

Maritime trade and commerce in medieval Tamilagam

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Abstract

The history of maritime commerce in South India spans several millennia, with the medieval Tamil Kingdom (Tamilagam) playing a pivotal role as a major hub of international exchange. Tamil merchants established extensive sea routes connecting the subcontinent with distant civilizations, engaging in brisk export and import trade with prominent global centres as far as ancient Rome and Greece. To manage these far-reaching commercial enterprises, protect their interests, and foster collective economic strength, Tamil traders organized themselves into influential trade guilds that articulated a strong sense of solidarity. This flourishing maritime enterprise was heavily supported by internal regional developments. The agrarian expansion and economic growth within the rich river basins of the Cauvery and Thamiraparani created a robust hinterland. This agricultural and industrial production directly fed into coastal networks, allowing nearby ports to thrive as crucial outlets for domestic and international goods across the Bay of Bengal. To support this high volume of oceanic traffic, the Tamil coast developed advanced maritime infrastructure. Ports were equipped with all necessary ancillary facilities, including functional harbours, shipbuilding and repair yards, and lighthouses to guide vessels safely. Medieval trade centres along the Bay of Bengal included Nagapattinam, Thirumullaivasal, Karaikkal, Thirumalairayanpattinam, Point Calimere, Tranquebar, Nagore, Adhirampattinam, Virapandyapattinam, Kayalpatnam, and Punnakayal. By the seventeenth century, many of these commercial trade ports gradually evolved into fortified coastal settlements. Among the various commodities traded, pearls emerged as the single most lucrative item in maritime commerce. Ultimately, this maritime activity extended far beyond the simple exchange of physical commodities; these long-distance trade networks served as powerful conduits for cross-cultural diffusion, facilitating the exchange and evolution of religious philosophies, iconography, and diverse cultural traditions across the Indian Ocean world.

Keywords: Maritime trade, sangam classics, commercial, marakkayar, portuguese, persian gulf, epigraphs, merchants, horse trade, pearl fishing, marco polo, Bay of Bengal, carnatic, harbours

Introduction

Trade served as the primary mechanism for mobilizing productive wealth and transferring economic resources across regions. Long-distance maritime commerce in the region spans two to three millennia, during which the medieval Tamil kingdoms of South India exerted a major influence on international sea routes. Tamil coastal urban centers established extensive import and export networks, reaching prominent classical Mediterranean empires such as Rome and Greece^[1]. To protect their economic interests, Tamil merchants forged strong collective identities and institutional solidarity by organizing themselves into powerful trade guilds. Under the Pandyas, the horse trade emerged as a vital sector dominated by elite merchant classes, driving a broader structural transformation of the regional economy from a strictly agrarian base toward a dynamic agro-mercantile framework. This coastal trade expansion relied heavily on inland economic development; the growth of fertile hinterlands along the Cauvery and Thamiraparani river basins generated surplus goods that fuelled the prosperity of coastal ports. Local merchant syndicates consolidated capital across strategic commercial hubs, enabling them to direct resources from domestic coastal trade into large-scale overseas enterprise^[2]. By the sixteenth century, 'Kayal' had established itself as a premier port facility in the southern region, serving as the central

export gateway for highly lucrative local commodities, particularly harvested pearls and chanks.

Important Ports

The maritime trade of medieval Tamilagam was energetic and had built up all the auxiliary requirements of harbours, shipping and light houses, etc. There were a few sea ports both on the western and eastern shores of Tamilagam. There have some data about them from the early, Sangam works of art just as the later Tamil works. The harbour was called Pukar in Kaverippoompattinam^[3]. the ports of Nagapattinam, Thirumullaivasal, Karaikkal, Thirumalairayanpattinam, Point Calimere, Tranquebar, Nagore, Adhirampattinam Virapandyapattinam and Kayal in middle age Tamilagam kept on filling in as outlets for homegrown and global Trade the Bay of Bengal. Indigenous trade, markets, merchants, trading networks in the medieval period besides shipbuilding and navigation in the Tamil coast were created. The trade foundations were gradually transformed into sustained settlements on the Tamil Coast in the 17th century^[4]. Portuguese private traders saw tremendous growth in the Port settlements. The Portuguese settlements flourished in part because of the individual merchants. In contrast to the ancient age, there were ports in close proximity to one another on the Southern Tamil Coast in the past. Due to the new Marakkayar colonies near the Hindu commerce ports, such as Virapandyapattinam and

