

KORKAI – THE OLDEST PORT OF TAMILNADU**A. Dafny**

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*Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.***ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with the history of ancient port of Pandyan Kingdom Korkai. Korkai was the capital, principal center of trade and important port of the early Pandya kingdom. Korkai has been a cradle of south Indian civilization and as per tradition; it is considered the home of three brothers also supposed to have founded the Pandyas, Cheras and Chola kingdoms. Korkai is sited on an alluvial terrace, above the present-day flood plain of the river. The archaeological finds are about 3m below the terrace level. The ancient port Korkai might have been situated on one of the distributaries of the Tamirabarani close to the sea coast. About 1 km southwest of Korkai there is a settlement called Kanavisamudram, indicating presence of sea or extensive water body nearby. After the decline of Korkai, Palayakayal emerged as a new port, but never rose to the prominence of Korkai. The replacement of Korkai by Kayal might have commenced around the 6th century AD. But its importance as a major port did not take effect till the 12th century AD.

KEYWORDS: *Korkai, Oldest Port, Pandiyan Kingdom, Thamirabarani River, Kayals, Pearl Fishing.*

INTRODUCTION

Korkai is the small village in the Srivaikuntam taluk of Thoothukudi district in Tamilnadu, India. It was called pandya-kavada in the kapatauram in kalithogai. It is situated about 3km north of the Thamirabarani River and about 6 km from the shore of Bay of Bengal. Korkai was the capital, principal center of trade and important port of the early Pandya kingdom. At that kingdom, it was located on the banks of the Thamirabarani River and at the sea coast, forming a natural harbor. Due to excessive sedimentation, the sea has receded about 6km in the past 2000 years leaving korkai well inland today.

Korkai is the oldest port site of Tamil country possibly since the beginning of the first millennium B.C. However, its emergence as a significant emporium may have been only around the fourth and fifth century B.C. Korkai is recognized by the Periplus of the Eritrean sea as Colchis and by Ptolemy as kolkhoi correct identification came in 1838. Korkai is one

of the oldest sea port in the world, was the sea port which was under the Pandya kingdom which was later taken by Portuguese.

The early days capital of Pandya's is Korkai, which is now an insignificant village in Tamilnadu, was the commercial capital and important port of the Pandya kingdom. Korkai has been a cradle of south Indian civilization and as per tradition; it is considered the home of three brothers also supposed to have founded the Pandyas, Cheras and Chola kingdoms. Korkai was the Centre of pearl trade and this trade was the chief source of wealth for the Pandya kingdom. After Korkai, the commercial capital of the Pandyas was shifted to a new port of a town old Kayal (Palayakayal).

Palaeo - channel traced from the satellite imagery scenes all around Korkai indicates that the river has shifted its course progressively east and south. As can be seen from a scrutiny of the topographic sheets and satellite imagery and tracking of palaeo-channels, Korkai once on the sea has receded away from the shore.

SOURCES AND EVIDENCE FOR THE STUDY OF KORKAI PORT

The early archaeological excavation carried out by Caldwell in the Tamirabarani delta in the 19th century, affirmed its present site almost in ruins close to a place called Eral. It was a dual Centre of the early Pandya- Kavada by the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and as Kapatapuram in Kalithogai. Its reputation is spoken of in Akananuru and Ainkurunuru. The entire gulf of manner is recognized by the Periplus as the Colchis gulf, due to pre-eminent status of Korkai. Excavations by Nagaswamy and others have brought to light the early artifacts of the sites at Korkai. Stone inscription in the Kovil of Vetrivelamman and the Pillayar Kovil at Korkai and at Attur across the river on the opposite's bank re-affirm that the site is the old port of Korkai. A lone 'vanni' tree standing in Korkai is about 2000 years old, according to the Tamilnadu archaeological survey.

Upstream of Korkai about 20 km away on the same river valley on the right bank of Tamirabarani is Adichanallur, the largest megalithic burial urn area in South India. Its proximity and the find of megalithic burial urns at Korkai itself indicate that the valley side was fairly well-populated during megalithic times. Carbon dating of the artifacts in the area indicates an age of 785 BC, while Adichanallur findings of copper finds including an icon of mother goddess of 8th century BC indicates that it was an active settlement, and probably river navigated extended up to it from the delta mouth.

Korkai is sited on an alluvial terrace, above the present -day flood plain of the river. The archaeological finds are about 3m below the terrace level. Excavations have revealed Mauryan pottery of 2nd and 3rd century BC and the glazed pottery found belong to northern black polished ware. The burial urns lie adjoining a structure built with large bricks. Adjoining on the west end are heaps of pearl oyster shells, and three ring wells. More significantly, the finds of black and red pottery ware with old Tamil Brahmin scripts, apart from drawn graffiti of the sun, fish, bow, and arrow have been dated to a period between 3rd century BC and 2nd century AD. The occurrence of Roman ware, and rouletted ware indicated their external links. Archaeologists have found ruins of chank cutting factories, centers for

split opening of pearl oysters at the archaeologists opine that korkai indicates the closing phase of the megalithic period and korkai itself was a major Pandya port during this period. Though it continued to function till the 5th century AD, it was on a decline since the 3rd century AD. Probably with this decline is linked the shift of the Pandya capital from ten-Madurai or korkai itself to the later capital at Madurai.

