

Medieval Ports and Maritime Activities on the North Malabar Coast of India

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Abstract

The Malabar Coast of India (Lat. 8° and 13° N, and Long. 74° 50' and 77° 50'E) is strategically positioned in the navigational network of the Indian Ocean region. From Early Historic times, this region witnessed intense maritime activities. While there exist many studies on the Early Historic (300 BCE to 600 CE) and Modern period (1500 to 1950 CE), medieval maritime activities of Kerala have not received due attention. The Arab and Chinese sources and the Geniza documents help us to understand the maritime history of this region. Indian, Chinese, Arab and Jewish merchants were active, with Kozhikode and Pantalayini Kollam emerging as important ports on the North Malabar Coast. This paper discusses the maritime activities on north Malabar Coast (from ca. 600 CE to 1500 CE) in general, and the dynamic around the above-mentioned ports in particular, based on textual and archaeological sources.

Key words: Maritime Archaeology, Ibn Batutta, Malabar, Ports, Indian Ocean Trade

Introduction

India is strategically positioned in the navigational networks of the Indian Ocean region that connect the eastern and western worlds. The landscape of India is like a honeycomb that hangs in the "Indian Ocean-scape," fanned by the southwest and northeast monsoons, which facilitate cultural exchanges and cross-fertilization across the ocean. India has been a source of ideologies which have influenced, and natural resources that have attracted people from different regions of Asia, Europe and Africa. Because of proximity, variation in the internal and external cultural factors and the

available natural resources, the Indian coastal landscapes have had different micro-regions. The North Malabar Coast of India (Fig. 1) is one such micro-region that witnessed the rise of many maritime centres, and it has occupied a significant place in the maritime history of India. An overview of the maritime history of this region from ca. 600 to 1500 CE is presented in this paper.

The Region

North Malabar lies (Lat. 11° and 13° N, and Long. 74° 50' and 77° 50'E) in the

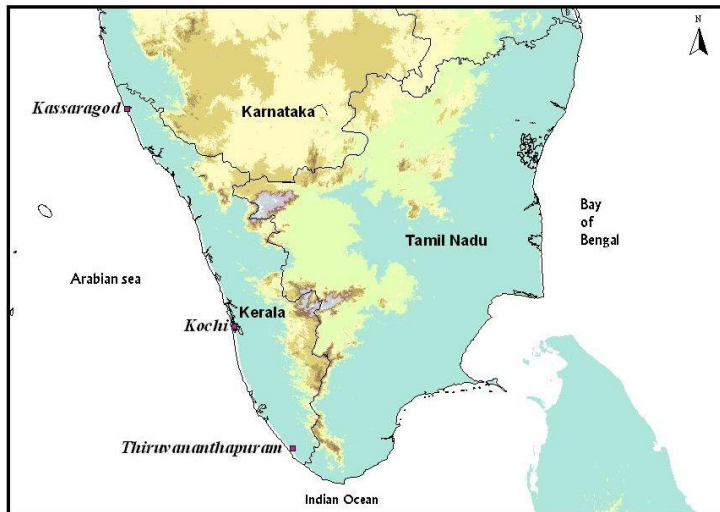


Fig. 1 Location map of Kerala. (Selvakumar, 2014)

southwestern corner of India. This region, bounded by the Arabian Sea in the west and by the Western Ghats in the east, is drained by several rivers, and along the sea coast, bays and backwater lakes occur. The river mouths serve as landing points for ships and the rivers support inland navigation. Important *loci* on the coast have been the promontory-

like features with bays near Koyilandy, Kannur and Ezhilmala, which offer secure contexts for the ships. The region is favored by the Southwest Monsoon and it has an annual rainfall of around 3000 mm. Kerala has forests with resources such as wood and spices, including pepper. Presence in the terminal zone of the Indian subcontinent gives Kerala an advantageous position in the Indian Ocean maritime networks.

Previous Research

A few studies are available on the maritime history of North Malabar Coast. History of the port towns of Kozhikkode (Narayanan, 2006) and Pantalayini Kollam (Raghava Varier, 2003) has received scholarly attention. The medieval commercial activities of this region are discussed by Karashima (2002), Chakravarti (2008, 2012) and Habib (2011) as part of developments in the Indian Ocean region. Sila Tripathi et al., (2005) discuss about a stone anchor found near Hydross Palli Mosque. None of the medieval

ports have been excavated. A surface survey of the ports of this region was undertaken by the author from 2005 to 2007.

