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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ROMAN TRADE IN KONGU REGION

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Abstract

The periplus gives a fairly full account of the many ports of south India and the commodities in which they trade and the conditions of navigation in the second half of the first century A.D. The hoards of Roman coins were found almost throughout the Tamilnadu, especially of the first two centuries of the Christian era confirm the seaborne trade stated in Sangam works. Roman brought gold and took away with them, in return, the products of Tamil land like pepper, rice, pearls, various grains, tamarind, salt and saltfish. Trade was divided into three main types, gift trade, administrative trade and market trade.

Introduction

Kongu Region

According to Srinivasa Iyengar “the word Kongu Nadu was more often used to refer the region south of the Maisur plateau and 500’ above sea level”. It is mostly a mullai land with an admixture of kurunji, where the Nilgiris, the Melgris, the Anamalais, the Palanis, and the Shervaroy rise aloft to the skies. Kongu Nadu occupied an area of 15,603 square kms, comprising the area bounded by the river Bhavani on the North and the Western Ghats on the west and south, the river Amaravati on the south-east, and the Kaveri on the east. It was located in the centre of the southern peninsular India, and was surrounded by the great powers of South India on all sides. Kongunadu consists of the modern day districts of Coimbatore,

Tirupur, Erode, Salem, The Nilgiris, Karur, Dharmaburi, Namakkal, Krishnagiri and the parts of Dindukal district in the South Indian state of Tamilnadu. Parts of Palakkd District in the state of Kerala and parts of Chamarajanagar in the part of state of Karnataka also fall under the region. The Western Ghat mountain passess through the region with majo rivers Kaveri, Bhavani, Amaravathi and Noyyal flowing through the region. Palghat Gap, a mountain pass connects the neighbouring state of Kerala to the region. The Eastern Ghats mountain range, which consists of the hills Kollimali of Namakkal district, Shevaroy (Shevrayan) and Mettur hills of Salem district and Palamalai of Coimbatore district, also passess through the region.

The Biligiriranga Hills of Chamarajanagar district is located at the confluence of Eastern and Western Ghats belongs to the region. The Kaveri river flows into Tamilnadu from Karnataka through Dharmapuri, Salem, Erode, Namakkal and Karur districts.

Trade

Trade is a basic economic concept involving the buying and selling of goods and services, with compensation paid by a buyer to a seller, or the exchange of goods or services between parties. Trade can take place within an economy between producers and consumers. International trade allows countries to expand markets for both goods and services that otherwise may not have been available to it.

Trade In Sangam Age

Trade missions were sent to China to organise Tamilian trade. The foreign trade existed between Tamilaham and the Roman, Arab and Chinese etc. Exchange or barter system was prevalent in the sangam age, through there were also gold coins brought by the yavanas. The regional trade were primarily carried by exchange of their respective products. The Tamil country was famous for its pepper, so very popular in the West. The pepper was carried from place to place in bags symmetrically placed on the backs of the asses. The merchants travelled in groups called "Cattu". The merchants organised themselves into groups or guilds. There were both merchant and trade guilds which in the sangam age were known as Sattu. The shepherds sold their honey and edible roots to the fisherfolk in exchange for fish oil and toddy. The cultivators sold their sugarcane and rice to the mountain folk in exchange for venison and liquor.

Roman Empire

The Roman empire at its height 117 CE, was the most extensive political and social structure in western civilization. By 285 CE the empire had grown too vast to be ruled from the central government at Rome and so was divided by emperor Diocletian 284-305 into a western and an eastern empire. The Roman empire began when Augustus Ceaser 27 BCE – 14 CE became the first emperor of Rome and ended, in the west, when the last Roman emperor, Romulus Augustus 475 – 476 CE, was deposed by the Germanic king Odoacer

476- 493. In the east, it continued as the Byzantine empire until the death of Constantine XI 1449-1453CE and the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE. The influence of the Roman Empire on western civilization was profound in its lasting contribution to virtually every aspect of western culture.

Roman Trade in Tamilnadu

The Roman empire had a flourishing trade with Tamilnadu in the early centuries of the Christian era. In fact, the commercial activities were geared around a little earlier, possibly by the end of the first century B.C. with Augustus assuming the Emperors title, and received momentum in the following decades. The Periplus lists articles worth exporting and worth bringing back from Western Coast of India. It also reveals certain recognised ports and harbours. Pliny the elder gives detail about Indian ports, bewails the drain of precious metals to India to pay for luxury goods, mentions that the convoys sailing to India had protection furnished by companies of archers. Ptolemy declares that he had obtained information direct from merchants or others who have spent years of residence in India in his account he includes a large list of ports and also names of some island towns.

Kongu Nadu Trade

During the early historical period, trade, particularly maritime trade, came to play an important role in the Tamil polity to the extent of being considered as providing the impulse for state formation. Further, it was one of the factors, succinctly corroborated by all categories of sources. That Kongu Nadu served as an important arena for this trade was well attested by the discovery of hoards of Roman coins in this region, besides other artefacts. Roman coins numbering more than 1500 have been unearthed so far in this region, and these constitute roughly eighty percent of such coins in the whole of India.

Literary Sources

Sangam literature: Tamil poems speaks of the yavana ships arriving at Muzchiri (Muziris). Sangam period (300 B.C. – 200 A. D.) poet Tayan Kannanar throws light on thevpepper trade of the Chera country (west coast). He describes how magnificent ships of

the yavanas came stirring the white foam of the periar river (of the kerala) sailed in with gold and sailed off with pepper making Muzchiri (port-town) prosperous. One verse in the Mullaipattu describes them as 'dressed in wide and puffed skirts folded up and sustained by a whip with their stiff corset, fearsome looking, strong of body, stand watch'. Nakkirar, a leading poet of sangam period refers to the statues of women lamp bearers of excellent workmanship made by the yavanas.