Palaeo-channels traced from the satellite imagery scenes all around korkai indicate that the river has shifted its course progressively east and south. As can be seen from a scrutiny of the topographic sheets and satellite imagery and tracking of palaeo-channels, korkai, once on the sea has receded away from the shore. The nature of the bird foot delta, lobes, lagoons, marine terraces, beach ridges and bars on the sea front, newly formed and old islands have all helped in tracing the probable stages in the evolution of the delta, as the river course progressively shifted south, and the distributaries elaborated. The korkai bay in the advancing front of the delta lobe got silted, and the port had to decline. The siltation is so rapid that in the last 2000 years of the historic past, land has advanced into the sea over a distance of about 8km.

After the decline of korkai, palayakayal emerged as a new port, but never rose to the prominence of korkai. The replacement of korkai by kayal might have commenced around the 6th century AD. But its importance as a major port did not take effect till the 12th century AD. The port site is at a location called palayakayal on a northern distributary of the delta, about 5km northeast of korkai.

Interpretation of satellite imagery indicates that in the 1st and 2nd century AD, the Tamirabarani River might have flowed towards northeast from Eral, parallel to the coast and joined the sea south of thoothukudi town. korampallam tank, peykulam, and Arumugamangalam tank might be the relicts of palaeo-channel of the tamirabarani river .In Tamil, Aru means river and mugam means face . The name of the settlement ' Arumugamangalam' might have been derived since it was situated on the bank of the river. At present there is no river in the area, but there exists a tank, which is elongated in shape, situated parallel to peykulam, and korampallam tanks. This tract has fertile alluvial deposits in a linear pattern. So, this must be the old river course of the Tamirabarani River.

The ancient port korkai might have been situated on one of the distributaries of the tamirabarani close to the sea coast. About 1 km southwest of korkai there is a settlement called kanavisamudram, indicating presence of sea or extensive water body nearby. There must have been a bay close to korkai in the Gulf of Mannar, which would have allowed more ship to anchor. Due to heavy sedimentation and deposition both by the sea and the river, the bay would have got silted up; Palayakayal might have emerged as a new port in place of korkai. Later, the coast might have prograded towards the east giving rise to new ports like punnaikayal and kayalpattinam. At present the coast is about 200m east of kayalpatnam.

The tamirabarani river might have flowed towards north of its present delta and joined the sea south of thoothukudi town. Palaeo-channel traced from the satellite imagery indicate that the Tamirabarani River might have shifted course progressively from north to south and

in the east. The siltation is so rapid and heavy that in the last 2000 years of the historic past, land has advanced into the sea over a distance of 7.5 km.

THE RECENT DISCURSION ON PORT

Korkai, deep in the south, is considered the port of Pandya kings in the state. R. Krishnamurthy, editor of the Tamil daily *dinamalar*, asserted that Korkai was the capital of a different Pandya kingdom. Mr. Krishnamurthy, who is also president of Tamil Nadu Numismatic Society and South Indian Numismatic Society, said during the same period, Madurai was also ruled by Pandya kings. “but we are not sure about their relationship, The period of Korkai Pandya is between 3rd century BC and 9th century AD”, says Mr. Krishnamurthy, in his book *Sangakala Korkai Pandya Veliyitta Chezhian Nanayangam* (coins released by Korkai Pandya). Question asked if Korkai Pandya also ruled Madurai, since Kannagi, the heroine of *Silapathikaram*, refers to the Pandya king as Korkai Pandya's, Mr. Krishnamurthy said it needed further research but in the book, he has said there are no similarities between the coins released by Korkai Pandya's and Madurai Pandya. Mr. Krishnamurthy said he collected the coins, which gives a clue to the existence of Korkai Pandya, from a vessels shop outside Nelliappar temple in Tirunelveli. “They were found on the bed of river Thamirabarani and looked like tamarind seeds. When cleaned, I saw Tamil Brahmin words *Chezhiya* and *Chezhiyan* on one side and an elephant on the other”, he said.

CONCLUSION

The harbour of Korkai gradually silted up and deltaic accumulation eventually cut off ready access to the sea. By which, the old town slowly decayed and the population drifted to the new mouth of the river, where another town sprang into being at the cost of Korkai. An archaeologist told TNIE that they are intended to excavate the Korkai cluster villages - Arumugamangalam, Maramangalam, Agaram in the surrounding, to find the traces of ancient ports and boat jetties. We study the geologically and scientifically when the sea receded. As of now, the archaeologists had marked areas for excavation around 40 metre away from the site formerly excavated by Nagaswamy. The archaeologists said that the Srivaikuntam panchayat union had handed over the tourist interpretation centre to the department of archaeology for storing the antiquities to be unearthed from the site.

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