Sources

Historical texts assist in understanding the maritime history of the Malabar Coast. The inscriptions from southern India published under *South Indian Inscriptions and Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* are useful for studying the commercial activities. The *Mushika Vamsa Kavyam*, considered to be the earliest known historical text of India, is useful for understanding the history

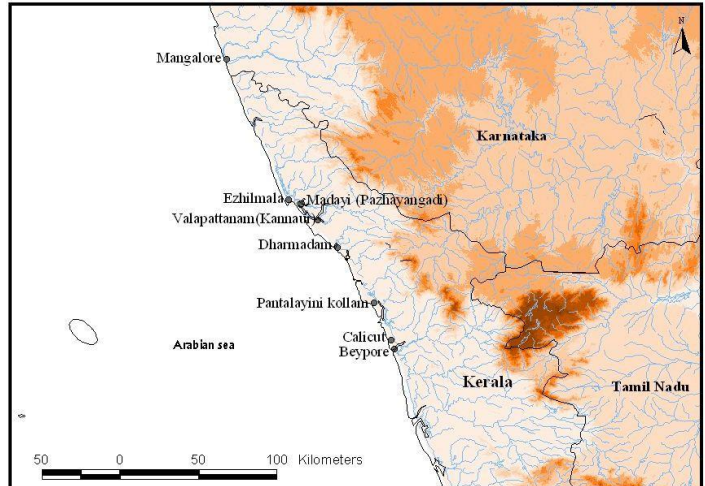


Fig. 2 Ports of the Malabar Coast. (Selvakumar, 2014)

of North Malabar. For reconstructing maritime history, external sources are very crucial, as they provide an Oceanic perspective, which is absent in the local sources. Foreign accounts of Marco Polo (Murray, 1845) and the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta give details on the ports of Malabar (Gibb et al., 1971). The Chinese sources (Raghava Varier, 2003) and the Geniza documents are very important for understanding the trade dynamics of the Malabar Coast (Goitein and Friedman, 2008).

In this paper, the maritime activities are visualized in terms of: A) ports/settlements and landscape features, B) communities and the agencies, C) commodities, D) maritime corridors and E) navigation and shipbuilding.

A. Medieval Ports/Maritime centers and the Landscape of the North Malabar Coast

The landscape of Kerala is very rich in natural resources, especially pepper, cardamom, timber and iron. In addition, Malabar Coast is strategically located facing the ports of West Asia and North Africa. Besides, its congenial climate was a factor that attracted migrants and maritime agencies. Calicut (Kozhikkode), Pantalayini Kollam and Mangalore were the major medieval ports of the North Malabar Coast (Fig. 2), besides the smaller ports such as Cumbala, Kasaragod, Nileswhar, Eli, Baliapatnam,

Dharmapatam, Chombaye, Badagara, Pantalayini Kollam, Parappanangadi and Ponnani (Kurup, 1997). A few specialized centers, e.g. Beypore, which served as a major shipbuilding centre in the late historical period, also perhaps existed in the medieval period. The smaller ports and the hinterland settlements also had an important role in the economic system and they supported the larger ports. The larger ports-cum-political-commercial centers developed due to the resource concentration, external demand for commodities, and the nature of organization of local polities.

Mangalore

Mangalore (12°51'35"N, 74°49'57"E) was an important port catering to the hinterlands of Karnataka region and northern Malabar, and it was a major commercial centre, as it figures in many travelers' accounts. It is identified with Ibn Battuta's Manjarun, a major estuary of Malabar. It is said to have had 4000 Mohammedan merchants including the greatest merchants from Yemen and Persia and was rich in spices and ginger. It was here that the Jewish merchant, whose letters have been preserved in the Cairo Geniza, was involved in commercial activities in the twelfth century (*Goitein and Friedman, 2008*).

