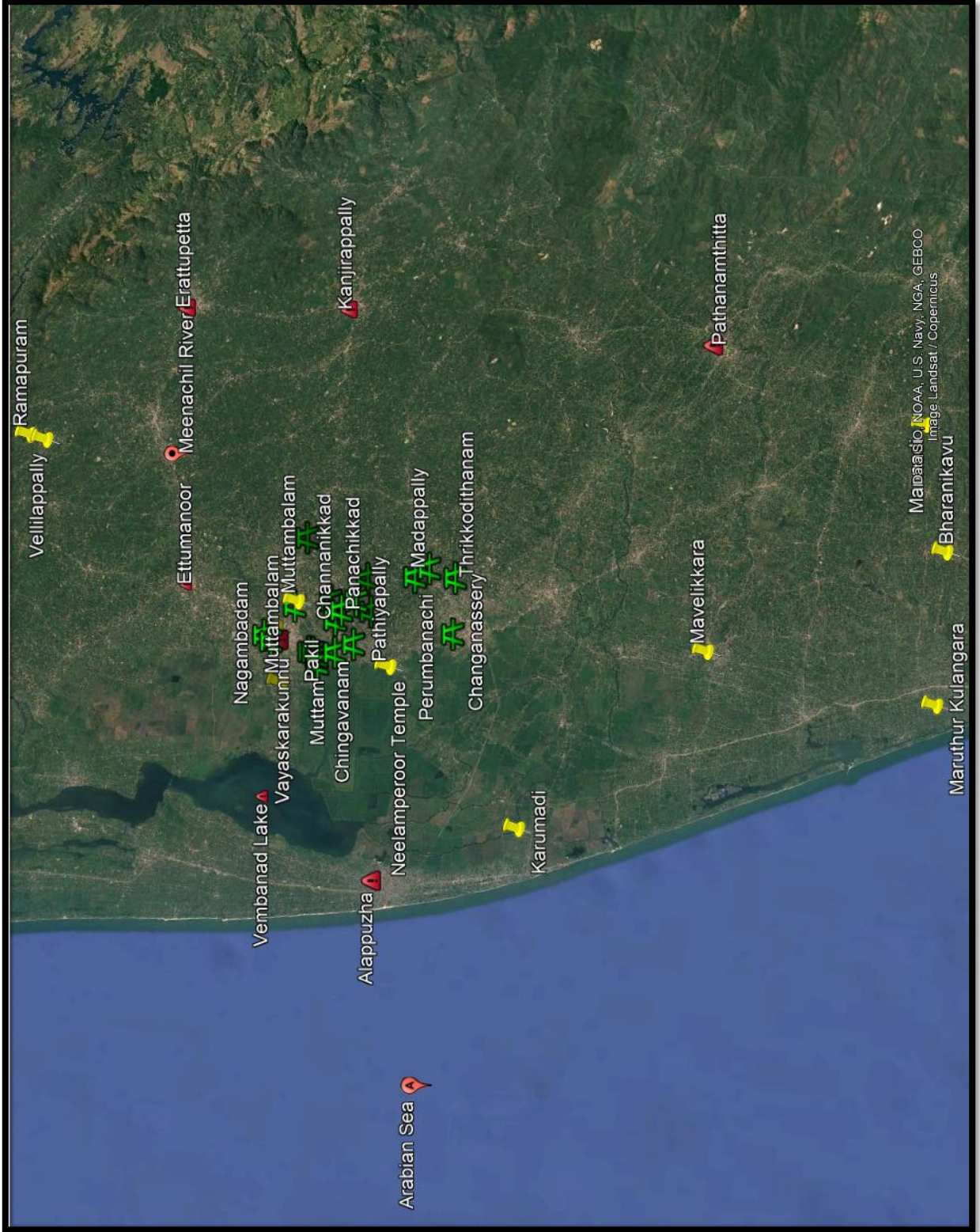


Fig 5.14 Jain and Buddhist Centres in Western Coast. (not in scale)

From Prominence to Margin.

The early centuries of the Common Era witnessed the spread of Jainism and Buddhism into the region, facilitated largely by trade networks and emerging market centres. However, by the pre-mediaeval period itself their influences had gradually begun to decline from the region. According to historians, they attribute this decline to the introduction of Brahmin settlements and growing dominance of temple centred hinduism¹¹⁷. Yet this was not to the outcome of a single event but rather a long gradual historical process shaped by multiple factors. Broadly three interrelated causes can be identified for this decline. Firstly, both traditions were facing internal challenges within their own communities. Secondly the establishment of brahmin settlements, and the consolidation of temple centred hinduism and thirdly, the wider socio-economic and political transformations in the period.

Internal Challenges: It is already discussed that both Jainism and Buddhism initially flourished in the region through their close association with trade networks, as many of their adherents were prominent in commerce, exchanges, and long-distance transactions. The accumulation of wealth within these communities gradually led to a more luxurious lifestyle, which in turn weakened the original ascetic and philosophical ideologies of their traditions and it led to diminished the credibility of these missionaries. With the subsequent decline of major trade centres such as Muziris and Bacare, many of the trading communities migrated to other regions, markets, causing a detachment of followers and halting the growth of these religions locally. In addition to the decline in trade, internal doctrinal changes also contributed to their weakening. Practices such as idol worship, rituals and ceremonies are absent in the original teachings but they become more widespread among the monks and nuns which leads to a loss of ideological purity. Furthermore, a number of monks and nuns were attracted by the customs and traditions of hinduism which gradually

¹¹⁷ Kesavan Veluthatt. (1978) 2013 *Op.cit.* p.168.

assimilated to it. It created further fragmentation within their communities. By the medieval period, the arrival and increasing prominence of Jews, Syrian Christians and Arabs in regional trade further displaced Buddhist and Jaina communities from their earlier commercial dominations.

Rise of Brahmin settlements and temple centred hinduism: From the Sangam period onwards, waves of brahmin migrations spread across Kerala¹¹⁸ and from 7th century itself bringing with them new religious and cultural practice. This process did not simply displace Jainism and Buddhism from the region, but gradually transformed the religious landscape. The people were attracted to hinduism with its spiritual flexibility and socially integrative character rather than the stricter monastic traditions of the sramanic religions. The rise of the bhakti movement often described as an ‘intoxicating devotion’¹¹⁹ posed a major challenge to Jainism and Buddhism as its emotive narratives, devotional stories and ritual practices deeply appealed to the masses. Hinduism also easily integrated with the local deities, traditions and even the ancestral worships, thereby creating a religious system that was both inclusive and culturally resonant. In contrast the more rigid philosophical and monastic frameworks of Jainism and Buddhism struggled to sustain popular support.

Changes in the Socio- Economic Sphere: The rise of bhakti movements gradually reshaped land relations, religious patronages and economic structures which contributed to the reorganisation of society. Socially, Kerala moved towards a feudal mode of organisation, marked by rigid hierarchies based on birth and occupation, which provided stability and recognition to certain groups¹²⁰. The temples became the central institution of this order not only as a place of worship but also as a community hub for festivals, redistribution of resources, education and even local administrations. Economically, this temple centred society facilitated the expansion of brahmin settlements and their agrarian

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.40.

¹¹⁹ B. Padmakumari Amma. *Op.cit.* p.247.

