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# The Early Maritime Trade Relations of Kollam: A Historical Introspection

Shaji A.<sup>1</sup> and Adabiya H.<sup>2</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>. School of Distance Education, University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus, Thiruvananthapuram – 695 581, Kerala, India (Email: shajideepam@gmail.com)
  - <sup>2</sup>. Department of History, Iqbal College, Daivappura, Peringammala, Thiruvananthapuram – 695 563, Kerala, India (Email: adabiyaiqbal@gmail.com)
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**Abstract:** Kollam, also known as Quilon or Desinganadu that formed part of present-day Kerala State, had a brisk trade with almost all the ancient civilizations and possessed rich tradition of maritime relations with the foreign countries like the Romans, the Phoenicians, the Arabs, the Chinese, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English through the centuries. Kollam remained an international emporium of world trade and commerce with its rich repository of all sorts of conceivable commercial products. It was one of the most important ports in the east-west trade of Kerala that commanded an important place in maritime relations for several centuries. The Sangam literature furnishes certain valuable information about the maritime contacts of Kollam, especially with the Romans, the Phoenicians, the Arabs, and the Chinese. The imperialism of Marthanda Varma, the Maker of Modern Travancore and interference of western powers like the Dutch and the English adversely affected the trade prospects of Kollam. The subjugation of Kollam under the sway of Travancore and the British reached its culmination through the Subsidiary System initiated by Marquis Wellesley; the Governor General of India through Col. Macaulay, then Political Resident of Travancore. The present study is an attempt to sketch the historical milieu of the maritime relations of Kollam.

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**Keywords:** Kollam, Thangassery, Tarissappalli Copper Plate, Mampalli Plates, Kollam Era, Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, Thankasseril Port

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## Introduction

From time immemorial, India had a rich tradition of maritime contacts in which the ports of Kerala played a pivotal position. Kollam emerged as the most important one among the evolving ports in Kerala that functioned as the centre of trade and commerce. Besides being the land of spices and precious stones, Kollam is blessed with a pleasant climate and enchanting scenic beauty. Kollam was connected with three well-known trade routes during those days. The Persian Gulf Route was extended from the Malabar Coast to the Levantine ports. The second one was the overland route from the Indian passes via the Khyber and the Bolan passes to the Balkh and the Oxus down to the Caspian Sea. The third route ran from the mouth of the Red Sea up to the Arabian Coast.

From prehistoric to modern times Kollam has had an eventful history. Prehistoric and Megalithic remains have been discovered from various places in Kollam. Remains of ancient burials have been unearthed from *Mangadu* near Kollam. The finding from *Mangadu* included pottery, burials, jars, iron objects, beads, bones and charcoal. The pottery consisted of red ware, black and red ware and dull black ware. Megalithic monuments have been found in various parts of Kollam. All this proves the fact that Kollam occupies a prominent place in prehistoric Kerala.

It is attested in the foreign accounts and indigenous sources that the Phoenicians and the Romans were followed by the Arabs and the Chinese who maintained direct trade relations with Kollam. It was the first port where the Chinese ships could come through the Eastern Sea. With the advent of the Portuguese, the cordial relationship between the Chinese and Arabs with the coastal areas of Kerala was broken and conflicts developed. When the European dominance became a reality the centuries old Arab-Chinese trade came to an end after leaving a rich socio-cultural legacy.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The present study is an attempt to unravel the mysteries associated with the early maritime relations of Kollam with foreign countries with the following objectives:

1. To analyze the historical antiquity of Kollam as the centre of attraction for the maritime relations with the foreign countries like the Romans, the Phoenicians, the Arabs, the Chinese, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English through the centuries.
2. To assess the importance of Kollam as the citadel of valuable commodities like precious stones like beryl, crystal, diamonds and sapphire; spices like pepper, cinnamon, ginger, camphor, coral, gold, tin and aluminum and copper besides its rich flora and fauna.
3. To appraise the circumstances that led to the arrival of the maritime powers to this particular part of the world in the context of trade routes and other factors including the climate.
4. To estimate the early phase of maritime contacts with special reference to the Romans, the Phoenicians, the Arabs and the Chinese.
5. To sketch the impact of the maritime contacts and its role in deciding the destiny of Kollam through the ages.
6. To review the factors and forces that contributed to the decline and fall of Kollam as a premier centre of world trade and commerce.