Numismatic Evidence

The Roman gold and silver coins found in South India, by far from the most striking evidence for this Indo-Roman trade. The majority of coins were found in the form of hards, a few as stray are in the Megalithic tombs and yet others from excavations. They have been found for the last two hundred years. The Roman coins found in Kongu nadu. Of the two phases of Roman coin-finds the first phase belonged to the first two centuries of the Christian era, Rajan has provided an updated list of coin-finds and has also provided a map, locating the archaeological sites in the Noyyal valley, in which he has correlated the megalithic sites, the find-spots of Roman coins and the area yielding semi-precious stones.

About the continuance of Roman trade, Warmington remarks: some writers imagine that because Roman coins of the evening of Romans glory have not been found in south India, The theory of continuance or revival of maritime trade is corroborated by the finds of the Roman coins. After 220 A.D. Roman gold coins hardly came to India. On the other hand, Roman bronze coins existed in India since the second half of the third century A.D. Late Roman copper coins and this is corroborated by the large quantity of such coins were found at Karur and to a lesser extent in Madurai. Pulankurichi record, who also exercised control over kongu, had his base at Madurai. Early historical period, Kongu nadu could have served as the route, connecting the west coast of Kerala, with the rest of Tamil Nadu.

Among the Tami kings, the Cheras are mentioned most frequently in connection with the Yavanas, either subduing them on the sea or encouraging their trade. The Romans brought vast amounts of gold. The latter

includes 12 gold Roman coins, 71 Roman denarius and 34 silver punch marked coins.

Roman Coins In Tamilnadu

The archaeological evidence from Arikkamedu, should be considered as Wheeler places the Roman settlement at Arikkamedu at 25 B.C or to the beginning of Christian era. "Since Muzuri" was the port of inflow of Roman coins into India, it is reasonable to expect many finds of Roman coins in this state. In Tamilnadu, the Coimbatore region predominates the scene as far as the discovery of Roman coins is concerned there are twenty-six finds here ranging from huge quantity of coins to a single specimen. Out of 3467 accounted coins 77 were of gold 3390 of silver in which the coins of Augustus and Tiberius predominate.

The finds of gold and silver Roman coins along with the silver punch marked coin in the hoard suggests that the country accepted them as current coins. Roman coins were of the same weight as punch marked coins. Mainly these were found at Arikkamedu.

Roman Coins in Coimbatore Region

The study of Roman coins in India, its spatial distribution, typology and frequency throws much light on the amount of external trade and maritime contact, the region had with the Western world. The literary, archaeological and numismatic evidences reinforce the dimension of trade activity that took place during the reign of the first Roman emperor Augustus (17BC to AD 14).

The Romans artifacts unearthed from the recent archaeological excavations at Arikkamedu, Kodumanal, Karaikadu and Alagankulam provide the extent of the trade and its impact on Indian economy. Roman *aurei* and *denari* at a number of places, particularly in the peninsular India. With in south India substantial hoards have come from Tamil Nadu and coastal Andhra Pradesh followed by Kerala and Karnataka in that order. In Tamilnadu, the Coimbatore region predominates the scene as far as the discovery of Roman coins is concerned there are twenty-six finds here ranging from huge quantity of coins to a single specimen. Out of 3467 accounted coins 77 were of gold 3390 of silver in which the coins of Augustus and

Tiberius predominate. When compared with other regions, like east coast, the Coimbatore region played a pivotal role. The reason for the concentration of Roman trade in Coimbatore is its geographical location and geological wealth.

Geologically, Coimbatore region is located opposite the Palghat gap through which the eastern and western coast might have been connected by land route. The second trade route might have entered this region through the gap to the west of pollachi. From pollachi it would have reached Madurai via Anamalai, Nattukalpalayam, Budhinattam and kattankanni. From Madurai along the river Vaigai it might have reached Alagankulam, the port located on the mouth of Vigai. This is borne out by the intensive trade activity with the western world in the early part the Christian era as evidenced by the discovery of several Roman coins.

Punch Marked Coins

The Kongu region occupying the north-western part of Tamilnadu comprising Coimbatore, Periyar and Salem Districts yielded stray finds of silver punch-marked coins either in isolation or along with Roman coins in many places like Pennar, Chavadipalayam, Alampalaiyam, Kanniankuttai and Kodumanal. Geographically, the Kongu region serves as a link region between the west and east coasts. The occurrence of punch-marked coins along with Roman coins and recent discoveries of Satavahana coins at Karur clearly establishes its close link with north India. The marked coins with Roman coin, particularly with that of Augustus found in other parts of this region. These punch-marked coins were identical with the coins found at Pennar, also in Coimbatore District. Besides Roman coins Roman and Arretine Wares

were collected from the habitation cuttings at Kodumanal.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that the typical factor of the Indian Polity, Uneven development, is reflected in the economy of Kongu Nadu during this period. It seems that the region was little affected by this factor but for the emergence of some urban centres, which catered to maritime trade as trade enclaves-cum-manufacturing centres like Kodumanal, Karur, Perur and Vellalur. The middleman and local chiefs, who obviously acted as collecting agencies of the commodities required for maritime trade, exchanged them for gold, which accounts for the coins finds in hoards. In short, it was a scarcity economy, with a layer of affluency, as revealed in the elaborate megalithic relics and coins finds.

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