¹²⁰ Kesavan Veluthat. *Op.cit.* p.29.

production. The land grants and donations that had previously been received by the Jain Buddhist *Sanga's* and monasteries were redirected to the hindu temples, making them prosperous. This withdrawal of patronage placed a heavy financial burden on Jain Buddhist institutions and led to neglect and eventual destruction. Over time, Jain Buddhist followers migrated to other regions and several abodes were either destroyed or converted to hinduism.

Politically, the rulers begun to favour brahminic tradition mainly due to its elite patronage and political legitimacy. By inviting brahmins and supporting their temples, rulers gained access to substantial economic resources as well as greater control over the lands and agrarian productions, which made them more integrated with the local society. Royal performance of rituals such as *yagas*, *yaknjas* and coronations further provided more divine sanctions for their authority and reinforced their political power. However, this gradual process shaped by internal weakness of Jainism and Buddhism, the growing dominance of Brahmin settlements and wider socio-economic political changes led to the decline of these religions from the region. As the royal patronages and popular support were shifted towards brahminical orders, Jainism and Buddhism lost their institutional base and eventually absorbed into emerging hindu cultures.

After the decline of Jainism and Buddhism, their followers were largely assimilated into prevailing hindu social orders. Some groups may migrate in to other market centres and a few have returned to their original homelands. Historians generally agree that the majority of them eventually became part of hindu society. According to M.G.S Narayanan, the Jain community was absorbed into the nair community¹²¹, while Ragava Varier suggests they may have converted into the *vaniya* sub-caste¹²² of nair who were traditionally oil trades in Kerala. In the case of Buddhism, William Logan in his Malabar Manual described

¹²¹ MGS Narayanan. 1972. *Op.cit.* Introduction part. p. ix.

¹²² M.R. Raghava Varier. 1974. *Op.cit.* p.22.

that the present day *Ezhava* traces their routes to migrants from *Ezham* or Sri Lanka, who were originally Buddhist. Thus, the decline of these religions did not erase their followers but rather integrated them into diverse hindu communities within the region.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the post Sangam period in the Meenachil region with a particular focus on the presence and traces of Jain Buddhist tradition. The study suggests that a population of Jain and Buddhist communities existed in the region after the early historic trade. Field observations further suggest that several temples in the area preserve affiliation to these Jainism and Buddhism. The motifs such as Jain *Yaksha Yakshi* figures and *Nagas*'s cult remain prominent within Hindu temples, with some of them still carrying older remnants. But due to some limitations, these elements could not be examined in detail. The place names associated with *palli* which is a term linked to Jain and Buddhist establishments were also located, marking potential sites of *sramanic* religions. In the case of Buddhism, oral traditions collected during the field study reveal that villagers have plenty of stories and events to connect with Buddhism. Many of them believed that the ponds, wells and water channels in the region once contained Buddha idols, indicating a lingering cultural memory of its presence.

From the present study, it may be inferred that both Jainism and Buddhism possibly coexisted or overlapped in the region. However, archaeological evidence more clearly confirms the presence of Buddhism, and direct material evidence for Jainism remains very limited. To address this gap, the study also draws on comparative data from neighbouring sites to understand the broader distribution and dynamics of these religious settlements within a wider regional framework. As an active trade centre, Kottayam likely attracted merchant guilds, traveling monks and religious patrons who contributed to the spread of heterodox faiths like Jainism and Buddhism. The presence of early historic trades routes, combined with archaeological and epigraphic traces, makes the argument strong.

GLOSSERY

<i>Abhya Mudra</i>	Hand posture indicative of assurance of offering protection.
<i>Agrahara</i>	Brahmin household
<i>Amana</i>	Senior Jain monk
<i>Atikal</i>	Terms of respect, king or God
<i>Bhattaraka</i>	King, deity or learned Monk
<i>Bhuta</i>	Dwarf figure
<i>Brahmaswam</i>	Land granted to the brahmins
<i>Chattan</i>	Pupils or disciples
<i>Cheraman</i>	Chera ruler
<i>Devaswam</i>	Land granted to the temple
<i>Dhyana Mudra</i>	Hand posture, palms are placed one above another on the lap
<i>Iduvor</i>	Those who exposed (the dead body)
<i>Kollan</i>	Iron smith
<i>Koothu</i>	A temple art
<i>Lalitasana</i>	Sitting posture of ease in which one leg is folded, rest flat on the seat and the other hangs down gracefully from the seat.
<i>Mukkalvattom</i>	Circular temple
<i>Nannangadi</i>	Urn burial
<i>Natukal</i>	Menhir

<i>Padmasana</i>	Lotus posture with legs crosses and both soles visible
<i>Palli</i>	Non vedic shrines
<i>Pallichandam</i>	Land grants to Jain institutions
<i>Pon kolavan</i>	Gold smith
<i>Sanga</i>	Community of the pious
<i>Sangam</i>	Early Tamil literature
<i>Saptamathrikas</i>	Seven Mother goddesses
<i>Sramana</i>	Jain
<i>Sutuvor</i>	Those who cremate (the dead body)
<i>Thoppikkallu</i>	Cap stone
<i>Thurai</i>	Coastal settlement unit
<i>Umanar</i>	Salt makers
<i>Ur</i>	Agrarian village
<i>Ushnisha</i>	A cranial protuberance on top of head of Buddha
<i>Uthariya</i>	Loose piece of upper body cloths over idol
<i>Vadakkirikkal</i>	A practice of death by starvation
<i>Varada Mudra</i>	Hand posture, indicative of conferring boon
<i>Vatteluth</i>	Ancient script used for writing old Malayalam
<i>Velir</i>	Hill chieftains
<i>Vellalar</i>	Cultivators

APPENDIX I

LIST OF RESEARCH PAPERS PUBLISHED AND PRESENTED BY THE PRESENT RESEARCH SCHOLAR

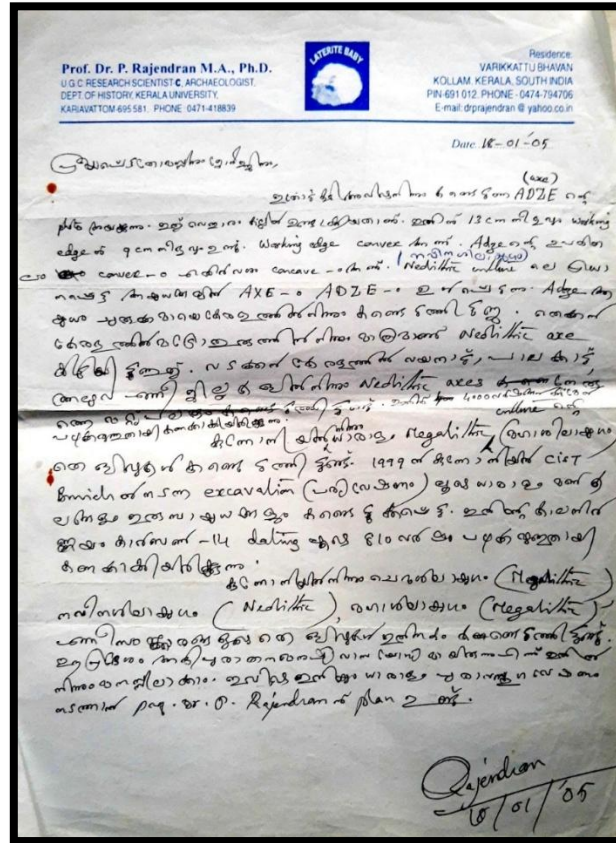
Published Research Papers

1. Aparna K R. “*Megalithic Burials as Cult Spots and Temples: A Study on the Meenachil River Basin, Kottayam, Kerala*” South Indian History Congress. 41(2023) ISSN No.:2229-3671.
2. Aparna K R. “*Iron Age-Megalithic Findings in Ettumanoor Region, Kottayam District, Kerala.*” Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology. Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala 10 (2022-23. pp.327-336. ISSN 2347 – 5463.