### **Methodology**

The study is largely based on the documentary and non-documentary sources collected from the archival and other research centres in South India. A critical and analytical historical research methodology is employed to unfold the changes in the maritime history of Kollam. The collected sources underwent a thorough system of external as well as internal criticism. The reliability of the sources was analysed in a most dispassionate and objective style.

## **Epistemological Review**

Studies with particular reference to the maritime relations of Kollam are very limited. So far there is no attempt to historicize the commercial contacts of Kollam with the maritime powers all over the world. For the study of the maritime history of Kollam the foreign accounts especially the travelogues constitute an important source of information. Early Christian and Arab travellers spoke very high of Kollam and its commercial importance. The place has been referred to by early writers by different names. It was at one time great political and commercial centre. Early travellers spoke very high of Kollam and its commercial importance. It was at one time a great political and commercial centre. Its fame attracted a large number of foreign travellers to Kollam. These travellers give details of spices and other products of merchandise such as pepper, ginger, ivory, peacocks, apes, etc. The trustworthy nature of the trading community of Kollam described by Benjamin of Tudela, the Jewish traveller from Spain, who travelled in the east between 1159 CE and 1173 CE.

The *Tuhafat-ul –Mujahidin* by Sheikh Zainuddin is considered to be the first historical work on the history of Malabar from 1498 to 1583 by a native scholar. Another elaborate study on the society and caste system is available from the books of Duarte Barbosa. R.H. Major's *India in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century* offers the travel accounts of Nichola Conti, Nikitin, Abdur Razzak, etc., which traced inter-regional trade and Asian trade before the advent of the Europeans. The edited works of Galletti and Buchanan were also used for the study. *The Dutch in Malabar* by A. Galletti is a collection of the memorandums of Dutch commanders' deals with the Dutch trade in very minute detail (Galletti 1911). Certain studies like *Ancient Rome and India, commercial and cultural contracts between the Roman World and India* edited by Rosa Maria Cimino; *The Book of Ser Marco Polo* translated and edited by Henry Yule and Henri Cordier; *Ibn Battutta, Travels in Asia and Africa* by H. A. R. Hibb; *The Book of Durate Barbosa*, translated by M.L. Dames in two volumes and *Arab Sea-faring in the Indian Ocean* by G.F. Hourani throw certain insights about the early phase of the maritime relations of Kollam.

The writings of Rev. T. White House, *Some Historical Notices of Cochin on the Malabar Coast*; F.C. Danvers, *The Portuguese in India*; Charles Fredeick Noble, *A Voyage to East Indies in 1747 and 1748*; G.R. Crone, *The Discovery of the East*, etc. remained a source of immense help to study the Portuguese trade contacts with Kollam. The above studies are mostly based on the primary sources that are available from the archival repositories in Portugal. The study of the Dutch contacts with Kollam became possible with the help of the scholarly contributions of Adriaan, Moens, *Memoir Written in the*

year 1781 AD; Van Gollennesse, Stein, *Memoir on the Malabar Coast*; Van Rhee, Henricum, *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus*; Jacob Canter Visscher, *Letters from Malabar*, translation by Herber Drury; A. Galletti, *The Dutch in Malabar*; John Nieuhoff, *Voyages and Travels of the East Indies*, etc. besides the primary sources from the archival centres.