Kayalpattinam, these globally significant ports were created^[5]. The Rulers of the Tamil kingdoms actively promoted and benefited from high-value international trade alliances with both Arab and Chinese merchant fleets because they understood the strategic importance of this trade.

Arab Contact with Tamilagam

The rise of Islam in the beginning of the 7th century A.D. what's more, the unification of the Arab clans under a concentrated state gave a gigantic stimulus to the development of extension which was going on since pre-Islamic period. Islam was, in a sense, limited to Arabia during the prophet's time. But it entered Syria and Iraq under Abu Baker. Egypt, Persia, and Syria were all under Muslim rule under Umar the Great. In this fashion, the Arabs maintained maritime trade with increased power in a matter of years. The Arab ships sailed from the Red Sea or the southern coast, landing either at the mouth of the Indus and in the Gulf of Cambay by cruising along the coast or on the coast of Malabar, where they proceeded directly to Kollam and other ports with the help of the storm^[6]. Beginning in the Persian Gulf, Arab ships followed similar routes and, with the help of the rainstorm, reached Kollam, the Malay peninsula, the eastern archipelago, and China. Additionally, during the Caliphate of Umar, land-based strategies for dealing with India were explored, and a wealth of information was gathered that ultimately led to Mohammed-bin-Qasim's victory in Sind at the start of the eighth century A.D. Meanwhile, Muslims established in Ceylon and three ports on the south Indian coast, and maritime trade continued. After the Abbasid dynasty was established in 750 A.D., the capital of the Muslim world was moved from Syria to Iraq. Consequently, the seaports in the Persian Gulf began to grow more quickly than those in the Red Sea, and the Abbasid caliphate significantly increased eastern trade. In addition to being an emporium of trade, Baghdad, the famous Abbasid city, evolved into a multicultural, linguistic, and social center of worldwide significance. Their settlements and commerce flourished throughout the eastern and western banks of south India^[7].

Muslims in Tamilagam

The main direct recorded proof of the Muslims in medieval Tamilagam was referenced in the 7th and 8th century A.D. In the antiquated burial ground of Qahirapattanam (Kayalpattinam) likewise there are comparable old burial chambers in demolished condition with ruined Arabic compositions to them^[8]. When Arab and non-Arab traders came to their coast, the Hindu kings of the eastern coast used an edified and encouraging approach. It was customary in the western ports for a ship to be driven along the shore out of concern for the weather, which led to the professionals' prosperity. In particular, this was not observed in the South. Aware of the prosperity this trade brought to their region, the southern monarchs also abolished all vexatious obligations, treated the traders with respect, consideration, and understanding, and provided them with all the help they needed to make their property comfortable^[9].

As a result, trade flourished and prosperous Arab trade towns emerged under the special protection of the regional leaders. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Muslims from Nagapattinam and the Nagore region unquestionably had a

dominant role in Southeast Asian trade, while Tamil Hindu merchants appeared to decline and likely turned their attention to financial matters. There were indications that Muslims were very active in trade in Karaikkal, Nagore, Muthupettai, and Adhirampattinam. They gathered in and around Thanjavur's coastal major and minor ports.