Presentations

1. Presentation on “*Megalithic Burials as Cult Spots and Temples: A Study on the Meenachil River Basin, Kottayam, Kerala*” South Indian History Congress. August 26-28, 2022 at G.T.N Arts College. Dindigul, Tamilnadu.
2. Poster presented entitled ‘*Representation Factors of Megalithic Landscape, A Case Study of Kottayam Region, Kerala*’ in National Seminar on Recent Research in Indian Archaeology. Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala. 19-22 June, 2023.
3. One day Historical Workshop: as resource person on ‘*Unearthing Indias Past; Archaeological excavation experience from Khatiya and Pattanam*’ Conducted by Research & PG Department of History. N. S. S. College Manjeri. November 04-2022.

APPENDIX II



പുരാതന നവീന സംസ്കാരത്തിന്റെ തെളിവുകൾ വീണ്ടും കുന്നോന്നിയിൽ

2013

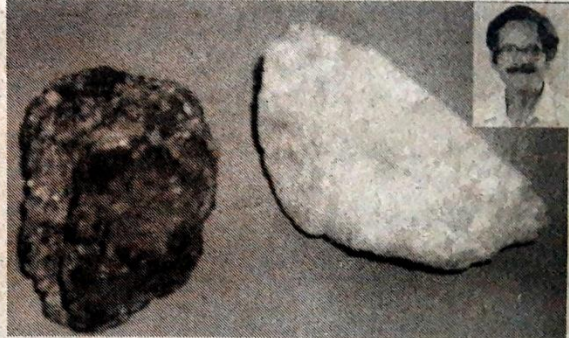
ഇരുമാറ്റപേട്ട: മിസോലെത്തിക്ക് (ചെറുശിലായുഗം) കാലഘട്ടത്തിൽ ഉപയോഗിച്ചിരുന്ന ശിലായുഗവും ഇരുമ്പ് യുഗമുടനീളം ഉണ്ടാക്കിയ ഉരുമ്പിന്റെ കീടസം (അവശിഷ്ടം) കോട്ടയം ജില്ലയിലെ പുന്നോന്നി നടുത്തു കുന്നോന്നിയിൽ കണ്ടെടുത്തു. കുന്നോന്നി സ്വദേശിയും അധ്യാപകനുമായ തോമസ് കുന്നിക്കലാണ് ഇവ കണ്ടെടുത്തത്. ബിസി 12000 നും 10000 നും ഇടയ്ക്കു നിലനിന്നിരുന്ന ചെറുശിലായുഗത്തിന്റെ ഉപകരണമാണിതെന്നു കേരള യൂണിവേഴ്സിറ്റിയിലെ യുജിസി പുരാവസ്തുശാസ്ത്രജ്ഞനായ ഡോ. രാജേന്ദ്രൻ പറഞ്ഞു.

കമ്പുകൾ ചെത്താനും മിനുക്കാനുമാണ് ഇത്തരം ഉപകരണങ്ങൾ ഉപയോഗിച്ചിരുന്നത്. ഈ കാലഘട്ടത്തിലെ ഉപകരണങ്ങൾ പോളിഷ് ചെയ്യാത്തവയാണ്. 1999 കാലഘട്ടത്തിൽ കുന്നോന്നി തകിടിമലയിലെ വടക്കേൽപുരയിടത്തിൽ മഹാശിലായുഗത്തിലെ രണ്ടു കല്ലറകൾ കണ്ടെത്തിയിരുന്നു. ഇതേ വർഷം തന്നെ കൽമഴുവും ഗ്രൈന്റിങ്ക് (പെസൽ) ഉപകരണവും തോമസ് കുന്നിക്കൽ കണ്ടെത്തിയിരുന്നു. മഹാശിലായുഗത്തിൽ തന്നെ കണ്ടുപിടിച്ച ഇരുമ്പയിർ ഉരുക്കി ഇരുമ്പ് ഇവിടെ ഉണ്ടാക്കിയതിന്റെ തെളിവും കണ്ടെടുത്തിരുന്നു.

ഇന്ത്യയിൽ ആദ്യമായി ഇരുമ്പിന്റെ ഉപയോഗം കണ്ടുപിടിച്ചത് 3000 കൊല്ലം മുമ്പ് ഉത്തരേന്ത്യയിൽ ആയിരുന്നുവെന്നു ശാസ്ത്രജ്ഞന്മാർ പറയുന്നു. ഇവിടത്തെ ആൾക്കാരും അയിരിൽനിന്ന് ഇരുമ്പ് ഉണ്ടാക്കിയതിന്റെ തെളിവുവെന്നു ഡോ. രാജേന്ദ്രൻ അറിയിച്ചു. കുന്നോന്നി തലപ്രയിൽ മുത്തളത്ത് എന്ന പേരിൽ ഒരു റോക്ക് ഷെൽട്ടറുമുണ്ട്. പുരാതന നവീന സംസ്കാരം

കുന്നോന്നിയിൽ നിന്നു കണ്ടെടുത്ത ചെറുശിലായുഗത്തിൽ ഉപയോഗിച്ചിരുന്ന ശിലായുഗങ്ങൾ, ഇൻസെന്റീൽ ഇവ കണ്ടെത്തിയ തോമസ് കുന്നിക്കൽ.

ഇവിടെ നിന്നിരുന്നുവെന്നതിന്റെ തെളിവാണ് ഇക്കാര്യങ്ങൾ വ്യക്തമാക്കുന്ന തെന്നു തോമസ് കുന്നിക്കൽ പറഞ്ഞു.



കുന്നോന്നിയിൽ ശിലായുഗസംസ്കാരത്തിന്റെ തെളിവുകൾ വീണ്ടും കണ്ടെത്തി

2013-4-05

13-4-05

ഇരുമാറ്റപേട്ട: പൂഞ്ഞാർ തെക്കേക്കര പഞ്ചായത്തിലെ കുന്നോന്നിയിൽ ശിലായുഗ സംസ്കാരത്തിന്റെ തെളിവുകൾ വീണ്ടും കണ്ടെത്തി.

മഹാശിലായുഗ കാലഘട്ടത്തിൽ ഇരുപ്രദേശത്ത് ജീവിച്ചിരുന്നവർ ഉപയോഗിച്ചിരുന്ന കല്ലുകൊണ്ടുള്ള ആയുധങ്ങളാണ് കണ്ടെത്തിയിരിക്കുന്നത്.

കേരള സർവ്വകലാശാല പുരാവസ്തു ഗവേഷകനായ ഡോ. പി. രാജേന്ദ്രനാണ് കുന്നോന്നിയിലെത്തി ഇവ തിരിച്ചറിഞ്ഞത്.

അധ്യാപകനായ കുന്നിക്കൽ തോമസാണ് വലരി തോട്ടുകളുടെ തിരത്തുനിന്ന്



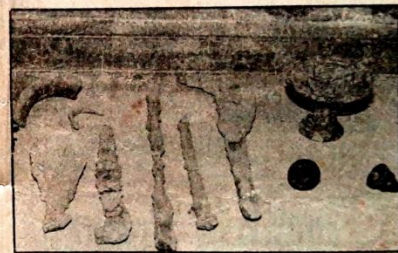
പൂഞ്ഞാർ പഞ്ചായത്തിലെ കുന്നോന്നിമലയിൽ കണ്ടെത്തിയ പുരാവസ്തുക്കൾ

ഇവ കണ്ടെത്തിയത്.