The published works like *The Trade Relations between England and India, 1600-1896* by C.J. Hamilton; *The English Factories in India, 1661-64* by Foster William; *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of Hindostan and Adjacent Countries* and *The East India Gazetteer, 2 Vols* by Walter Hamilton; *Annals of the Honorable East India Company and Plans for the Government and trade of Great Britain in the East India*, by John Bruce. The writings of M. Prakash, *Dutch factories in India 1617-1623 AD*; O.M. Prakash, *Dutch East Indian Company and the Economy of Bengal (1630-1720 AD)* and *The Dutch Factories in India, 1617-23* find comparatively very limited information about the Dutch contacts with Kollam.

### **Historical Milieu of Maritime Relations**

The Kollam had a very rich tradition of maritime relations and the port of Kollam has been described by early travellers as one of the largest in the world and its markets the finest in India. From prehistoric to modern times Kollam has had a sizeable and eventful history. Prehistoric and megalithic remains have been discovered from various places in Kollam. Prehistoric cultures include the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Megalithic, and their occurrences have been recorded from various places in Kollam. Two urn burial sites discovered at Poredam in Kollam gives much insight in to the prehistoric people of ancient Kerala. The cultural evidence obtained from Poredam consists of several red ware and grey ware potteries, black- and red-ware potteries and a few iron implements (Rajendran 1993). Burials of ancient settlement also have been unearthed from Mangadu near Kollam. The discovery of beautiful, etched carnelian beads and iron implements from Mangadu shows that the people of the era between fifth and first century BCE were familiar with the technology like smelting. The findings from Mangadu included pottery, burial jars, iron objects, beads, bones and charcoal. The pottery included red ware, black and red ware and dull black ware (The Hindu 1991). The anonymous writer of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* describes the commercial activities at the ports of Muziris (Cranganore), Nelcynda (Niranam), Bacre (Purakkad) and Balita (Varkala) where coir, topaz, precious metals, etc., were exchanged for large quantities of pepper, ginger, ivory, peacocks, apes, piece goods and other indigenous products (Sasthri 1939).

### **Ayyan Adikal and the Tarisappalli Copper Plates**

When Venad emerged into political prominence early in the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, it was only an administrative division of the Kulasekhara Empire (800-1102 CE) and not a distinct political entity. The first King of Venad of whose reign inscriptional evidence is available is Ayyan Adikal Thiruvatikal. He has immortalized himself in the famous Syrian Christian Copper Plates which were executed by him in 849 CE in the presence of the important officers of the state and the representatives of the Anchuvannam and

Manigramam. The inscription reveals several interesting facts. One Muruvan Sapir Iso had erected a church named Tarisappalli at Kurakkeni Kollam and Ayyan Adikal Thiruvatikal made a gift of a plot of land to this church along with a number of families consisting of Ezhavas, Ezhakayyars and Vannans, remitting all taxes due from them. The Tarisappalli Copper Plates are of inestimable historical value. The document is the first epigraphical record of Kerala the date of which can be determined with any degree of accuracy. The record also shows that Kollam was at that time a place of great commercial importance. It is in the Tarisappalli Copper Plates that we find the first reference to merchant guilds like Anchuvannam and Manigramam which played an important part in the economic life of all major towns in ancient Kerala.

### **Sri Vallabhan Kothai and Mamballi Plates**

In 149 Kollam Era (974 CE) Sri Vallabhan Kothai was ruling at Kollam is proved by the evidence of the Mamballi plate dated Kollam Era 149. The Mamballi Plate is an important document. It is incised in *Vattezhuthu* characters with a few *Grantha* letters like *Swasti Sri, Sri, Rakshi* and *Raksha*. The Mamballi Plate is important in more ways than one. The record has also been helpful in determining the dates of Bhaskara Ravi, Indukota, etc., who ruled at Mahodayapuram in the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. It throws light on the arrangements made for the administration of temples in Kerala during this period thus the Mamballi plate of Sri Vallabhan Kothai has proved itself to be an important document.

