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DISCOVERING THE PAST: THE NOYYAL RIVER VALLEY EXCAVATIONS AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

The Noyyal River Valley, located in the Coimbatore region of Tamil Nadu, is an important archaeological zone. Explorations and excavations at Vellalore, Sulur, Boluvampatti, Perur, Kodumanal and Molapalayam have unearthed Roman coins, semi-precious stone beads, terracotta figurines, terracotta beads, iron tools, shell ornaments, different types of pottery, inscriptions in Tamil-Brahmi and Vatteluthu scripts, and burial remains, etc. These findings reveal strong trade connections with the Romans and other regions of India. The evidence of bead-making, iron and steel making, weaving tools, shell ornament making and pottery industries shows that early societies in the region were prosperous and skilled. Additionally, evidence like megalithic burial sites, habitation layers and structural remains proves the existence of a planned community spanning from the 3rd century BCE to the 9th century CE. On the whole, the excavations conducted in the Noyyal River Valley contributed to know about the socio-cultural history of western Tamil Nadu during the early period.

KEYWORDS: Noyyal River Valley, Archaeological Excavations, Roman Trade, Megalithic Culture, Socio-Cultural History.



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Introduction

The Noyyal River Valley, located at Coimbatore region in Tamil Nadu, India, is a remarkable site enriched with archaeological wonders. Recent excavations in this area have provided new knowledge into the ancient civilisations that once flourished along the riverbanks. These diggings have uncovered a rich cultural heritage that extends back thousands of years and provides a fascinating understanding of ancient India's social, cultural and technological progress. From ancient settlements to burial sites and beautifully crafted pottery to various artefacts, the findings in the Noyyal River Valley paint a rich mosaic life in South India during ancient times. Every findings reveals the area's past and the values of human experience that developed in this region throughout the ages. This article explores the significant discoveries made during the excavations conducted in the Noyyal River valley, very specifically at Vellalore, Sulur, Boluvampatti, Perur, Kodumanal, and Molapalayam. These places are very prominent not only for their proximity but also for the rich findings of artefacts disclosing the socio-cultural values of this region.

A small description of River Noyyal

The River Noyyal, also known as *Kāñci Māṇadhi*, is a tributary of the River Cauvery. It originates from the Bolampatty Valley of the Vellingiri Hills.ⁱ The river flows through the heart of the Coimbatore district and continues its journey through the Tiruppur and Erode taluks before ultimately merging with the Cauvery River in Tiruchirapalliⁱⁱ. Although it is often a mere jungle stream, drying up for several months of the year, the Noyyal River is more than just a geographical feature - it is a lifeline that has shaped the landscape, culture and economy of western Tamil Nadu.ⁱⁱⁱ

The River Noyyal may flow through a narrow path, but its importance to the people is comparable to the nutritional value of small grains for the human body. The Tamil word 'noy' means 'small grain', which is rich in nutrients^{iv}. Hence, the river derived its name from Noyyal.

The banks of rivers have long been historically the birthplace of civilizations. For example, the Egyptian civilization flourished along the banks of the Nile River and the Indus Valley civilization developed near the Indus River, by providing early humans with a comfortable and sustainable environment, river valleys are often referred to as the 'cradle of civilizations.' River Noyyal has also been a habitat for humans since pre-historic times. The river's banks and those of its tributaries have supported numerous human settlements over the centuries. However, the Noyyal basin stands out for its distinctive past. Archaeological findings, including over two

thousand Roman coins and various other antiquities, have been unearthed along the river's banks, revealing the region's rich history.^v The presence of River Noyyal has undoubtedly played an important role in the development of civilization in this region.

Significant archaeological findings in Noyyal river valley

The Noyyal River is known for its archaeological wealth. Purana author of Perur has sung '*Maṇi vārip poṇ kōlithu malar kalundhithēṇ virāi aṇiyarath thavaṇdhōḍu maruṇīr Kāñcī*' and '*Atirpuṇal valakaratha arpudha Kāñcī*' here '*Kāñcī*' denotes Noyyal. It is a river that has been glorified from the Sangam sages to today's poets. Places such as Vellalore, Sulur, Boluvampatti, Perur, Kodumanal and Molapalayam are some of the important archaeological sites in the Noyyal River basin.