ഡോ. രാജേന്ദ്രന്റെ നേതൃത്വത്തിൽ കുന്നോന്നി പ്രദേശത്ത് പത്തുവർഷം മുമ്പ് പ

ര്യവേക്ഷണം നടത്തിയപ്പോൾ ആയുധങ്ങളും കളിമൺപാത്രങ്ങളും ലഭിച്ചിരുന്നു.

ആഗസ്തപക്ഷത്തിൽ 1993-ൽ വടക്കൻ ഹൃദയിത്തിൽ പറമ്പു കുഴിച്ചത് പോലെയ് സവിശേഷമായ കരിൽ അനാട്ടുകാരുടെ ശ്രദ്ധയിൽപ്പെട്ടത് അധ്യാപകനായ കുന്നിൻകൽ തോമസ് വിവരണിച്ചിട്ടുണ്ടെന്നു അർക്കിയാമുഖിക്കൽ ഡയറക്ടറുടെ അനുമതിയോടെ പര്യവേഷണത്തിനു



○ കുന്നോണിയിലെ കരിങ്കൽ അറയിൽനിന്നും കണ്ടെടുത്ത ആയുധങ്ങൾ. 1999

ഇവ ലക്ഷണത്തിലെ വീക്ഷണ സഹാനി ഇന്ത്യയിലേക്ക് അയച്ചു കൊടുത്തു. മൂന്നു മാസത്തിനകം ഫലമായിത്തന്നെ.

പലതവണ അനുമതി നിരസിക്കപ്പെട്ട കുന്നോണിയിലെ ഉദ്യമത്തിന് ഈ വർഷമാണ് ഔദ്യോഗിക അനുമതി ലഭിച്ചത്. സെപ്റ്റംബർ 16 മുതൽ നാട്ടുകാരുടെ സഹകരണത്തോടെ ഡോ. ഓംജനൻ തെച്ചിൽ ആദ്യ ഏല്പാദിവാസവും രാവിലെ 8.30 മുതൽ വൈകുന്നേരം ആറുവരെ

முள்ள அமைப்புகளினதில் நாட்டிற்காவது வேலை, தோண்டி, வேணி, போ-
 ஸ்யாவெல் എന്നിവയും സഹായിക്കുന്നു. പരിവ്രസ്തക്കൾ ലഭിച്ചതിനെ
 ഇന്നലെ കുന്നോനി തകിടിയിലേക്ക് ജനപ്രവാഹമായിരുന്നു.

●കുന്നോന്നിയിൽ കണ്ടെടുത്ത നാലായിരം വർഷം പഴക്കമുണ്ടെന്നു കരുതുന്ന ശിലായുധങ്ങൾ

1974 മുതൽ പരിസ്ഥിതിയെക്കുറിച്ചും പരിത്രാതീതകാലത്തെ സ. സ്കാരത്തെക്കുറിച്ചും ഗവേഷണം നടത്തിവരുന്ന ഡോ. രാജേന്ദ്രൻ

1999-ലാണ് കുന്നോണിയിൽ പര്യവേഷണം ആരംഭിച്ചത്.

ശിലായുഗത്തിലെ തെളിവുകൾ കേടായ, പാലക്കാട്, കൊല്ലം, മലപ്പുറം ജില്ലകളിൽ കണ്ടെത്തിയിരുന്നു. മീനച്ചിലാറിന്റെ തീരങ്ങളിൽ നിന്ന് ആയുധങ്ങളും കുന്നോടി മലകളിൽ കിരീടപാളികൾകൊണ്ടു തീർത്ത കല്ലറകളും കണ്ടെത്തിയിരുന്നു. തലപ്പ്രയിൽ കണ്ടെത്തിയ മുതൽക്കുള രാജേന്ദ്രനും, സംഘവും സന്ദർശിച്ചു.

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Early Human Settlements in Historical Perspective: The Meenachil River Basin, Kottayam District, up to the 8th Century AD.

Introduction

Early civilizations emerged along riverbanks, where diverse geographical zones and ecological settings played a fundamental role in shaping human history. Rivers were not merely sources of water and fertile soil; they functioned as dynamic corridors of movement and interaction. Through these waterways flowed goods, people, and ideas, fostering the diffusion of languages, writing systems, technologies, religious traditions, and cultural practices. Studying a river valley from its source to its mouth therefore offers a comprehensive and multi-layered perspective on the evolution of human settlements and the changing relationships between communities and their environment over time.

The Kottayam district of central Kerala provides a geographically and culturally significant landscape for inquiry. Bordered by the lofty Western Ghats in the east and the vast Vembanad Lake and Kuttanad paddy fields in the west, the region encompasses a diverse ecological setting. Among the three major and minor rivers flowing through Kottayam, the Meenachil River occupies a central position. Originating in the Western Ghats near Poonjar, it stretches for approximately 78 kilometres and passes through settlements such as Poonjar, Theekoy, Erattupetta, Bharananganam, and Pala—localities that later developed into important urban centres. The course of the river thus forms a natural corridor that has shaped patterns of habitation, mobility, and cultural development over centuries.

Against this geographical background, the proposed study titled “Early Human Settlements in Historical Perspective: The Meenachil River Basin, Kottayam District, up to the 8th Century AD.” undertakes a focused micro-regional examination. The Meenachil River Basin represents a landscape marked by ecological diversity and sustained human

interaction, yet it remains understudied in mainstream archaeological and historical research despite its proximity to early trade centres and cultural spheres.

This study seeks to reconstruct the cultural trajectory of the Meenachil basin from prehistory to the 8th century AD by synthesizing archaeological evidence, literary references, material assemblages, environmental features, regional trade networks, and religious movements such as the spread of Jainism and Buddhism. By integrating geographical analysis, excavation reports, comparative studies with neighbouring river valleys, classical sources, and early Tamil literature, the research aims to illuminate how early communities inhabited, utilized, and transformed the region, and how the Meenachil basin became woven into broader socio-economic, political, and cultural processes.

Research Problem

The Meenachil River Basin represents a region of considerable historical potential, yet it remains one of the least explored cultural landscapes in Kerala. Despite the presence of material evidence spanning long-term social formations—including prehistoric stone tools, Iron Age and early historic megalithic remains, early trade centres, literary references, traveller accounts, and indications of Jain and Buddhist presence—no previous study has systematically examined the historical geography of this river valley. Much of the region's cultural heritage remains undocumented due to limited archaeological attention, lack of awareness among local communities, the challenging terrain, and, at times, the reluctance of residents to expose monuments for fear of official procedures. Consequently, several valuable structures have been destroyed or vandalized over time.

While neighbouring regions have yielded significant megalithic and early historic sites, the Meenachil basin still lacks a clear and comprehensive understanding of the distribution and nature of its Iron Age and early historic settlements. Existing historical research on Kottayam has largely focused on the colonial and modern periods, leaving the prehistoric, early historical, and medieval phases underexplored. Moreover, although

Kerala's ancient trade networks, spice economy, and early historic interactions have been well documented, micro-level investigations of interior river basins—such as Meenachil—remain insufficient.