### **Evidence of Trade Relations**

The commercial contacts of Kollam can be traced from the Biblical days, even before the beginning of the Christian era. The earliest reference to such transactions comes from the Book of Kings in the Old Testament. Solomon, the wise, King of Israel is said to have sent his ships along with the ships of Hiram, the Phoenician king to Ophir from where they brought gold and silver, ivory, apes and peacocks. From this it is clear that Solomon (c. 974-932), King of the Hebrews, traded with West Indian ports and the main imports came from Kollam. All these goods, excepting silver, were the products of Kerala; the Hebrew names for the last two items, *Kapim* and *Tukim* are obviously of Tamil origin. The celebrated Ophir, from where gold was obtained, was identified by several scholars with *Beppur*, on the mouth of the river of the same name.

The Sumerians and Babylonians also seem to have extensive trade relations with Kollam. On the Assyrian inscription Obseliks of Shalmanser III (860 BCE), apes, Indian elephants and Bactrian camels are portrayed. Logs of teak wood were found among the remains of the temple of the Moon at Ur and the place of Nebuchad Nezzar (604-562 BCE) at Birs Nimrud. With the conquest of Western Asia by the Persians, there was great development in trade and commerce between India and Western Asia.

Darius, the Great (521-485 BCE) organized many merchantable expeditions to link Persia with India and Egypt by sea as well as by land. The period witnessed tremendous progress in the volume of trade. His captains sailed down the Indus and

thence round Arabia to Egypt. As a result of these transactions trade greatly developed and naturally Malabar trade with Western Asia must have increased considerably. The Persian conquest of the Middle East marked a new epoch in the course of commercial relations between Kerala and the Middle East.

The Arab trade contacts with Malabar are reflected in their travel accounts. The Arab itineraries furnish detailed information about Malabar which is mentioned in different names like 'Mulaybar', 'Malibar', 'Mamibar', 'Malai', 'Mabar', etc. Among the Arab writers special mention should be made about Sulayman, Yaqut, Minishinqui, Abul Fida, Idrisi and Qazmini. Merchant Sulaiman (c. 825 CE), the first Arab traveller, whose travel account has reached us thus described the seaborne trade with Indian. "The ships (starting from Basra) sail from here (Muscat). It takes a full month to reach Kollam Mali (Quilon). From here ships sailed bound for China, Kollam Mali also possesses a dock where ships are built and repaired. The port dues for Chinese ships are a hundred drachams and for other ships one to ten dinars." Abu Zayd, writing about 25 years later than Sulaiman, mentioned that the sailors of Siraf are more at home in the Indian ocean than the coast of China. Ibn Battutta, who traveled extensively on the West Coast (1342-44 CE) described Malabar's "The land of pepper", extending over a length of two month's journey from Sandabur (Goa) to Kulam (Kollam). Of the several ports of Malabar, he says Kalikut (Calicut) is one of the chief ports of Mulaybar, and one of the largest harbours in the world. It is visited by men from China, Sumatra, Ceylon, the Maldives, Yemen and Fars and in it gathers merchants from all quarters. Kulam (Kollam) is the nearest of the Mulaybar towns to China and most of the merchants (from China) come there (Hibb 1929).

The Arab merchants carried numerous products of India. The most numerous articles which were much in demand in the West Asian and European countries include Aloe-wood (Ud), its different varieties, Ambergis (Ambar), bamboo, camphor, clove, coconut, cloth of different varieties, cotton, crystal, cassia leaves, cardamom, elephants and elephant tusks, ebony, frankincense of benzoin, fanid, gold, herbs, horns, ivory, iron, jute, jewels, kabab-chini, lak, lemon, musk, betel leaves, mace, nutmeg, oranges, precious stones, pearls, pepper, poison, perfumes, peacock, *rawandchini*, rice, *sambadhaj*, shoes of Kambayat, spear, swords, sagon, spices, tabashir, vessels of clay and willow. But only a few articles were imported by India, namely horses, dates, silks, furs and wine. Duties on imports and exports were charged either on the value of the articles or on the ship.