Contact between the Kings and the Merchants

In every instance, the Tamil Kings had friendly and intimate relations with the Arabian and Persian traders. The southern Hindu princes needed horses for their armed forces, and they were mostly dependent on the Arabs for the flexibility of fine-bred horses, for which they received generous compensation. Arabia, Persia, and some western Asian countries are closer to the western bank of south India^[10]. These districts' proximity typically led to a rapid improvement in the vibrant trade between Arabs and Tamils. Many Arab Muslims settled in the wealthy areas of the country as a result of the Hindu kings of Tamilagam's empowering approach. The Arabs imported additional horses from Hurmus, Bahrayn, and Uman as a result of the profitable horse trade.

These strange animals were lawfully transported to Tiruperunthurai, which was formerly a remarkable seaport from which the Arabian horses might easily have been transported to Madurai and the capital of Chola. The requirement for getting these significant creatures was incredible to such an extent that Manikkavasagar, the best among the Saiva devotee, was sent to the Thiruperunthurai by the Pandyan King, Varaguna to buy horses structure the Arab merchants, who were additionally furnished with dresses of honor by the Pandyan ruler^[11]. Although it is difficult to pinpoint a precise date, Manikkavasakar most definitely flourished in the latter part of the eighth or ninth century A.D. As a result, it is clear that the Pandyan King maintained friendly relations with foreign countries, encouraged unfamiliar trade, and pursued a strategy of resistance and generosity toward Muslims. As a result, numerous Muslim settlements were established on the western and eastern coasts of south India, which persisted until the 12th century^[12]. Consequently, from ninth to the twelfth century, the Muslims framed an entrenched network in numerous parts of the Tamil-land and they appeared to have procured adequate significance, for they are seen as carrying presents to the Ceylonese General, Lankapura Dandanatha, who attacked the Pandyan realm in 1170-71 A.D^[13]. The existence of multiple Muslim settlements in Malabar is sufficiently declared by Amir Khusru and Ibn Batuta. They were also responsible for the creation of several Muslim communities in the south, including the Moplahs, Lebbais, and Nawayats in Tamil Nadu and south India. When everything is said and done, the conversion of Arabs to Islam resulted in Arab traders bringing their new faith—Islam in particular—to the south. In order to carry out evangelist work and propagate Islam in the south and Tamilagam, the Prophet's friends and devotees trailed the traders. The evangelical movement thus started shortly after the Prophet's ascension and continued unabated until the 12th century A.D.

Horse Trade

As "Then Pandya Nadu's" principal port, Kayalpattinam flourished. Arab horses and significant goods were brought to this port from Aden, Hormoz, Greece, and other Arab

countries, where they were widely marketed. Prominent traders from many regions of India came to "Palayakayal" and bought these imported goods in large quantities. "Kayalpattinam" became the main commerce hub for Muslims in South India prior to the end of the 13th century. "Pattinappalai," one of the Sangam sonnets, discusses the importation of horses from foreign countries over the sea^[14]. Chimes were tied round the necks of the horses which draw the chariots. Marcopolo says that quantities of horses were brought to the domains of the Pandyan King and of his four siblings who governed autonomously. "A horse will bring among them 500 Saggi of gold, worth in excess of 100 signs of silver, and tremendous numbers are sold there consistently," he adds. Wassaps' descriptions of this trade are far more detailed and contain fascinating nuances. "It involved realizing that each year, Malikul-Islam Jamaludin and the merchants should depart from the island of Kais and arrive at Mabaar with 1,400 horses of his own breed and such liberal roots that, when examined with them, the most renowned horses of the past, such as the Rukhs of Rustam and so on, should be as worthless as the horses of the chess-load up. It was also agreed that he should leave as many as he could from each of the Persian isles, including Katif, Lahsa, Bahrain, Hurmuz, and Kulhatu. The Arabs imported more horses into the Pandya kingdom as a result of the profitable horse trade^[15].