The primary problem addressed in this study, therefore, is to understand how geography, trade, social formations, and religious currents influenced the cultural development of the Meenachil River Basin from prehistoric times, early historic period to the 8th century AD. By assembling fragmented evidence, contextualizing it with findings from neighbouring valleys, and integrating archaeological, literary, and environmental data, this research seeks to fill the existing gaps and reconstruct the region's settlement patterns, socio-economic structures, and cultural transitions.

Research Questions

This study addresses several interrelated questions concerning the early cultural landscape of the Meenachil River Basin. It examines how the region's geography and river system shaped the emergence and development of early settlements and seeks to understand the nature and spatial distribution of these habitations across different ecological zones. The research further investigates the major archaeological indicators—such as prehistoric tools, megalithic monuments, ceramics, iron objects, and other material remains—that illuminate the cultural and technological attributes of the basin's early communities. In addition, the study explores how the river and its hinterlands facilitated the rise of markets, trade centres, and communication routes, and how these routes connected the western coast with external regions, particularly the political centre of Madurai. Classical accounts, export commodities, and Greco-Roman literary sources are analysed to reconstruct and map the trade networks associated with the region. Finally, the research considers the migration, settlement patterns, and interactions of Jain and Buddhist communities, assessing whether these groups coexisted and how their presence contributed to the cultural fabric of the Meenachil basin up to the 8th century AD.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to reconstruct the historical evolution of the Meenachil River Basin by examining the interplay between its geographical features and human occupation across different periods. This includes exploring the influence of the basin's topography, ecological zones, and palaeo-channels on early settlement patterns. The research aims to gather and analyse literary sources and archaeological materials relevant to various cultural phases in order to build a comprehensive historical narrative of the region. It further seeks to map and interpret the spatial distribution of megalithic burials and associated grave goods, thereby understanding the social and cultural dimensions of Iron Age and early historic communities. Another key objective is to identify, as far as possible, the locations of the ancient ports of Nelcynda, Cottanara, and Bacare, and to trace the early historic hinterland trade routes and market centres connected to the Meenachil valley. The study also examines the impact and long-term consequences of early historic trade on the cultural landscape of the region. Additionally, it aims to document the remnants and influence of Jainism and Buddhism, assessing their presence and interaction within the local cultural milieu. Ultimately, the research seeks to understand the nature, continuity, and transitions of human habitation in the Meenachil basin from the prehistoric era to the post-Sangam period.

Methodology and Sources

The present study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology inspired by the Annales School of Historiography, particularly Braudel's emphasis on the long-term interplay between human societies and their physical environment. Integrating history, archaeology, geography, and ethnography, the research examines the Meenachil River Basin from prehistory to the 8th century AD. Methodologically, it combines extensive field surveys with a critical review of literature and archival sources. Field investigations involve locating and re-documenting megalithic burial sites, analysing associated material goods,

tracing hinterland trade routes, mapping Jain–Buddhist sites, and identifying potential locations of ancient ports such as Nelcynda and Cottanara. Ethnographic observations, oral histories, and local cultural practices further supplement the historical reconstruction. The study’s sources include a wide range of archaeological materials—microliths, Neolithic celts, megalithic monuments, excavation finds, Roman coins, Buddhist idols, sculptures, and other antiquities—alongside textual evidence from Greco-Roman works (Strabo, Pliny, Ptolemy, Periplus, Muziris Papyrus, Peutinger Table), Sangam literature, early South Indian texts, temple inscriptions, land grants, church records, and regional histories. Together, these diverse datasets enable a comprehensive reconstruction of the cultural evolution, trade networks, religious movements, and settlement dynamics of the Meenachil basin.

Chapter Organisation

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Land Water Life, the Landscape and Early Communities of Meenachil River valley
- 3 Roots of Society: Early Social Formations in the Meenachil River Valley
- 4 Crossroads of Commerce: Early Historic Social Networks in the Meenachil River Valley
- 5 The Dawn of a New Era: The Presence of Jainism Buddhism in the Meenachil River Valley
- 6 Conclusion

Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter, “Introduction,” provides a comprehensive overview of the existing scholarly work related to the Meenachil River Basin and its historical development. It identifies key research gaps that necessitate the present study and explains the central objectives guiding the investigation. The chapter also outlines the methodological framework adopted, including archaeological, geographical, and literary approaches, and

presents the working hypotheses that shape the analysis. In addition, it discusses the primary and secondary sources used—such as excavation reports, inscriptions, literary texts, maps, and previous research publications—thereby establishing the foundation for the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2: Land Water Life, the Landscape and Early Communities of Meenachil River valley

This chapter examines the physical setting of the Meenachil basin — its hydrography, topography, vegetation, soil types, slopes, and climatic conditions. The analysis highlights zones suitable for early habitation, including hill slopes, elevated terraces, and fertile alluvial patches. By comparing these ecological niches with known prehistoric settlement models, the chapter argues that the river basin offered favourable conditions for early communities, particularly in the midland regions. The geographical framework sets the foundation for understanding the cultural developments discussed in later chapters.

Chapter 3: Roots of Society: Early Social Formations in the Meenachil River Valley

The prehistoric phase of the Meenachil basin is reconstructed primarily through the three recorded Neolithic celts. The chapter provides detailed descriptions of their typology, morphology, and distribution. Comparative analysis with celts from neighbouring regions—like the Pamba, Manimala, and Periyar valleys—indicates technological and cultural parallels, suggesting broader regional interactions. And the second part of the thesis examines the megalithic burials (such as urns, cairns, and menhirs) documented in the region, along with associated material goods like ceramics, iron tools, and beads. Through typological and spatial analysis, the chapter reconstructs settlement patterns, socio-economic strategies, agricultural practices, and possible migration routes toward the Western Ghats. Comparative studies with other parts of Kerala and South India help situate Meenachil's megalithic culture within broader South Indian Iron Age trends. The chapter

concludes that the megalithic communities contributed significantly to early social formations in the basin.

Chapter 4: Crossroads of Commerce: Early Historic Social Networks in the Meenachil River Valley

Chapter 4 examines the early historic phase of the Meenachil region (3rd century BC to 5th century AD) by integrating evidence from Sangam literature, Greco-Roman accounts, classical geographies, and archaeology. It discusses the roles of the ancient ports of Nelcynda, Cottanara, and Bakare in facilitating Indo-Roman maritime exchange, along with the production and export of pepper, cardamom, and other commodities from the Meenachil hinterland. The chapter also reviews material evidence such as Roman coins, Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, and ceramic traditions, while highlighting the administrative and trade influences of the Madurai Pandyas and early Chera polities. Overall, it shows how the Meenachil basin became connected to long-distance trade networks and experienced significant cultural and religious transformations during this period.