The rulers of China and Kollam exchanged Embassies and there was a thriving Chinese settlement at Kollam in the medieval period. The Chinese Annals explained that in 1282 CE some emissaries from king of Quilon landed at Zayton port in China. Marco Polo, the celebrated Venetian traveller who visited Kollam towards the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century gives fascinating description about the country (Kunju 1975). He had gone to the court of Kublai Khan in 1275 CE and engaged a high place in the Chinese service. As diplomatic representative of Kublai Khan Marco Polo subsequently visited

Kollam and other places. According to Yule “Kublai Khan” had a good deal of diplomatic intercourse of him usual kind with Kaulam (Kollam). Regarding the trade of Kollam, Marco Polo says: “The merchants from Manzi (South China) and their ships and their merchandise make great profits both by what they import and what they export” (Kunju 1975).

Kollam had profited mostly from the Chinese trade; the chief articles of export from Kollam were Brazil wood or sapang, spices, coconut and areca nut. All these goods had great demand in China and the Chinese brought to Kerala coast goods like silk, porcelain, copper, quick silver, tin, lead, etc. Chinese net and ceramics of China had great demand in Kerala coasts and Kollam was a significant centre of Chinese goods (Raja 1966). Ibn-Batuta, the African Arab traveller who came to Kerala in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, had given vivid account about the Chinese traders and Chinese ships (Kunju 1975). Chinese government also attempted successfully to increase the volume of trade by sending a trade mission abroad and offering special licenses. This new trade movement reached its greatest extent during the period of the Sung dynasty in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in course of time, the growth of illicit trade in luxuries brought about a drain of metallic currency that created anxiety in China (Van Rheede 1911). So, they prohibited the export of precious metals and coined money and put restriction upon the trade with Coromandel Coast and Kollam. The restriction points out the fact that the ports of Malabar Coast had brisk trade relations with China at that time.

### **Impact of the Trade Relations**

The most important impact of Chinese trade was the emergence of Kollam as a principal port in South India. According to William Logan, the British Collector of Malabar, there was a large Chinese colony in Kollam. The fourteenth century Chinese records mention Kollam on the Western coast of India having very flourishing trade. This was considered a principal port of all the lands of the western ocean by them. Pepper, dry betel-nuts, jackfruit and coloured cotton stuffs were purchased by the Chinese from this port. Span-wood, frankincense, pearls, corals, butter and jasmine flowers were brought to Kollam. The works of Chinese travellers Wang Ta-Yuan, Fa Hein and Huang Tsang make mention of the Chinese trade conducted on the Malabar coast. Chinese names of several items used in Malabar such as *chinachatti*, *chinavala* and *chinavedi* speak for the long Chinese contacts with the Malabar Coast. The most eloquent testimony to the Chinese trade at Kollam is the pottery and potsherds obtained from the coastal areas of the town. Chinese coins in thousands have been recovered from the sea as a result of dredging of the Kollam port in 2014. This proves the vigorous trade relation between China and Kollam.

The economic progress of the modern world began with the expansion of trade that brought about an increase in industry and finance. Ports, the portals of a country or a particular region have some kind of character which is much differing from the region which they represent. A port is a protected body of water that provides facilities for

boats to berth and manage passengers and goods. India has an ancient and glorious maritime history and tradition from the time immemorial. The geographical situations and economic resources made this country a great trading and maritime power. Kollam is an ancient trading town with a well set up port. It had trading relation with Chinese, Arabs and other oriental world. China had a constant commercial contact with Kollam during the medieval period. The flourishing of Indo- Chinese merchants played a main role in ancient Sino-Indian relations. They not only paved the way for the very first diplomatic and religious contacts, but also played an important role in the exchange of ideas and information.