Vellalore

Vellalore village in Coimbatore district is located on the southern banks of the River Noyyal^{vi}. Vellalore was known as Annadhana Sivapuri and Thenur^{vii} in the ancient period. It was an important trade centre associated with the Roman economy. More than 500 Roman coins have been found in Vellalore, which were issued in the Roman Empire nearly 2,000 years ago during the rule of emperors such as Augustus, Drusus, Germanicus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius.^{viii}

Many gold ornaments have also been found in this place, including a ring with a tiger motif, a ring engraved with an elephant and cow, a fish-engraved ring, a *Maikōṭi* (type of comb), an ear-sweeping instrument, a ring with stone inlays engraved with the image of a Roman woman combing her hair, a ring engraved with a Greek horseman and a ring with the image of a clown^{ix}. Additionally, a horse grazing scene carved in carnelian stone, about the size of a fingertip, has also been found.^x

Even at present, plenty of artefacts like broken conch, potsherds and certain ornaments were found during surface exploration.

Sulur

Sulur is situated on the left bank of the River Noyyal, 16 km from Coimbatore. Megalithic relics, especially stone hoards, have been found in Sulur, dating back to the 3rd century BCE.

Roman coins, including those from the periods of Augustus and Tiberius, have also been discovered in earthen jars. Additionally, copper coins issued by the Eran heirs, belonging to the 3rd century, have been found in Sulur^{xi}.

Two medieval-period Vatteluthu inscriptions have also been discovered. A village habitation site, located 3 km from Sulur on the left bank of the River Noyyal, has been identified. Archaeological findings include thin and thick varieties of black and red ware, russet-coated ware, and black ware. Semi-precious stone beads have also been collected from Sulur.

Boluvampatti

Boluvampatti is situated in the foothills of the Western Ghats, 22 kilometres away from Coimbatore city. It is located on the western banks of the River Noyyal. Now a small village, Boluvampatti is adjacent to the Nageswara Siva temple in Muttam.

Excavations were conducted at Kottaikadu, 3 kilometres from Boluvampatti village, during the years 1979-1980. Surface exploration yielded large-sized barked bricks and a large number of beautiful terracotta figurines dating back to the 5th to 6th centuries. Some of the terracotta figurines resembled busts of a female, torso, maitreyā, head of a human, head of Buddha, a lion (18th-century C.E), head of an elephant (16th-century C.E), a man of a lion, parrot, tortoise, yāli, yakṣi, and yakṣa figurines.^{xii}

Excavations were conducted at three sites in Boluvampatti. The first trench was laid out on plain ground, while the other two trenches were located on a small, disturbed mound. The first trench yielded no antiquities or pottery. However, the second trench produced numerous antiquities, including 50 semi-precious stone beads of various sizes, a large number of terracotta earlobes^{xiii}, iron objects, potsherds with inscriptions, punch-marked coins, shell bangle pieces, charcoal bits, terracotta lids, cups and a terracotta seal. This terracotta seal has figures of bow, tiger and fish along with the name 'Varmaṇaḥa'.^{xiv} The third trench uncovered 200 semi-precious stone beads^{xv}, 10 terracotta beads, shell bangle pieces, ivory bangles and animal bones. Apart from these two notable sherds were unearthed, among them one is with Tamil Brahmi characters and another is with Vattezhuthu.^{xvi}