Chapter 5: The Dawn of a New Era: The Presence of Jainism Buddhism in the Meenachil River Valley

This chapter examines the early presence, spread, and cultural impact of Jainism and Buddhism in the Meenachil River Basin, situating the region within the wider religious landscape of early South India. Drawing on archaeological finds, iconographic evidence, place-name studies, oral traditions, and literary references, the chapter traces the routes through which Jain and Buddhist communities entered the interior regions of Kerala. The study highlights the significance of trade routes, monastic networks, and interactions with early Tamil cultural spheres in facilitating the movement of these religious groups. Evidence such as fragmented sculptures, stone idols, cave shelters, and etymological clues in local toponyms indicates that both Jain and Buddhist establishments once flourished in the area, though later absorbed into or replaced by dominant Brahmanical traditions. The

chapter also discusses the possibilities of coexistence between Jain and Buddhist communities, interpreting the material vestiges in relation to broader socio-political contexts, including early trade centres and shifting patterns of patronage. By integrating archaeological and textual data, this chapter reconstructs the religious landscape of the Meenachil basin and assesses how these traditions contributed to its cultural and intellectual development before their gradual decline by the early medieval period.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The thesis concludes that the Meenachil River Basin, though understudied, possesses a deep chronological span of cultural developments. Its geography facilitated early habitation; its limited prehistoric remains hint at broader regional connections; its megalithic culture reflects evolving social formations; and its early historic phase reveals active involvement in South India's trade economy and religious networks. By synthesizing varied strands of evidence, the study contributes a comprehensive micro-regional perspective to Kerala's early history and highlights the need for more systematic archaeological exploration to uncover its full potential.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

The five chapters of the present work '*Early Human Settlements in Historical Perspective: The Meenachil River Basin, Kottayam District Up to the 8th Century AD.*' examine the role of the Meenachil River in shaping early social formations and cultural developments in the ancient historical narrative of the region. These chapters are organised and analysed on the basis of archaeological, literary and geographical evidence in order to understand the patterns of continuous human habitation along the Meenachil river within the wider history of Kerala. The primary methodology adopted is the concept of 'Historical Geography', viewing the Meenachil river as a historical landscape shaped by human settlement, natural resources, their utilisation and cultural interactions. It focuses on the geographical factors influencing historical events, highlights how the environment affects human behaviours and activities thereby transforming the landscape over time and it helps to trace migrations, social formations, networks of connections and cultural developments within a region. The study of a river valley from its basin to its delta or from its origin to its mouth offers a kaleidoscopic view of the changing patterns of human settlements over years. In the past, rivers and streams often served as natural boundaries, shaping the territorial and cultural landscape of human habitation. Accordingly, the study of Meenachil River include a broad region without rigid internal boundaries, extending between the Muvattupuzha river in the north and the Manimala River in the south sides and from the Western Ghats of Idukki in the east to the Western Coast of Alappuzha and Vembanad Lake also including its entire basins.

The present work is organized into six chapters, structured on the basis of broad chronological frame of the social formation. The first chapter 'Introduction' provides the framework of the study including the literature review, objectives, hypothesis, methodology and the sources. The study began with an examination of the available

research works in the academic field. The literature review primarily focused on works specifically related to the Meenachil region and Kottayam district, while studies on neighbouring valleys were also used for comparative analysis and to reconstruct a broader regional history. The review revealed significant gaps in historical research particularly concerning the ancient history of the region, as most of the existing studies concentrate on the medieval and modern period. Addressing this research problem became a primary objective of the present study which is to trace the early social formations in the Meenachil basin. Following preliminary observation, the available material evidence supported the formulation of the hypothesis of ‘continues human habitation in the Meenachil river valley’. This in turn shaped the methodology which employed the concept of Historical Geography of a river basin. Sources for the study were collected primarily through field work and surveys supplemented by literature studies and personal communications. In an attempt to trace the developments from the prehistoric period to the post Sangam period the chapters have been arranged in chronological basis for clarity and convenience.

A popular view has long suggested that the physical and geographical features of Kerala were not suitable for prehistoric human habitation. The second chapter ‘*The Landscape and Early Communities of Meenachil River Valley*’ challenges this argument by examining the environmental factors that contributed to the formation of early settlement settings. The chapter highlights how fertile alluvial plains, gentle valleys and accessible riverbanks provided a favourable condition for habitation and agricultural activities, while surrounding hills and uplands served as natural boundaries and defensive zones. Geological features further shaped the availability of essential natural resources such as fertile soil, minerals, water and vegetation ensuring the sustainability of these settlements. The interaction of both physiographic and geological factors influenced the river’s courses, seasonal changes in its banks and the overall land use patterns of human communities. The Meenachil river with its numerous tributaries, provided strong interconnections across different parts of the basins which ensured effective connectivity even to remote locations.

The early communities often depended on these tributary channels, especially during periods of seasonal flooding in the main river course. The riverbeds carried fertile alluvial soil that supported cultivation, while the surrounding forest offered abundant natural resources. Alongside rich vegetation, the region also supplied essential raw materials such as the rocks, stone, granite, wood which were widely used for tool makings and other subsistent activities. were available in the region. From this analysis, it becomes evident that the Meenachil basin possessed all the key requirements for early habitation. The presence of natural resources, tributary channels, hills, slopes, natural shelters, migration routes and communication networks collectively supported the process of settlement, as reflected in the evidence of early tribal communities inhabiting the uplands and upper basin of the Meenachil valley.

With its favourable geographical features, the Meenachil river basin was probably occupied by the early settlers as early as prehistoric period. Evidence from the upper regions of the Meenachil basin, particularly in the Idukki district shows traces of human activity. Sites such as Marayur and the Anjunad valley with their mesolithic rock art, indicate that human habitation in the Western Ghats began at least from the mesolithic period. Over time these groups likely moved down to the hill slopes and midlands. No rock art has been reported from the Meenachil basin but microlith tools made by pebbles, along with three neolithic celts in the tributaries of the Meenachil river have been discovered from Kunnoni region. Unfortunately, no prehistoric settlement sites have yet been identified in the basin and systematic material studies of the available finds are still lacking. This absence of settlement evidence may be linked to climatic conditions and the subsistence patterns of early groups. The high ranges with their cooler climate, favoured rock shelters as the safest mode of habitation. These communities or groups dependent on hunting and gathering likely lived in small populations and restricted their activities to the vicinity of such shelters. This could explain the scarcity of material remains in the region.

Nevertheless, the limited evidence does not rule out the possibility of mesolithic or neolithic habitation in the Meenachil basin. More plausibly, the scarcity of finds is the result of insufficient explorations. As discussed in the previous chapter, the basin offered natural shelters and essential resources such as water and for security, making it a suitable area for early habitation. The present author proposed the Kunnoni region, located on the foothills of the Western Ghats as a probable early settlement zone. Its geographic setting, the presence of two natural cave shelters, its position near the tributaries of Meenachil, and the recovery of microliths and neolithic celts together suggest the potential for it being on the earliest inhabited locations in the Meenachil basin. Interestingly its location along a migration route connecting the Western Ghats to the Western Coast strengthens this argument.

The second part of this chapter discusses the Iron age Megalithic period of the region which provides a greater abundance of material evidence compared to the prehistoric phase. This period reflects increased migrations and a growing population, with habitation gradually spreading from the earlier prehistoric pockets to cover the entire Meenachil river basin. Megalithic sites are distributed across the highland, midland and low land zones, displaying patterns similar to those observed in other regions. The principal types of burials recorded are menhirs, cists, dolmens, dolmenoid cists, urns and hood stones. Among these dolmens and dolmenoid cist are found in more numbers, while urns burials though less frequently reported are believed based on local traditions to have been more common in the midland areas. Unfortunately, many of these burials have been scattered, destroyed or vandalised often due to neglect and local beliefs that contributed to their disturbance. Some menhirs continue to be objects of worship and are thus better preserved, yet in general the local population remains largely unaware of the archaeological value of these monuments.