## Conclusion

Kollam commands a predominant place in the maritime transactions of the world. It is an established fact that Kollam was repository of all kinds of valuable commercial goods. The network of water transportation with its oceanic and backwater contacts enabled it to form a good commercial centre. The rich flora and fauna of Kollam captivated foreigners. From prehistoric to modern times Kollam has had a sizeable and eventful history. Prehistoric and Megalithic remains discovered from various places in Kollam like pottery, burials, jars, iron objects, beads, bones and charcoal testify its importance. Kollam, strategically located on the direct sea-route between the Far East and the West, was a thriving port. The edge between the land and sea, with its several ecological and topographical variations, has played an important role in determining human activity. The Arabs, the Assyrians the Babylonians, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Chinese were among the foreign peoples who had contacts with the Kerala coast in the ancient period.

The fate and destiny of Kollam as a maritime centre was highly influenced by its geographical position. Kollam was unique in many ways, blessed with a port which served the country's trade needs as well as strategic needs. It provides infra structural facilities for the countries inland and foreign trade and also serve as inlets and outlets of socio-cultural interaction with the people of different countries. Trade has flourished since the dawn of the civilization mainly due to the distribution of raw material. Trade had ever been a prime factor of socio-economic change in the traditional Indian society and economy was concerned. Kollam is looked upon as a country with enormous resources available throughout its length and breadth.

From very ancient time onwards Kollam occupied a unique position in the commercial world. One of the most significant impacts of this trade was development of port cities on the coast of seas and rivers. As a result, a long chain of ports of varying degrees began to emerge on the east west coast of India. Among the few maritime states of India, Kollam enjoyed a position of importance. The long coastline and several natural harbours facilitated the development of her external trade. It has been acknowledged as an important centre for maritime trade. Kollam maintained contacts with the countries of the outside world even from time immemorial. Tamil literature of first few centuries of the Christian era especially *Silappathikaram* and *Manimekhalai* testify to this

overseas trade. *Periplus of Erythrean Sea*, a Roman treatise written in 1st century CE finds references about the ancient ports. *Old Testament* of Bible also shed certain information about cinnamon, cardamom and spices which were the special products of Kerala. The prominent ports of that period were the Muziris, Thyndis, Nelcynda, Barace, etc. The travellers from other countries visited here and they noted the significance of ports of Malabar and about its pepper trade.

For a long period, the monopoly of entire trade remained in the hands of the Arab traders, from whom the Phoenicians came to know about spices and controlled spice trade between Arabs and the western world. The Arabs monopolised spices until the Greek sailor Hippalus forged the new trade routes with the east. The Kerala coast was referred by all the Arab writers as the country of pepper. As their knowledge of the coastal cities of India increased gradually, they started calling the sea-board country as 'Malibar, the land of Mall', the term they used synonymously with pepper and land because pepper was the chief article of their trade. It is from Idrisi of the 12th century CE that we hear for Malibar the first time, which also means the land of pepper. Ibn Battuta calls it Mulaybar and states that it is the pepper country.

At the same time China, Indonesia, and other South-East Asian countries had trade relationship with Kerala. Out of these the Chinese were the dominating group. The trade contacts between China have been mentioned in Malayalam literature. *Unnunilisandesam* mentions the Chinese junks which came to the bank of Kollam. *Unniyachicharitham*, which is assigned to the end of the 14th century mentions the Chinese among several others who were seen in the town of "Sriparvata". These trade links prevailed in post-Perumal era (after 800 CE) and the acceptance of Arab traders among the rulers made conflict with Chinese and Arabs, and slowly the Chinese trade activities removed from the Kerala coast. Still the vestiges of Chinese contacts are visible in Kollam. It is evidenced even by place names like Chinnakada which once remained Chinakada and Champranikkodi situated on the eastern bank of the Ashtamudi Kayal which is derived from the Chinese Champrani.

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