

Arikamedu: Its Place in the Ancient Rome - India Contacts

S. Suresh

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In this book, Sethuraman Suresh has compiled available data on Arikamedu and other equally significant, lesser-known ancient trade sites in Puducherry and Tamil Nadu. Several ports have been surveyed and excavated along the east coast of India, but not a single comprehensive monograph covering the archaeological and historical aspects of a particular site has been published, except some excavation reports, such as the Arikamedu Excavation Reports by Vimala Begley *et al.* (1996, 2004). Suresh's present monograph is thus a unique and pioneering attempt and adds a new dimension to the study of Arikamedu.

The book is divided into five chapters followed by appendices, glossary and bibliography. In the first chapter, the author provides a historical overview of the trade between ancient Rome and India. Tamil and Roman literary sources, numismatic evidence and Indian artefacts reported in Africa and the Arabia-Persia regions are discussed. Further, the causes for decline of the trade and its subsequent impact on both Rome and India have also been deliberated.

Chapter 2 deals with trade routes. Here, the author has described the Silk Route, the sea route between the Mediterranean Sea and southern India through the Red Sea, use of monsoon winds by the mariners, trade routes within the Indian subcontinent and finally, the routes between India and Sri Lanka. Interestingly, the distribution pattern and chronology of the Roman coins and other Roman antiquities in South India and Sri Lanka confirms the use of many trade routes in these regions.

The archaeology and history of Arikamedu has been covered in chapter 3. The author has discussed the location of, and approach to the site, and has put forth various suggestions pertaining to the literal meaning of the name 'Arikamedu'. The site has been excavated by several scholars at different times. The Madras Museum excavated the site in 1940 (directed by A. Aiyappan). The French scholars Brother L. Faucheux and R. Surleau excavated it between 1941 and 1944. R.E.M. Wheeler excavated Arikamedu in 1945. Between 1947 and 1950 Casal has conducted excavations here. More recently, Vimala Begley excavated the site between 1989 and 1992. Prior to these excavations, Arikamedu has been described in certain travel accounts. For example, Guillaume Le Gentil, the French astronomer, observed several brick walls, terracotta ring wells and various types of pottery at the site during his visit, between 1768 and 1771. Further, the site has been referred by Jouveau-Dubreuil in 1937 and M. Goloubew in 1939. Finds from Arikamedu are now scattered in various museums and institutes in India and abroad and some are even in private collections. Investigating the antiquity of

Arikamedu, the author concludes that trade contacts with the Mediterranean region began in the late 3rd century B.C. and the site was under continuous occupation till the end of the 18th century.

Chapter 4 is focuses on the author's recent field studies in the ancient satellite settlements around Arikamedu. Before the beginning of South India's maritime trade with the Roman world, many sites in the surrounding region were inhabited by the Megalithic people. Such sites include Parikal, Sengamedu, Suttukeni and Tiruvakkarai. Arikamedu had commercial and cultural contacts with these sites. During the period of Roman trade, the main ports along the Coromandel Coast were Vasavasamudram, Karaikadu, Kaveripattinam, Alagankulam and Korkai, with which Arikamedu interacted. The chapter concludes with details of the location of the sites, and the finds revealed by explorations and digs in each of these satellite sites. Such finds include Roman amphorae, Rouletted ware, beads, jars, terracotta ring wells, brick structures and coins.

The last chapter has been devoted to recommendations. The author has discussed, how Arikamedu is historically very different from all the other sites. The chapter also details the present physical condition of Arikamedu and the natural and manmade threats to the site. The final section of the chapter provides suggestions for developing Arikamedu as an archaeological tourism destination. Presently, the Chennai Chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) is organizing tours, for serious tourists and students, to Arikamedu as part of a bigger 'Roman Trail Tour' of South India.

Appendix-I lists the Roman coin finds at spots in Kerala, Puducherry and Tamil Nadu and Appendix-II lists the amphorae find sites in the same region. This is followed by a useful glossary of some of the rarer and non-English terms used in this book. At the end, there are two bibliographies: Bibliography -I related to the ancient Rome-India contacts and Bibliography - II exclusively covering works directly relating or referring to Arikamedu.

The book is an essential addition to the existing literature on the maritime trade contacts of India. Well-illustrated and attractively produced, the book will be useful to students, researchers and all others interested in ancient trade and Arikamedu. (This is NIO Contribution No. 4467).

Sila Tripathi
Marine Archaeology Centre
National Institute of Oceanography
Dona Paula, Goa 403 004