

**Original Research Article**

## **Unearthing History: A Journey Through the Tranquebar Archaeological Site**

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### **Abstract**

Archaeology is the study of human activity in the past, primarily through the recovery and analysis of the material culture and environmental data that they have left behind, which includes artifacts, architecture, biofacts and cultural landscape. The idea of archaeological and historical research was introduced to India mainly due to the colonial system. After the coming of the Britishers, they realized the glorious past of the Indians especially south Indians through archaeological excavations. The state department of Archaeology is doing excavations in various places from the prehistoric period to the historic period. Tarangambadi is a window into South India's historical cultural and maritime heritage. The archaeological findings reaffirm its significance as a historical crossroads where ancient Tamil traditions met global influence. Tarangambadi also known as Tranquebar is a picturesque coastal town in the Mayiladuthurai district of Tamilnadu. The history of Tranquebar could be traced back to the beginning of the common Era. Ancient sangam classics like the Purananooru, Natrinai and Agananooru refer to Poraiyar as a port town. It continued to play an important role in history of Tranquebar till 19<sup>th</sup> century. This article focuses the historical overview and significance of archaeological excavation in Tranquebar.

**Keywords:** Tranquebar, Danish colonialism, maritime archaeology, Historical overview, significance

## Introduction

Tranquebar, also known as Tarangambadi, is a town in Tamil Nadu's Mayiladuthurai district, on the Coromandel Coast. Tarangambadi mean “the land of the singing waves” in Tamil, reflecting the tranquil seaside landscape. It was originally a thriving Danish commercial centre in India, founded around 1620. Today it is a picturesque seaside town recognized for its historical landmarks, magnificent beaches, and laid-back lifestyle. It contributed significantly to the region's cultural and maritime heritage. Tarangambadi is notable historically because of its colonial background. Tarangambadi was a Danish settlement from 1620 to 1845. The Danish East India company founded it as a trading center, which later became a fortified settlement. It transformed into a vigorous trade centre. Danish merchants traded for spices, textiles and gems, their ships carrying these riches back to Europe.

## Historical Overview

Tranquebar has the habitation of late Chola period. The history of Tranquebar (Tarangambadi) can be traced to the beginning of the Christian era. It was a Danish colony from 1620 to 1845, and in Danish and some other European languages it is known as “Trankebar” or “Tranquebar”. The earliest reference to Tarangambadi occurs in a 14<sup>th</sup> century inscription, mentioning the place as Sadanganpade. Tranquebar was founded by the Danish East India Company in 1620, when a factory was opened and a fort, known as Fort Dansborg, was built by a Danish captain named Ove Gjedde. This fort was the residence and headquarters of the governor and other officials for about 150 years. It is now a museum hosting a collection of artifacts from the colonial era.

## The Danish Period

In 1618 the Danish king Christian IV and a new East Asiatic Company sent 3 merchant ships and 2 navy ships with 300 soldiers to Ceylon under the command of admiral Ove Gedde in order to establish a Danish point of support in the region. The original plans failed. But in 1620 he managed to get an agreement with the Naik of the state of Tanjore on the Coromandel Coast according to which the Danes against a yearly tribute got the right to administer and fortify Tranquebar on the Coromandel coast. Immediately thereafter the construction of Dansborg was begun. In the next 225 years Tranquebar was under Danish rule. During this period several thousand Danes have spent shorter or longer time in the colony as officials, merchants or crew. Some of them had their Danish families with them in the Far East. Tropical diseases and the unusual climate taxed their health heavily. Many never returned to Denmark, but died in Tranquebar where they are buried. Several were lost on the long voyage from Copenhagen to Tranquebar by shipwreck or because the unhealthy conditions aboard the ships of those times. Even though more years have passed since Denmark sold Tranquebar there still exist memories of and physical remnants from the Danish period. Many Danish family stories contain memories of one or more ancestors who have been in Tranquebar. In the history of Denmark, the acquirement of Tranquebar mark the first direct contact with South Asia. In Tranquebar some of the houses, streets, Dansborg, the Land Gate, the churches and the vibrant educational environment still bear witness to the Danish period. And among the local population there still exist fragmentary memories of that period which is often depicted in a positive way supposedly as a sort of “good old days” in contrast to the following period under British rule.