Ezhilmala

Ezhilmala or Mount Eli (12°2'39"N, 75°11'51"E) was another important centre along the Malabar Coast. The hill here served as an important landmark, as it is prominently visible from the sea. This hill is considered to be part of Early Historic chief Nannan's territory. Ezhilmala is identified as the northern most limits where the ships of China reach, according to Ibn Battuta. The mount Hili was considered sacred to Mohammedans and Hindus. The existence of a mosque is also mentioned by Ibn Battuta (**Gibb et al.**, 1971). It is no surprise, since in the Indian tradition that such prominent landscape features (e.g. hills) are considered sacred. Venetian traveler Marco Polo, who visited India at the end of the thirteenth century mentions mount Eli, i.e. Ezhilmala. The nearby settlement of Madayi is also important and in the compound of a mosque (considered to be medieval in age), West Asian glazed ceramics were found in 2008. Vallabha II, The king of Mushika (Mushika=rat in Sanskrit and Eli in Malayalam, and hence the Mount Eli) dynasty founded the ports of Madayi and Valapattinam (Vallabha Pattanam=Valapattanam). Narayankannur inscription found

near Ezhilmala gives details about the trade guild of Manigramattars, who were the protectors of the temple land (Raghava Varier, 2003: 160). After Ezhilmala, the port of Jurkannan is mentioned as the next destination by Ibn Battuta, and its king was held in high regard. The exact location of this place is unknown. Dadkannan is the next town mentioned and it could be identified with Dharmadam. Fattan is mentioned as the place before Pantalayini Kollam and it had Brahmin population. Mention is made of a mosque, which was used by strangers, by Ibn Battuta.

Pantalayini Kollam

Ibn Battuta mentions Fandarina as the town next to Fattan. Pantalayini Kollam (different from the port of Kurakkenikollam (Quilon) of South Malabar) was an important port on the Malabar Coast, located a little north of Koyilandy. This port figures in the accounts of Ibn Battuta as Fandarina and it is identified with “Shaojunan” of Daoyi Zgilue (Aoyagi and Ogawa, 2004: 51). Its location is close to a bay, which is considered an ideal location for wintering of the Chinese ships (Raghava Varier, 2003). Name of a merchant called Kantancantirayya Chetti from Pantalayini Kollam occurs in an inscription (ca. 1234-35) from Vizagapattinam, a medieval port on the Andhra Coast (*Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy*, Ins. 98 of 1909). Mostly ceramics of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were unearthed from Pantalayini Kollam (Aoyagi and Ogawa, 2004: 52). This town also had Jewish and Arab merchants.

Calicut

Calicut or Kozhikkode was a major port in the northern part of Kerala. The reason for the development of Calicut was perhaps the Samuthiri (Zamorins) kingdom. In addition, its location in north Malabar directly opposite to the Gulf is very significant. Calicut seems to have emerged as a major trade centre mainly from the thirteenth century (Narayanan, 2006). According to Das Gupta, before the 13th century the Persian Gulf was an important commercial region which had direct connection with Chinese ports via Kollam in southern Kerala. It has to be noted that in 2014 a large hoard of Chinese coins were unearthed from Southern Kollam. This trade route was disrupted with the fall of Abbasid Caliphate in 1258 CE, due to the Mongol invasion. As a result, the Persian Gulf lost its importance and the Egyptian Karimi merchants gained prominence and Calicut gained importance (Das Gupta, 1967: 5). Marco polo who visited Calicut in

1293-94, mentions that Calicut was an important port and was famous for spice trade (Raghava Varier, 2003). Ibn Batutta also gives a detailed account of Calicut port (**Gibb et al.**, 1971). The Samuthiris were the leading political powers here from the thirteenth century. They could raise a strong army; build an alliance with the Muslim traders to develop commercial activities in this town. Kamal-ud-Din *Abdur Razzaq* ibn Ishaq, a Persian ambassador to the court of Samuthiris (Zamorin of Calicut), gives details on Calicut, which seems to have emerged after the decline of southern Kollam. The Chinese admiral Zheng He touched Calicut eight times (Chakravarti, 2012: 85), which suggests that Calicut had a settlement of Chinese merchants. The Samuthiris also had maintained good relations with the Chinese empire. Calicut also figures in the accounts of Marco Polo and *Niccolò de' Conti*. Obviously Calicut was a large cosmopolitan centre with Arab, Jewish, Chinese and local merchants, and well known for pepper and other spices and the famous textiles called Calico. The dominance of the Arabs could have reduced the significance of the Chinese merchants at a later date.

