

Original Research Article

Recapping the Archaeological Excavations at Korkai: An Important Port City of the Sangam Pandyas

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Abstract

South India has a long history and rich cultural heritage, yet till the arrival of the Britishers in South India, the people have no idea about the glory of their past and the achievements of their predecessors. After the coming of the Britishers, they realized the glorious past of the South Indians and through archaeological excavations they started to bring the hidden past to light. For instance, the first archaeological excavation was held at Pallavaram near Chennai by a British Geologist named Robert Bruce Foote in 1863. It confirmed the existence of the Palaeolithic settlements in South India. Similar excavations were conducted at Korkai, Adichanallur and Arikamedu. It revealed the trade contact of the ancient Tamils with the foreign countries and so it added more glory to South India among the countries across the world. Following that, innumerable excavations were conducted in South India far and wide. After India's Independence, through the Archaeological Survey of India, the government undertook many excavations in order to bring back the buried antiquity of South India. This article entitled "Recapping the Archaeological Excavations at Korkai: An Important Port City of the Sangam Pandyas", is going to remind the great antiquity of South India to the current generation.

Keywords: Archaeological Survey of India, Artifacts, Excavation, Remains, Unearthed.

Introduction

Archaeological excavation is the process of unearthing material remains from the past to study the human past. In short, excavation is the way to obtain material remains by digging the earth for study in archaeology. Archaeological excavation was not born overnight. It evolved through the centuries and blossomed into what we call archaeological excavation today. South India has a long history and rich cultural heritage. In the political field it witnessed the emergence of so many great dynasties like Chera, Chola, Pandya, Pallava, Imperial Chola etc. In society, it gave due importance to the social values like chastity, family etc. Similarly, it has a glorious economic history, because it had trade relations with the foreign countries. For the cultural development it produced three Sangams. But till the arrival of the Britishers in South India, the people have no idea about the glory of their past and the achievements of their predecessors. After the coming of the Britishers, they realized the glorious past of the South Indians and through archaeological excavations they started to bring the hidden past to light. For instance, the first archaeological excavation was held at Pallavaram near Chennai by a British Geologist named Robert Bruce Foote in 1863. It confirmed the existence of the Palaeolithic settlements in South India. Similar excavations were conducted at Korkai, Adichanallur and Arikamedu. It revealed the trade contact of the ancient Tamils with the foreign countries and so it added more glory to South India among the countries across the world. Following that, uncountable excavations were conducted in South India far and wide. After India's Independence, through the Archaeological Survey of India, the government undertook many excavations in order to bring back the buried antiquity of South India. This article entitled "Recapping the Archaeological Excavations at Korkai: An Important Port City of the Sangam Pandyas", is going to remind the great antiquity of South India to the current generation.

The Sangam Pandyas

The Pandyas were one of the oldest dynasties having the privileges of having a continuous history upto 16th century A.D. The name Pandya is derived from the word Pandu which means ancient. The ancient epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha refer to them. The earliest Pandya ruler was Vadimbambaninra Pandya also called Nediyan. Their emblem was fish. The Pandyas were credited with the establishment of three Sangams. Since the Pandyas ruled the Tamil country, they were called Thennavan.

Geographical Location

Korkai was an important port city and also the initial capital of the Ancient Pandyas. It is at present situated as an insignificant village in the Thoottukudi district of Tamil Nadu. It is located on the northern side of river Tamiraparani and is in the north east of Srivaikundam by 20 Kms and by 15 Kms from Adichanallur. It is also positioned about 6 Kms from the shore of Bay of Bengal. The place Korkai has so many historical references.



Geographical Location of Korkai

Historical References

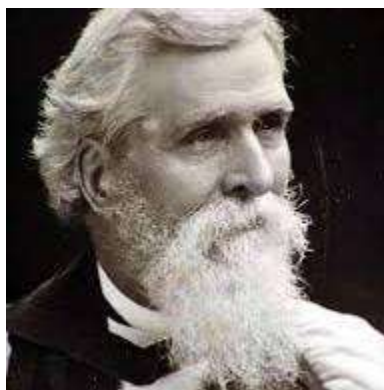
Korkai has been invariably referred to by so many people. Periplus refers to it as 'Comari', which was a cape and a harbour. He states that this region from Comara to Colchi (Korkai) had pearl fisheries, which were worked by sentenced criminals and the region was owned by the Pandyas. Ptolemy refers to the place as 'Kolkhai' and says that it was an emporium. Pliny has also attested this and gave it a very high position among all valuables exported from Tamil country to the west.