## **Significance of Tranquebar**

### **Masillamani Nathar Temple**

The temple finds frequent references in hymns like Devaram. The presiding deity of this temple is referred to as 'Mani Varneeswarar Masila Nathar' in Devaram. This temple is the oldest monument to survive in Tranquebar. This was built by a king named Maravarman Kulasekara Pandyan in 1305 AD. This temple originally had 3 Mandapams out of which 2 have been completely swallowed by sea. The temple contained rich pieces of architectural works and epigraphs which have fallen prey to the ferocious tides. What remains today is the innermost mandapam – a tottering structure in a precarious condition.

### **First Ever Printing Press in India**

The service rendered by Ziengenbalg to Tamil language and Christianity is amazing. He setup the first ever printing press in India at Tranquebar and even produced printing paper during 1712 AD. He brought a refreshing change to Tamil script by suggesting reforms and printed the first ever Tamil version of the New Testament in 1715.

### **Architectural and Archaeological Significance**

One of the most striking features of Tranquebar is its well-preserved colonial architecture, which offers a glimpse into the past. Zion Church Established in 1701, it is the oldest Protestant church in India. It is simple yet elegant design reflects the austere architectural style of the Danes.

### **New Jerusalem Church**

It was constructed in 1718. This church stands as a testament to Tranquebar's significance as a centre for missionary activity. The Danish missionary Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, who established India's first printing press here, is closely associated with this site.

### **Town Gate**

The Danish-era gate at the town's entrance is an iconic structure that has stood the test of time.

### **Dansborg Fort**

Tarangambadi fort was first constructed in 1620 CE by the Danish. During 1620 A.D, Tanjore province was under the rule of the mighty king Viyaya Raghunatha Nayak. The king of Denmark Christian IV sent two ships to India under the leadership of Ove Gedde with the help of Roeland Crape of Holland. On 5<sup>th</sup> May 1620 A.D, Viyaya Raghunatha Nayak granted permission to the king of Denmark, Christian IV to set up their trading centre at Tranquebar. A treaty was signed between Thanjavur Nayak Ragunatha Nayak and Ove Gedde on November 19 1620. According to the agreement the port Tarangambadi was given to the Danish traders and provision was made for collecting the tax and construction of the fort. based on the agreement that the Danish would pay Rs.3111 per month as rent. The agreement document is in the form of a small sheet made of gold in which Vijaya Raghunatha Nayak has signed his name in Telugu. This document is now preserved in the international archives in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Around the same period during 1620 AD, Roland Grappe, a Danish Navy Captain in the name of Danish King bought Tranquebar and the surrounding area from the Tanjore King. Then the Danes built the Majestic Dansborg Fort and the stony walls that surrounded it and thereby made Tranquebar a prime trading sport and a well known place. This Dansborg Fort has the unique distinction of having attracted the sea voyagers passing through the East Coast, into Tranquebar. Most of the portions of the fort reconstructed several times. This fort consisted of two large

structures. They are the rampart wall and the main building. The rampart wall was a fairly large four-sided structure with bastions at each cardinal point.

Tranquebar came into the complete control of Danish rulers, When the English established their rule in India, they (English) bought Tranquebar from the Danish for Rs12 and half (12.50.000) lakh during 1845.

### **The transfer to the British**

From the beginning the 19<sup>th</sup> century it became increasingly clear that Tranquebar had lost its importance for the trade in Southeast Asia. The deficit of the colony had to be paid by the Treasury. After the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 the Danish state several times tried to sell Tranquebar. But not before 1845 it managed to enter into a contract with the British about the taking over of both Tranquebar and Serampore by Calcutta.