B. Communities and Agencies

Apart from the local people, who were mainly suppliers and consumers of goods, the merchant communities played an active role in the maritime activities, which cannot develop merely with the presence of one group; they are the result of interactions and exchange involving multiple partners. This is very much evidenced by the Jewish, Indian, Arab and Chinese communities who were involved in the mercantile transactions of the Malabar Coast. After the 12th century the Arab traders were dominant on the coastal landscape. However, numerous merchant guild inscriptions in the interior regions suggest that local traders were also dominant in many parts of South India (Karashima, 2002.)

Geniza documents and the Jewish Trader of the Malabar Coast

Geniza documents are an important source of medieval merchants of the western Indian Ocean (*Goitein and Friedman, 2008*). These documents have been compiled and edited by Goitein, and Amitav Gosh has published on the contexts of the letters (Ghosh, 2012). Abraham Bin Yiju was a Tunisian Jewish merchant who had set up a brass factory on the Malabar Coast perhaps near Mangalore and was sending commodities from Malabar region. He had married a girl from Malabar and lived on the Malabar

Coast for about 17 years. The correspondence between him and his agents is preserved in the Cairo Geniza documents. These documents help us understand the connections and the importance of the trade. The letters mention about a Nambiyar who was a *Nakhuda*, a ship captain. Geniza documents also prove that pepper was the dominant commodity in the trade, and it adds that iron was also exported from the Malabar coast. The fact that the Jewish trader set up a brass factory here reveals the entrepreneurial activities of the merchants across the oceans. The luxury commodities that the Jewish merchant demanded from his contacts in West Asia, give a glimpse on the personal preference of the merchants.

Medieval Merchant Guilds

From the early medieval period, trade guilds were active in South India, including the Malabar Coast. The Terisapally copper plates of ninth century mention about the Anjuvannam and Manigramattar (Abraham, 1988). Mercantile activities of medieval South India were very dynamic from about 13th century CE. Inscriptions mention the activities of Nanadesis and Tisaiyayirattu Ainurrvar. Merchant guild inscriptions occur in several places of Kerala: Pantalayini Kollam, Ramantali, Talakad, and Wayanad (Shanmugam, 2002: 297-307).

C. Commodities

Commodities are important ingredients of maritime trade. As social complexities increased, communities required prestige goods from long distance for various reasons including social hierarchy and warfare.

Pepper

Pepper was an important exported commodity in the maritime trade of the Malabar Coast. Pepper grows naturally and it was also cultivated extensively in medieval Kerala. The bulk of the pepper production gave Malabar Coast an advantage in the spice trade of the Indian Ocean.

Horses

Horse, an important animal of prestige (Fig. 3), transport and warfare was in great demand in the medieval period,



Fig. 3 The Chera King of Kerala depicted on a horse in the 11th century paintings of Brihadhiswara Temple, Thanjavur. (Selvakumar, 2014)

when feudalism and warfare were on the rise. The Sangam Tamil texts of the early period indicated that horse and chariots were symbols of the chiefs and royalty. To maintain political supremacy, the local rulers acquired horses very extensively and as result the horse traders, from northern part of Kerala, amassed a lot of wealth and numerous inscriptions mention their activities in various parts of South India. Kudirai Chettis (horse traders) of Malaimandalam figure frequently in the inscriptions and because of their access to the western coast, these traders could dominate horse trade in South India.

Other Commodities

In addition to prestige goods, subsistence goods such as rice and wheat, and fine clothes, semi precious stones, metal and camphor were also traded. The Geniza documents indicate the preference of the Jewish trader for good quality paper and other personal items.

D. Maritime Corridors

The Malabar Coast represents one of the historically important maritime stretches in the Indian Ocean world. The Malabar Coast was part of four important corridors of trade. Corridor (A) covered from Gujarat to the Malabar Coast; the second corridor (B) linked the east coast of India. The international corridors that connected with the ports of West Asia (C) and with China and the East (D) are the other two. The ships from Malabar came to Gujarat with spices, timber and areca nut and returned with clothes, pepper and horses (Habib, 2011). The merchants from the Malabar Coast were active in the medieval Andhra coast. It is also clear that Bengal supplied rice to Maldives Island and in turn shells were exported from the Maldives (Chakravarti, 2012: 86).