There were three excavations conducted in the region such as Oliyani, Kadanad and Neendoor. Unfortunately, apart from preliminary reports, no detailed excavation reports, or

material studies have yet been published, which has made the analysis of material culture from the region difficult. The available material assemblages are primarily consisting of ceramics; iron tools and implements and beads. These were mainly recovered from dolmenoid cist and urn burial. The ceramics include black ware, red ware and black and red wares along with lids. The iron objects consist mainly of weapons as well as agricultural and domestic tools. An interesting find from Oliyani was reported by P. Rajendran, who identified three serpent-shaped objects as ritual artifacts, however the present author suggests that these may in fact be corroded fish hooks whose shapes resemble snake heads. Beads of carnelian, and stone have also been documented along with a rare gold leaf discovered at Kadanad. These materials show patterns comparable to those found in other regions, though the occurrence of gold within this assemblage is exceptional.

Based on the distribution of burials, material assemblages and their patterns it is difficult to identify a distinct settlement area within the region, as the river basin appears to have been more or less continuously occupied by human habitation. Consequently, clear settlement traces are very scarce. However, future excavations and systematic explorations particularly in the forested zones may help to solve these issues. From the present study, Kurinji and Kunnoni emerge as potential habitation sites. Kurinji is an ancient grove, is itself significant which is mentioned in the Sangam works as a landscape inhabited by the *maṇavar*, *Kuṛavar* peoples and its and its surrounding areas contains a considerable number of burial monuments. Kunnoni, which has yielded traces from both prehistoric period and the megalithic phase, may also represent one of the region's continuous settlements. Interestingly, many of the burials are situated at some distance from the tributaries, suggesting that the actual settlement areas may have been located along the basin of these smaller tributaries.

The socio-economic and cultural patterns of the region, when compared with other basin, reveal both shared traits and distinctive features. The society appears to have been

primarily based on kinship but over time evidence points to the emergence of social stratifications, as indicated by the variety and distribution of burial goods. Economically the communities may have begun as hunters and gatherers later, the presence of iron tools and implements suggests that a subsequent shift towards agricultural and other subsistence practice. The cultural interactions are evident in the discovery of beads and gold objects among the burial goods which were not locally manufactured, suggesting the contacts beyond the nearby regions. However, these findings were collectively suggested that the systems of cultural exchanges, communication networks and transactional interactions were already in place during the Iron Age megalithic period in the Meenachil region.

The fourth chapter '*Early Historic Social Networks in the Meenachil Valley*' discusses the later migrations and their impact on the Meenachil basin. Following the iron age megalithic phase, the region entered the Sangam period noted for its Indo- Roman trade connections. By the final stages of the megalithic period the trade networks were already in existence, gradually expanding into maritime contacts during the last centuries BC. In the early centuries of the Common era these Interactions facilitated the rise of important port centres such as Nelcynda, Bacare and so called 'pepper district' Cottanara. All of these formed integral nodes within wider exchange networks. However, the identification of the precise location of these centres remains uncertain, due to the limited nature of literary references, transformations in the landscape and importantly the absence of systematic explorations and excavations in the region.

The present study makes a preliminary attempt to identify early historic ports. The Bacare is already identified with Purakkad. Nelcynda is considered to have been located either at Nakkida or in the Niranam regions on the Pamba River basin. Meanwhile, Cottanara appears to have been located around the uplands of Kottayam rather than Kuttanad. The principal export commodity was black pepper, which continues to be abundantly cultivated in the high ranges of the Western Ghats. References in Sangam

literature suggest that pepper cultivation was already established during the period. Other exports included cardamon, malabathron, timber, and ivory raw tusk were all naturally available in the Ghats and contributed to the expansion of the trade networks. With the flourishing Indo- Roman trade, these commodities from diverse regions extending as far as Central India, North and North East, and even from South East Asia and China reached the port of Bacare. Goods arrived via both inland and coastal routes to the ports of Bacare and Muziris during the early historic period. Some of these routes passed through the Palakkad Gap, while others connected through Madurai and the Western Ghats. Unfortunately, no largescale excavations have yet been carried out in this region, unlike at Muziris Pattanam Excavations, which has provided extensive archaeological evidence.

According to Greco- Roman accounts, the region was under the rule of the Pandyas during the early centuries of the Common Era with their capital at Madurai. The later part of this chapter discusses the connections between the Western Coast and the Madurai region as important trade routes and highlights the role of Meenachil river in facilitating the inland exchanges. The present study finds that the Meenachil river served as a channel linking the pepper growing areas of the high ranges to the Western Coast and to Madurai during the early historic period. Notably, Erattupetta emerges as a significant point along the Meenachil river with several Roman and Punch marked coin hoards reported from the nearby region. While analysing the society there was no direct material or literature evidence for socio economic and political life of the people. The only book available is Sangam literature. But it cannot be specifically describing the region because the Sangam works mainly portray the urban cities, centres and no direct evidence about the places in the region so it cannot be generalised as an urban character to every region. Finally, during the 3rd century AD, the trade was shifted to more north Malabar led to the gradual decline in the trade ports in this region.

The fifth chapter '*The Presence of Jainism Buddhism in the Meenachil Valley*' discusses the after effects of the early historic trade particularly about human migration. The expansion of trade and the developments of port towns led to the movement of different groups into the region, especially as traders, merchants and intermediaries. Among these were followers of Jainism and Buddhism, who are believed to have arrived as part of these commercial networks. From as early as the 3rd century BC, their presence is attested in Madurai and its surrounding regions. So, when the ports such as Nelcynda Bacare and Muziris became prominent, Jain and Buddhist communities may have been among the first to migrate to these Western Coast regions. The present study suggests that both Jainism and Buddhism left traces in the Kottayam region. Although archaeological evidence for Jainism are relatively scarce, its presence can be identified from sculptural, iconographic and etymological studies. In contrast, Buddhism is more firmly attested archaeologically. The Neelamperoor Bagavati Temple and Kiliroor temples are believed to have once been an abode of Buddhist worship. Additionally, two more idols were discovered from the Ramapuram in the Meenachil basin and information collected about two more idols from the Kottayam town further confirms the presence of Buddhism in the region.

The presence of Jainism and Buddhism in the region also reflected in place names and local traditions. A number of sites carry etymologically associations with Jain features, especially with the term Pallis. Several temples contain sculptures of *Yaksha Yakshi* and *Nagas* that are similar with the Jain iconography. Buddhism on the other hand, is evidenced through temples and cultural assimilation of certain festivals into the region. However, due to the changing nature of worship practices during the post Sangam period, coupled with the strong influence of Buddhism in later centuries, much of the earlier evidence has either been obscured or lost. In examining their presence, an important question arises regarding whether Jainism and Buddhism co-existed in the region.

While the available evidence does not help for a definitive conclusion and the possibilities of their co-existence at certain point in time cannot be ruled out. The absence of substantial archaeological remains for Jainism may indicate its early or formative stages in the region. Buddhism, which appears to have gained stronger ground later, has left behind more material traces. The decline of both traditions can largely be attributed to the rise of Brahmanism, which not only asserted religious influence but also intersected with wider socio economic and political changes in that period.

The growth of brahmin migration and their gradual developments in the region marked a significant phase of religious and cultural transformation. In the Meenachil basin, three major brahmin settlements emerged such as Kidangoor, Ettumanoor and Kumaranellor. While, the neighbouring Manimala basin settlement developed at Katamuri, Kaviyur and Thiruvalla. The density of settlements in the region suggests the agricultural and economic potential of the river valleys in this area. At the same time, the scale and distribution of these brahmin centres suggest more demographic expansions and reflect the depth of decline of earlier Jain and Buddhist traditions in Central Kerala. Over time, many of these Jain Buddhist sites, institutions and cultural landmarks were either absorbed into or transformed by growing brahminical order. This was not about the religious transformation alone. It involved reworking of cultural practices, iconographic elements and even the local traditions of the region. Even though certain rituals, architectural motifs and local legends retain traces of these Jain Buddha presences which were gradually interpreted within a brahminical framework.