The corvette "Galathea" was sent to India in order to represent Denmark by the official transfer to the British which in Tranquebar took place on November 7 of the same year. After only 77 days of sailing "Galathea" anchored at Tranquebar on October 12. But the ship had to leave three days later in order to prepare an expedition to the Nicobar Islands that remained a Danish territory. The object of the expedition was to check up on the possibilities of a last attempt to colonize the islands and thereafter to make scientific researches on the further voyage round the world.

After the transfer a few Danes lived on in Tranquebar where they either served the British or lived on as pensioners to their death. At the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century no Danes were left in the town. Now the Danish presence in Tranquebar first and foremost was a subject of the historiography. But from the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially after the Tsunami of 2004 new contacts at both official and unofficial levels have arisen between Danes and Indians on basis of common history of more than 200 years.

When India attained Independence during 1947, the Dansborg Fort came under the control of Union Government. Later, this Fort was transformed as the state Government's Inspection Bungalow. This fort has been under the maintenance of Tamil Nadu Archaeological department. Now, this Fort houses an archaeological museum. Many school students and public used it as a playground. It has been maintained by the Tamil Nadu Archaeological Department Since 1978.

### **Excavation at Fort Dansborg – Tarangambadi**

The rampart wall of the Dansborg fort was damaged due to storms. So, it looks like a mound. To reconstruct the rampart wall a trial trench was laid in the year 2001. The base of the whole rampart wall was not exposed. Relentless efforts of the 'Tranquebar Association of Denmark, which comprises a group of good Denmark citizens and other members, Dansborg Majestic Fort was partially renovated during 2002, nearly 382 years after its inauguration. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), and the Tamil Nadu Archaeological Department extended full cooperation to the Tranquebar Association in this great job.

In 2002, there more trenches were laid. The aim of excavation is to know the nature of the foundation of the rampart wall and to strengthen the foundation. Totally eight layer were exposed in this excavation. A single layer paved brick was laid right on the Natural soil (Sea Sand). Above this brick paved floor, 30 cm thick compact clay mixed with brickbats and lime was laid. Above this compact earth filling again 30 cm thick yeallowish soil, locally called 'tavittuman' was used. Over this yellowish soil, another brick floor was paved.

A large part of Tranquebar village was damaged due to the Tsunami in 2004, with the help of Tamil Nadu State Archaeological Department and the Royal Danish family, the Danish Tranquebar Association has managed to restore parts of Tranquebar.

The Danish Government represented by the Director the National Museum: Copenhagen expressed a desire in 2004 to further explore the Dansborg are with a view to identify the Moat and other structures surrounding the fort. After discussion it was agreed that joint excavation will be conducted by the Danish Government in collaboration with Archaeological Survey of India and Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology. The excavation was carried out in the northern side of the fort for 20 days in march 2008. Five tranches were laid in front of the fort and all the trenches were excavated up to the moat level. In this excavation a draw bridge constructed during the Danish period was identified at the entrance of the main gate. The bridge contained three platforms and all the three are constructed with the help of bricks and motar. This draw bridge was made up of wooden pillars, the floor of the entrance was high and of brick-paved platform. Total breadth of the moat was 24mts. In this excavation Chinese potteries and smoking pipes made up of white clay were recovered. Now these are displayed in the inside of the fort.

The Danish Fort at Tarangambadi functioned as the hub for Danish settlement in the region. The fort is the second-largest one ever erected by the Danes, after Kronborg in Helsingør. It is a great example of Danish architectural style, with enormous halls, lofty ceilings, columned constructions, and projecting drapery. The fort has a roughly trapezoidal shape, with the side facing the sea spanning 60 metres (200 feet) and a width of around 11 meters (36feet). The fort has three rooms in the left wing, which were originally used as the governor's residence, a kitchen with an open fireplace and chimney in the upper left corner and a church room, which is now a museum, in the centre of the edifice. The museum inside the fort exhibits a variety of objects from the Danish era in India, such as furniture, coins, ceramics, weapons, paintings, and maps. It also houses a collection of gamla (old Danish) documents that recount the history of the Danish East India Company and its operations in Tranquebar. These exhibitions provide insight into the lives of the Danes who lived and worked in Tranquebar. Today, the fort is a major tourist attraction run by the Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department. The monument is designated as historically significant under the Monument and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1966. It is an excellent spot to learn about the history of Danish colonialism in India while also exploring the fort's architecture and relics.