Similarly Sanskrit literature also refers to this city. Arthasastra refers to this city located on the bank of river Tamiraparani and was famous for pearl fishing. In Arthasastra, Kautilya relates that pearls were found in Kavata of the Pandyan country (here Kavata may be identified with Korkai) on the banks of river Tamiraparani. Kalidasa in his Raghuvamsa also attests the obtainability of pearls in abundance in the mouth of river Tamiraparani. The Hathigumpha inscription of Kharavela of Kalinga states that the King Kharavela received from the Kings of South India among other things rich presents of pearls. This information affirms the fact that Korkai served as an important pearl fishing city of the ancient Pandyas.

Ancient Tamil literature offers much information regarding the city of Korkai and its international links. Historian and retired Professor A. Sivasubramanian said that Korkai has been referred to in various ancient Tamil literatures including Silappathikaram, Kalithogai, Akananuru and Aingurunuru. It was called 'Pandya- Kavada' in Kalithogai. Ahananuru mentions that the city Korkai was situated within a fort and it was famous for pearl fishing. It further states that the pearls fished from Korkai were very famous and had a good name for it. Silappadikaram refers to this city as one of the popular ports of the time.

The First Historical Excavation

Korkai has an antiquity of its own having urn burials and megalithic objects. Excavations were also done in this site to trace its history. In 1876 Robert Caldwell did excavation in Korkai and its adjoining places. He found an urn burial which was eleven feet in circumference and contained objects such as human bones, small black polished wares etc. in most of the urns. Finally, he concludes that the ancient level of Korkai was about eight feet below its present level which itself is proof of its great antiquity.



Robert Caldwell

In addition to that the department of Archeology also conducted excavations, where a large number of shells, rings, potsherds etc. were found which all belonged to the coarse variety of the medieval period. A large number of inscribed potsherds bearing Tamil characters assignable to the period from 3rd century B.C. to 2nd century A.D. were also noticed in the layers. In some other trenches, bone pieces and black and red potsherds, inscribed potsherds etc. were also found.



Some early discoveries from Korkai

Other Excavations

After 52 years of the first historical excavations at Korkai, again it was excavated. The Tamil Nadu Department of Archeology had surveyed the region back in 1968 under the headship of Director, Dr. R. Nagaswamy and it is said to be the first survey by the state in Tamil Nadu.



Dr. R. Nagaswamy

His excavation unearthed a structure with nine courses of bricks in six rows at the depth of two- and- a half feet from surface level and three large sized rings placed one over the other, below the brick course. The artifacts collected from Korkai in 1968 were initially stored at a museum in Korkai village, however, it was shifted to Madurai and Chennai when the museum was closed in late 90's. Because of these excavations so many hidden facts were brought into light. These excavations also proved the historicity of Korkai that is mentioned in the ancient literature. Through this article, it tries to recap once again the glory of Korkai in various aspects in those days. It is believed that this article will create an idea about the antiquity of Korkai among the current generation.

As a Centre of Political Power

Korkai was the center of political activities. In the early historical period Korkai was the capital of the early Pandyas. By virtue, the king's palace and fort establishments were situated there. The Sangam literature such as Madurai Kanchi, Silapadikaram, Manimekalai, Natrinai etc. refers about the political history of Korkai and they say that the Pandyan Kings assumed titles such as Korkai Vendan, Korkai Koman, Korkai Porunan etc. which testifies the importance of Korkai. In the beginning of the Christian Era, Korkai was the capital and an important port city of the Pandyas. But in due course, as the Pandyas shifted their capital to the present-day Madurai, subsequently, Korkai lost its importance. However, Korkai remained to be their subsidiary capital and they appointed a crown prince or an heir apparent to the throne who resided at Korkai to control the important affairs by camping there. It shows the political importance of Korkai during the period of the ancient Pandyas.