The Marakkayars and their Trade

The Marakkayars lived in the Thanjavur region of Tamil Nadu on the Coromandel coast and were Muslims who spoke Tamil. In the early medieval era, Muslim villages appeared in this area of Tamil Nadu. The Muslim population severely restricted the sea ports of Karaikkal, Nagore, Nagapattinam, Thopputhurai, Muthupettai, and Adhirampattinam. Marakkayars, a Muslim community, took on a prominent role in the development of maritime operations in the Thanjavur area. Penang, Malacca, Malaysia, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and other South East Asian nations used these ports as a segment or intersection. Due to their trade connections, Arab shippers were able to settle in these port towns and marry local women. As navigators, ship owners, merchants, and maritime merchant princesses, their offspring continued the marine tradition. In the courts of the neighboring Marathas, these people—who were to be referred to as "Marakkayars"—gave up enormous might. As a result, these leaders eagerly provided the members of this trading network with a variety of infra-auxiliary offices where they could conduct their research. From the 13th century to the 19th century A.D., the Marakkayars controlled the influxes of Indian seas, especially around the Coromandel coast^[16]. They set up a wide organization of stations and branches in the peninsula area of Thanjavur district and far away terrains.

Export

The primary goods that the Marakkayars exported from the Thanjavur region were textiles like silk and cotton, rice chank, pearls, and seafood like fish and dryfish, crabs, prawns, and so on. Flavors, arcanuts, metals, horses, elephants, and a variety of consumer goods were imported through the port towns as part of their interior trading activities. A large portion of this import and freight trade was conducted by boats and vessels, and the precise numbers of this trade were not available in the regions of

Thanjavur, Ramnad, and Tuticorin until the end of the 1820s^[17]. In terms of maritime commerce, the port of Nagapattinam handled the majority of fares and imports. In actuality, very little trade was conducted at the other sea ports in the Thanjavur district, which are Thopputhurai, Thirumullaivasal, and Adhirampattinam. It was stated that Nagapattinam's trade encompassed not just the Thanjavur region but also other nearby locations connected to it by roads and inland streams via small boats or pontoons. Up until the start of World War II, the great majority of the aforementioned goods continued to be shipped from Nagapattinam.

Marakkayars were exceptional fortune seekers who amassed enormous wealth by trade with South and Southeast Asian countries. They were also incredibly powerful politically and financially. During their international trading operations in the area, the Marakkayars faced numerous challenges and disruptions from the Europeans^[18]. The brutal Portuguese attack in the sixteenth century A.D. stunned the Marakkayars. The outsiders' initial attack on the Marakkayars was this. Subsequently, the Dutch, Danes, English, and French, among other European trading nations, advanced this financial dispute. However, the Marakkayars also owed the altered situation for their financial turn of events to the European endeavors. Vessels claimed by "Chettis" and "Muslims" (Marakkayars) at Nagore and Nagapattinam were also mentioned frequently. Karaikkal also engaged in shipbuilding^[19].

Trade with Ceylon

Many of them worked as specialists, employees, or bondsmen for European companies in the 17th and 18th centuries. Thanjavur had a substantial exterior trade. Rice was exported from Thanjavur to Ceylon and other regions of India. There were several harbors of commercial importance along the lengthy coastline that washed by the Bay of Bengal on the east and the Palk Straits on the section that veered west from Point Calimere. The most well-known of these was Nagapattinam, with genuine connections, where the first Nayak Sevappa allowed the Portuguese to establish a town. As the Portuguese took advantage of the Nayak's internal distractions, this settlement spread out. It was entirely Portuguese by the start of the 17th century, and they used their right to trade and authority. The Portuguese captured the town in 1658 A.D. and claimed it by right of victory until the English managed to hold onto it in 1781 A.D.D. The Dutch had a wide range of commercial interests in Thanjavur. They possessed manufacturing facilities at Adhirampattinam and Thirumullaivasal in addition to the massive foundation and vibrant trade conducted at Nagapattinam^[20].