It is considered that the Chinese Junks sailed up to the Malabar Coast and the goods were transported into the ships of the western world from Malabar Coast (Aoyagi and Ogawa, 2004: 53). It was convenient for the Chinese sailors to navigate up to the Malabar Coast, and similarly the Arab sailors could continue to operate from the West Coast of India. The Malabar Coast interlinked these eastern and western Indian Ocean realms, beautifully and acted as an intermediary (transit) space in the “Indian Ocean scape”.

E. Navigation and Shipbuilding

Navigation is the key factor that facilitated maritime enterprise. The texts give a detailed picture of the navigation during this period. The tradition of shipbuilding was well established in this region in the medieval period (Kurup, 1997; Greeshmalatha and Rajamanickam, 1997).



Fig. 4 Beypore Boatbuilding yard. (Selvakumar, 2014)

Beypore still has a tradition of building large ships called *Uru*, which are now manufactured for the Gulf market (Fig. 4). The watercraft of *Uru* is mentioned in the medieval inscription of Mottupalli of Andhra Pradesh. The reason for the emergence of large shipbuilding industries in the north Malabar seems to be the availability of good quality timber in the Nilambur forests (Kurup, 1997). A stone anchor reported by Sila Tripathi et al., (2005) near Kannur belonged to a large ship. The Indians also owned large ships as evidenced by the Geniza documents and Ibn Batutta indirectly mentions that he sailed in a ship that was produced in India. The abundance of teak wood and *Anjili* (*Artocarpus hirsutus*) here made the building of large ships easier. Ibn Batutta mentions about three types of Chinese ships that plied on the Malabar Coast. The medieval sailboat excavated at Thaikkal in southern Kerala displays Southeast Asian and Chinese features (Tomalin et al., 2004; Selvakumar, 2006). The maritime contacts obviously brought new elements into local shipbuilding traditions.

Discussions

Maritime activities are the result of a number of factors, both internal and external. Efflorescence of culture, elite consumers and organized state are essential factors for long distance trade. The emergence of empires in West Asia, India and China boosted

the maritime activities in the Indian Ocean. Fluctuations were also seen in the intensity of the trade due to changes in the political and economic factors in the Indian Ocean region. The historical developments in medieval India reveal that maritime dynamics of this region is partly due to the core cultural developments in the interior and partly due to external factors. The coasts are regions where external and internal factors fuse. The coastal landscapes at times remain entirely distinct cultural regions from the interiors, because of the external dynamic. From the developments it is clear that the fortunes of ports fluctuated according to the political scenario. We notice the rise of Calicut and the decline of Kollam in the medieval period. From the fifteenth century, the long distance voyage declined and the different sectors of the trade routes from West Asia to China were navigated in separate lags and were dominated by different navigators; the route from west Asia to India was dominated by Arab navigators, while those from India to Malacca were dominated by Indian navigators and the Chinese navigators dominated the stretch between Malacca and South China (Das Gupta, 1967).

Calicut, Pantalayini Kollam and Mangalore were the major ports of the North Malabar Coast. The reasons for the rise of major ports in North Malabar could be attributed to the strong political power, especially the Samuthiris. They did realize the importance of the maritime trade and the dynamics that could bring wealth and prestige goods for the territory, and supported the activities of the merchants. With regard to the goods of trade, pepper was an important commodity exported from this region, while horse was one of the important items of import. In addition timber was also exported and reference is also made to the construction of ships on the Malabar Coast. Camphor was imported from Southeast Asia and carnelian, from Gujarat. The Jewish traders seem to have been active in the trade activities from about ninth century in Kerala. From the analysis of evidence, one could see the predominance of Arab traders from the 13th century in South India. Similar pattern is also seen on the east coast. This could be attributed to the dominant role of West Asian kingdoms in medieval Asian history. The development of strong states, state policies and consumerist elites and materialistic, enterprising merchants were essential for the maritime commercial activities. Urbanization and commercial activities, including the proliferation of merchant guilds, took stronger roots in South India from the thirteenth century, which could be attributed to the “medieval

globalization” (a world system) that was sweeping across the Indian Ocean Regions. The historical sources clearly indicate that external factors were as dominant as internal factors in the development of long distance maritime trade.

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Biography

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