As a Trade Centre

Foreign Travelers like Strabo, Pliny, Ptolemy, the author of *Periplus of Erythraean Sea* mentioned about the international trade of the Pandyas with the Roman empire through the port at Korkai. Strabo says that embassies were sent to the court of Augustus Caesar of Rome from the Pandyan kingdom to promote trade. He further says that he himself saw 120 ships laded with pearls and other articles. *Periplus* and Ptolemy agree that Korkai was the headquarters of Pearl fishery by the time. It is stated that the Greek and the Roman ladies increasingly used Pandyan pearls for their personal adornment. Pliny says that the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra was very fond of using Pandyan pearls. It seems likely that Roman trade in pearls was increased after the discovery of Hippalus due to the heavy demand of the Greek and Roman ladies for their personal adornment.



Pearl

Apart from literary evidence, through archeological excavations, researchers have found Roman ware and Rouletted ware from Korkai. This evidence testifies to the fact that Korkai was an internationally reputed trade centre of the time.

As a minting Industry

For the purpose of corroborating the international trade with the city of Korkai, a large number of coins both indigenous and foreign were found at Korkai. Prof. R. P. Sethupillai feels by taking into account numerous coins that the Pandya kings had their akkasalai (mint) at Korkai. Among them the copper and silver punch marked coins were collected from different places around Korkai in large numbers. These coins bear the symbol of stars, wheels and other small marks and are irregularly punched here and there. They are commonly called punch- marked coins. The gold coins of the Pandas bear the distinguishing Pandya figure of the fish with ancient Nagari letters. In order to prove this, there was a reference in Sangam Literature, when Pandyan Nedumchezhiyan died out of grief in the Kannaki Kovalan episode, his younger brother Vertivelchezhiyan, the crown Prince of Korkai ordered the massacre of one thousand goldsmiths. It proves the prevalence of gold smith in and around Korkai. In addition to that, thirty Arabian coins and one Spanish coin were also unearthed from Korkai. The availability of these varieties of coins clearly attests the prevailing of a minting industry at Korkai.

As a Religious Centre

Korkai was also a religious centre. *Peripuls* records the southern extremity of the Indian Peninsula where people used to come here and lead a pious life. It was a center of festivals also. It is stated that every year on a full moon day they celebrate the Korkai festival after the sunset by decorating the city. Ahananuru states that during the time, the city looked like a ship and ladies worshiped God by offering pearls and conches. In order to prove this literary evidence, there was archaeological evidence found through the excavation of 1968. In that excavation found the

ruins of conch- shell cutting factories and centres for splitting open pearl oysters. It proved the religious importance of Korkai during the period of the early Pandyas.

Decline of Korkai

A close study of the above, it is known that Korkai was an important port city that flourished during the early centuries of Christian Era. Because of its pearls, foreigners came and settled there and traded with the Tamil people. As a result of it, Tamil Kings acquired more and more wealth. By dint of this wealth the Tamil kings established a stable government, maintained a standing army, patronized religion and promoted arts and culture. But unfortunately, while the Roman empire collapsed in the 3rd Century A.D. its trade with Korkai also collapsed. In the meantime, the Roman Emperor Nero passed an Act to prevent the use of gold as medium of exchange as it drained the Roman economy. As international trade declined, the importance of Korkai also lost its importance. At the same time due to natural calamity Korkai port might have submerged and became unfit for use. Therefore, the Pandya kings shifted their capital to Madurai after the 5th Century A.D. Subsequently, the people involved in trade and commerce also shifted their residence to Madurai.

Conclusion

Korkai is one of the ancient archaeological sites in South India. The first excavation at Korkai was undertaken by Caldwell and following that innumerable excavations were held at the place. All these continuous findings have made clear the antiquity of South India and the existence of a fine civilization for a long time. A systematic exploration and excavation in that area will yield rare antiquities which will throw new light to rewrite the history of Ancient Tamil Nadu in proper perspective. But nowadays because of our busy life we are forgetting the antiquity of our land and so it is the duty of every historian to recap the excavations of Korkai. It is believed that through this kind of attempts one can remind the great antiquity and the glory of our land to the current generation.

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