Perur

Perur is prominently known for the Patteswarar Shiva temple and the development of Saivism. Constructed during the reign of Kongu Cholas, this temple has been endowed with rich architectural blending. Later, during the Hoysala invasion many beautiful sculptures were made in this temple. They add additional value to the temple architecture. Perur is another historically important town which is situated 6 km west of Coimbatore and lies on the south bank of the river Noyyal. In 2002^{xvii}, five trenches were dug in Perur for excavation purposes. The first trench yielded potsherds, small stone pieces, brickbats, irregularly shaped granite stones, grooved tiles, two postholes and a few bricks. The second trench revealed three pits, a dump, a dark thick tub-shaped clay path and a mud-brick paved flooring banded with a mixture of thick clay and lime. Additionally, a hard flooring made of clay mixed with lime^{xviii} was also discovered. The third trench uncovered two disturbed brick structures, a small posthole and mud flooring. The fourth trench yielded a limited number of potsherds and antiquities. The fifth trench produced a small collection of black and red ware, red ware and russet-coated ware.

The pottery collected from the Perur excavation can be classified into six types they are black and red ware,^{xix} russet-coated painted ware, red slipped ware, black slipped ware, brown slipped ware and red ware (coarse variety). The antiquities obtained from the excavation consist mainly of terracotta objects, as well as items made from shell, iron, lac, glass, copper and other materials. Over 200 beads in various shapes and colours were unearthed during the excavation. These beads were made from agate, carnelian,^{xx} quartz, soapstone, lac, terracotta, shell and glass.^{xxi} In addition to beads, other items collected include bangles, cowries, stone objects, lac objects, metal objects and terracotta objects. The terracotta objects include a female figure (Mother Goddess), a male figure (a devotee), a yakṣa figure^{xxii}, a spindle whorl (*Tākali*), lamps, game pieces, hopscotch boards, smoking pipes, earlobe ornaments, seals and spout knobs featuring various decorations.

From these excavations, four periods of occupation have occurred and there was no gap in the layers. Based on the antiquities that occurred from the excavation a continuous habitation from the 3rd century BCE to 900 CE is proved.^{xxiii}

Kodumanal

Kodumanal, situated in the Perundurai taluk of Erode district, is located on the northern bank of the Noyyal River, a tributary of the Kaveri River. In early Sangam works, such as the Sangam literature '*Pātittiruppatu*,^{xxiv} Kodumanal was referred to as *Kōtumāṇam* and was an important city in ancient times.

Excavations at Kodumanal uncovered 15 trenches and three megalithic monuments. These excavation pits were selected and excavated at two locations: Chelavanankadu and Thoranakadu. The trenches yielded many significant findings, including: many semi – precious stone beads, crystal stone beads, carnelian beads, terracotta objects, terracotta beads, copper objects, gold objects, terracotta blowers^{xxv}, an 18 faced fine crystal bead, conch bangles, conch shells used for making bangles,^{xxvi} glass bangles, a pit (possibly a bin or granary), deer horns, hip – hops (round chips), sharpening stones, dabbers, grooved tiles, bone arrowheads, cotton pieces, iron arrowheads, arrowheads made from iron and bone, bones of cattle and animals, terracotta lamps, terracotta lids, sickles, terracotta spout, terracotta toys, a broken vase, ring stand, perforated sherds, roman pottery, terracotta perforated ware, iron objects, iron ores, iron bangles, posthole, iron rod, iron nails, an iron anthropomorphic figure-like object, urn pieces, round stones, pottery (include the varieties of black and red ware, black ware, red ware, russet coated ware, coarse black ware, black polished ware and red polished ware), Brahmi script sherds^{xxvii}, black and red ware vase contains single Brahmi script on the body of the bowl and pottery with graffiti marks.^{xxviii}

The site revealed two distinct cultural periods: 300 BC - 100 AD (Megalithic period) and 100 AD - 300 AD (Early Historical period)^{xxix}, based on the artefacts, pottery, and soil layers found.

Molapalayam

Molapalayam is situated in the south-eastern corner of the Noyyal river valley, near the hills adjacent to Vadivelampalayam village.^{xxx} This location is situated in the south of Pooluvapatti, along the route to Siruvani. The archaeological site in Molapalayam is situated in Moolakkadu. Here, the surface soil is greyish and contains archaeological materials, including Neolithic potsherds, a polished celt fragment, quern stones, grinding stones and animal bones.