Tranquebar's archaeological importance extends beyond its colonial legacy. Excavations have revealed artifacts from the Sangam period indicating that this region was a thriving port long before the arrival of European settlers. The coastal erosion and recurring natural calamities, such as the 2004 tsunami, have also brought attention to the need for preserving Tranquebar's archaeological sites.

## Conclusion

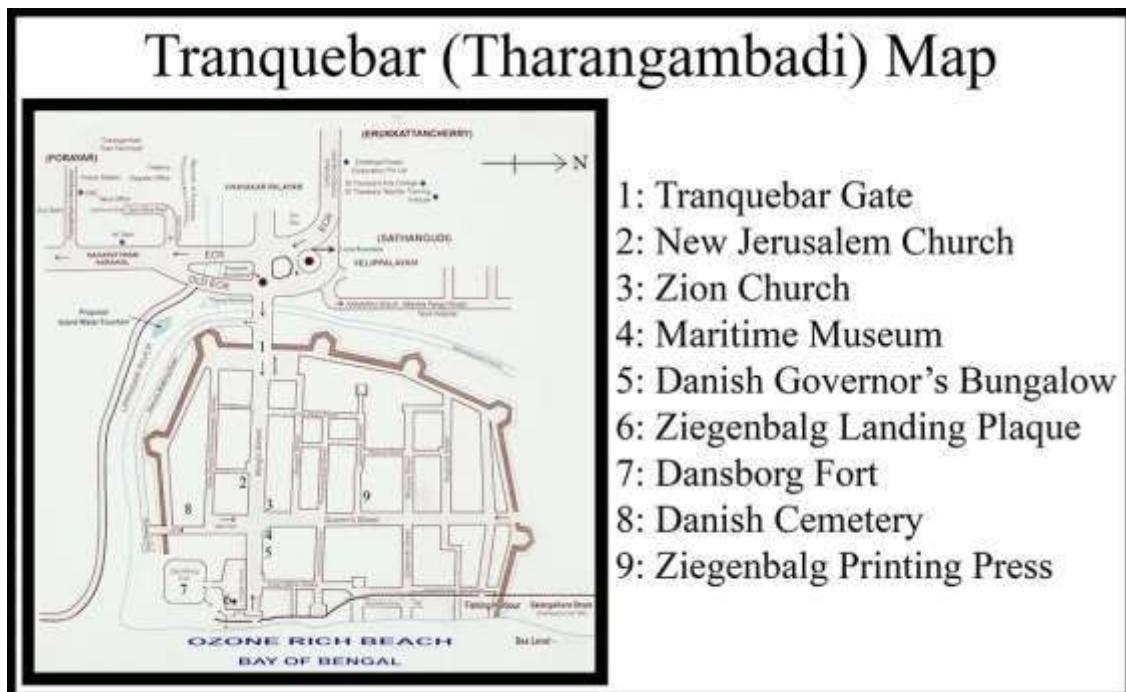
Tranquebar is an archaeological site. It is a testament to India's multicultural past and resilience. As efforts to preserve its heritage continue, Tranquebar stands as a bridge between history and modernity, inviting the world to explore its unique narrative of cultural fusion and maritime legacy. Tranquebar served as a cultural interaction centre between Denmark and India during the Danish colonial period. It witnessed the mingling of Danish and Indian cultures, resulting in a distinct cultural legacy. It holds a pride of place in Indian History for the harmonious coexistence of Hindus, Muslims and Christians for centuries together. It served as district head-quarters during the inceptive period of English rule. Today, the fort is a major tourist attraction run by the Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department.

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## Annexure II

### The territory of Tranquebar 1730



### Dansborg Fort





## Museum - Tarangambadi



## Printing Press





**Tarangambadi - Tamil Nadu Government Museum**