European Settlements

The Danes settled in Tranquebar in 1620 with the authorization of the Nayak and had a stronghold and an industrial facility there. They kept the castle until the British took it over in 1845, and they carried on trading here for a remarkably long period of time. In 1737A, the French established a town at Karaikkal, which is also on the Carnatic coast.D. The Europeans engaged in a lucrative and varied trade with Thanjavur. It was where they could confirm bounty arrangements for their various colonies. The Dutch purchased a significant amount of rice for Ceylon, and textiles were the primary draw. The concentration of

European settlements along the coast can be attributed to the Cauvery delta's numerous weaving villages, which were mostly located in Nagapattinam, where the Dutch provided trade to many^[21]. Additionally, the sale of imported commodities was booming, including Southeast Asian spices and metals like copper, zinc, and lead. Europeans were constantly negotiating with the Nayaks for trading advantages in the 17th century because they wanted to settle in Thanjavur. The Dutch naval superiority in these waterways and the pressures they were able to exert on the Nayaks are the reasons why there weren't more of these colonies.

Pearl Fishing

Pearl fishing and the related trade of chank diving were significant export sectors in South India as early as the Sangam era. The most profitable marine commerce was pearl, and the pre-colonial kings of the Kayalpattinam region also benefited greatly from pearl fisheries. In order to fish for pearls, a lot of hidden information about the district's pearl shellfish twist was needed^[22]. The district fishing networks, which included the non-Muslim Paravas of the Gulf of Mannar and the Muslim Kayalpattinam, acquired this competence in pre-colonial times. There have been several references to the port of Kayalpattinam, including Kahal, Cahila, Chayal, Gael, and Kia-i-le. Kayal sent goods to Syria, Iraq, and Khurasan, including silk, pearls, and fragrant roots. As pearl fishing was established under the guidance of Jatavarma Sundara Pandya (1251-1268), this port also flourished in the pearl trade.

The Portuguese settled in the ports of Kayal and Punnakayal due to trade and pearl fishing. The agent in India, "Francisco de Almeida" (1505–1508), was asked to obtain and transmit the pearls and seed-pearls to Lisbon by the King of Portugal, who expressed remarkable enthusiasm for them. During their stay, Portuguese traders developed the pearl fishery. The improvements made to the port of Thoothukudi were largely responsible for the lesser ports of Kulasekarapattinam and Kayalpattinam losing their importance. Pearls were traded internationally between Egypt, Persia, Arabia, and China a few centuries ago. According to Pliny, the pearls were essentially brought to Rome from the Indian Ocean.

Maritime Infrastructure and Foreign Trade

The main means of communication between Tamil and China during the Middle Ages was by sea. Through the Bay of Bengal and South China seas, East-West trade and cultural exchanges linked China and the Mediterranean region. Chinese ships arrived in Tamilagam ports. They stopped for the winter, bought more items that were uncommon in China, and came back at the start of spring. The existence of important historical port cities like Korkai, Kayal, and Periyapattinam amply demonstrates that the medieval monarchs were involved in both domestic and international trade. Medieval rulers actively championed trade by incentivizing both local and foreign merchants, while also allowing western vessels to dock freely at Tamil ports. These extensive commercial operations were systematically managed by powerful merchant guilds^[23].

Conclusion

Trade and commerce played a vital role in medieval Tamilagam, extending beyond the simple exchange of

goods to drive the spread of philosophies, artistic styles, and cultural practices. The interaction of these human activities blended local traditions with foreign influences, giving rise to distinct forms of art and religious beliefs. Classical Tamil literature and ancient Western texts, such as *Historia Naturalis*, document the export of beads, iron, steel, and ceramics from South India to regions including Rome and Egypt. Roman records specifically note that imported beads and steel from the Indian peninsula were subject to customs duties at the port of Alexandria. Around the 7th century, South Indian, Arab, and Chinese traders established commercial routes with Sri Lanka. As trade between China and the Middle East surged from the 8th century onward, Sri Lanka emerged as a pivotal hub in maritime commerce connecting the East and the West.

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