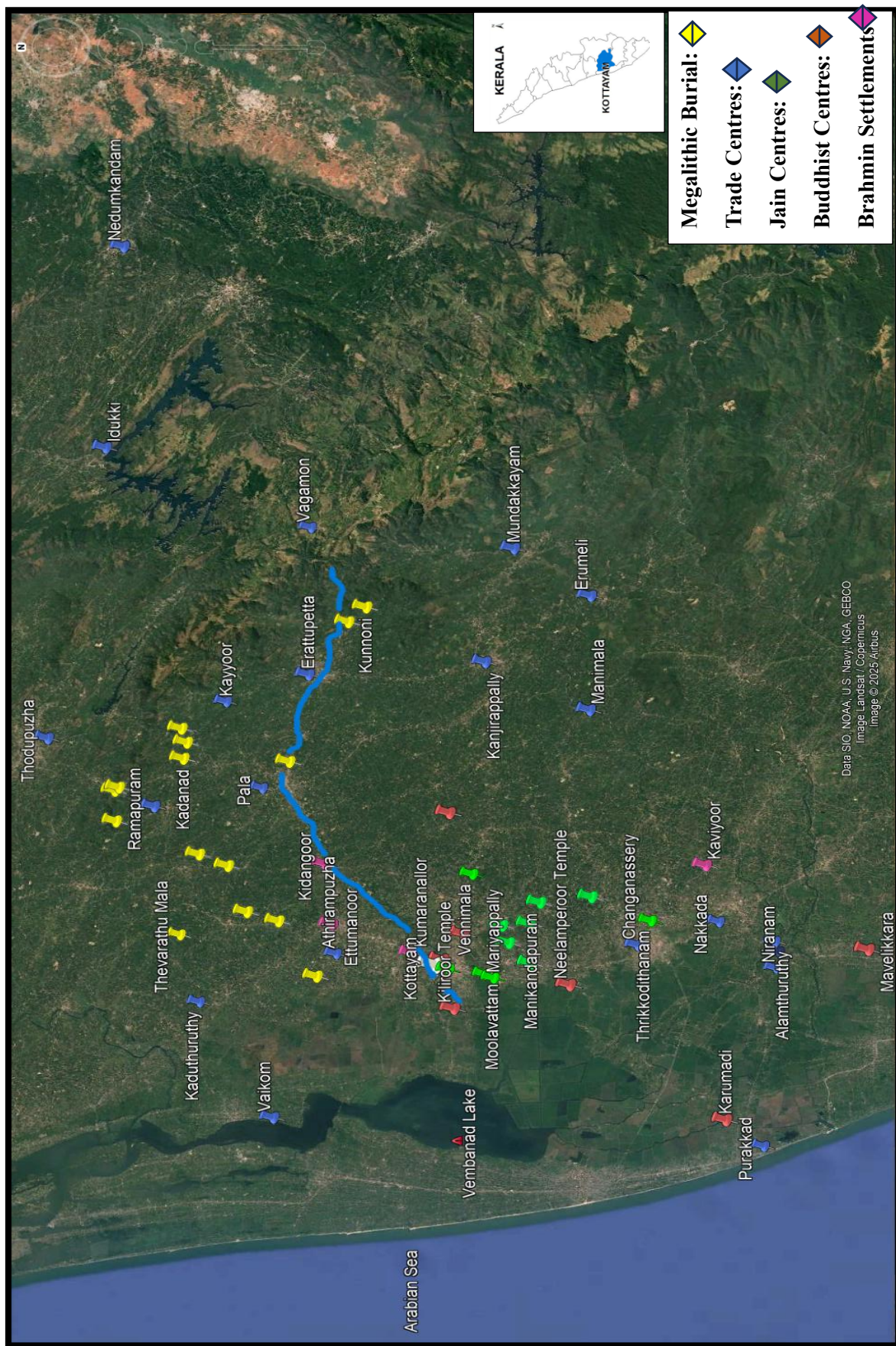


Fig 6.1: Important Centres in Kottayam. (not in scale)

Current condition -Future Studies in the region

After the study about the Meenachil basin the author observed that the region needs a systematic excavation and exploration for both prehistoric, Megalithic and early historic studies. In terms of prehistory, the regions show considerable potential for an early human habitation like Kunnoni region, which demanded extensive exploration to identify mesolithic and neolithic stone tools. The megalithic burial is more numerous than currently reported particularly in the high ranges forested areas. Several burials especially in the Kurinji-Kottamala region are suitable for an excavation. The frequent accidental discovery of urn burials presents a serious problem as it often leads to the destruction of the urns and the burial goods. So, systematic documentation and public awareness is essential to minimize such destruction. During the field work, it was also noted that the discovery of Roman coins, Punch marked coins and other material remains are often sold in black markets. Many such coins remain in personal collections especially in the Nakkida, Niranam regions. Proper documentation of these finds and their locations would help to identify more market centres in the region. Finally, a number of temples in the area still preserve traces of Buddha, Jaina traditions. Many of these features have been transformed or concealed under layers of later worship practices such as garlands or *chandanas* applications. The local traditions, along with etymological and the iconographic studies can provide valuable insights for these sites and tracing the abodes of Jainism and Buddhism in the region.

Conclusion

The present study ‘Historical Geography of Meenachil River basin’ was mainly focused on the hypothesis that the Meenachil basin had occupied since the prehistoric period. The findings suggested that as a river valley system, the Meenachil region indeed supported human habitation from the earliest times. Migration from the Western Ghats appears to have played a crucial role in this process by facilitating the wide distribution of

megalithic culture across the basin. The evidence for the prehistoric period is identified mainly from the Kunnoni region, while megalithic burials are found distributed across different parts of the basin. The Meenachil river and its tributaries were formed part of the large exchange system, supporting inter *tinai* contacts and early historic trade. Its geographical position and abundant natural resources, especially spices like pepper contributed to the emergence of important port centres like Nelcynda and Bacare. Later these trade networks not only carried commodities but also facilitated people, ideas and cultural practices. The migration of Jainism and Buddhist communities into the region was closely linked to these mercantile activities. Arriving via both inland and coastal routes, they established themselves during the Post Sangam period. By the 3rd century AD, trade in the region began to decline and led to further changes in the region. The internal disputes, the rise of brahmin settlements and broader socio-economic changes in the pre- medieval period contributed to the waning influence of Jainism and Buddhism. The influx of brahmin migration and the emergence of pre temple society reshaped the socio economic and political landscape of the Meenachil Basin.

According to the study, the Meenachil region holds considerable potential for advancing our understanding of Kerala's ancient history. Like the Periyar and Pamba basins, the Meenachil basin was also occupied by human settlements from the prehistoric period onwards. Sites such as Kunnoni, Erattupetta, Ramapuram, and the Kurinji region appear to have been inhabited by successive communities over time. Further explorations, excavations, and future studies in these areas will help clarify and strengthen the interpretations presented in the current research, thereby highlighting the Meenachil basin's significant role in Kerala's historical landscape.