Excavations were conducted at this site in 2021.^{xxxii} Two archaeological excavation pits were laid out, revealing significant evidence. The first pit yielded three storage pits, three human burials, potsherds, bone fragments, stone tools, two beads and two cylindrical conch shells.^{xxxiii} The second pit uncovered a pile of animal bones, a conch bead, a cut piece of conch, a cow horn, a broken polished stone axe, bone tools, grinding stones, charred grains and pottery.

Socio – cultural impact

The explorations and excavations conducted in places like Vellalore, Sulur, Boluvampatti, Perur, Kodumanal, and Molapalayam have shed abundant light on the socio-economic and cultural conditions of this region. These findings indicate that the Noyyal basin was inhabited by a civilized group of people who engaged in extensive manufacturing activities.

A significant number of Roman coins were collected in and around these places, suggesting that the region had thriving trade activities with other parts of India and foreign countries^{xxxiii}. The discovery of various artefacts, such as potsherds in different colours and varieties, iron objects, terracotta objects, semi-precious stone beads and shell and conch bangle pieces, indicates that these regions enjoyed a fair amount of prosperity.

The large collection of beads in different varieties found at these archaeological sites suggests that a flourishing bead-making industry prevailed in these places. The discovery of shell bangle pieces in Boluvampatti and Kodumanal, shell beads in Perur, a conch bead and a cut piece of conch in Molapalayam indicates that these people had connections with coastal region communities and shell industries also flourished in this region. The discovery of hopscotch boards, cowries and terracotta game pieces in Perur suggests that the inhabitants of this region engaged in games and hobby activities during their free time. The uncovered potsherds with graffiti marks and scripts show that these marks were initially engraved to convey a certain message to contemporary society. It served as a communicative tool.

The revealing of various objects, including iron nails, iron rods, iron arrowheads, iron ores, iron bangles, terracotta blowers, terracotta spindle whorls, ivory tools and bone tools with grooves, provides evidence that weaving,^{xxxiv} iron and steel-making industries had flourished well in these places.^{xxxv} The manufacturing of iron and steel was not the only significant industry of these people.

The gemstone industry was another vital mainstay, with the Noyyal basin being renowned for its diverse array of semi-precious stones. These included amethyst, sapphire, carnelian, soapstone, beryl, agate, lapis-lazuli, quartz, and jasper.^{xxxvi} Additionally, the potteries in different varieties such as black and red ware, black ware, red ware, russet coated ware, coarse black ware, black polished ware and red polished ware discovered from these places revealed that pot-making industries prospered in these regions.

Conclusion

Therefore, it was understood that the Noyyal River valley had flourished well with a civilized society involved in many commercial activities. In terms of trade, all the finished products like carnelian beads semi-precious stone beads shells and conch bangles were imported to West Asian and East Asian countries and made this region prosperous. Thus, the river Noyyal valley still remains an epitome of rich culture and trade centres, which plays an important role to the promotion of Coimbatore region as an industrial area in Tamil Nadu.

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^v M. Saradhamani, *Historical sites and Monuments along the river Noyyal (South India) Megalithic period to Medieval age – A study*, Ph.D Thesis, Government Arts College (Autonomous), Coimbatore, 2013, p. 2.

^{vi} T. S. Sridhar, *Coimbatore Mavatta Tholliyal Kaiyedu*, State Department of Archaeology, Chennai, 2011, p. 25.

^{vii} R. Pooingundran, *Perur*, Tamil Nadu Government Archaeological Research Department, 1979.

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- ix T. S. Sridhar, *Coimbatore Mavatta Tholliyal Kaiyedu*, *Op.cit.*, p. 26.
- x *Ibid.*
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- xxv *Ibid.*, p. 12.
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^{xxxv} K. Rajan, *Early Writing System: A Journey from Graffiti to Brahmi*, Pandya Nadu Centre for Historical Research, Madurai, 2015, p. 7.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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