Early Tamil Society and Culture

Learning Objectives

The objectives of this lesson are to familiarize yourself with

■ Tamil literary, archaeological, epigraphic and non-Tamil text sources for the study of the early Tamil society

■ *Thinai*-based life in the society

■ Literature, polity, society, economy and urbanization during the period

Introduction

Tamil civilization, as we have seen, begins atleast three centuries before the Common Era (AD (CE)). As seafaring people, Tamil traders and sailors established commercial and cultural links across the seas and merchants from foreign territories also visited the Tamil region. The resulting cultural and mercantile activities and internal developments led to urbanization in this region. Towns and ports emerged. Coins and currency came into circulation. Written documents were produced. The Tamil-Brahmi script was adopted to write the Tamil language. Classical Tamil poems were composed.

3.1 Sources for the study of early Tamil society

The sources for reconstructing the history of the ancient Tamils are:

1. Classical Tamil literature
2. Epigraphy (inscriptions)
3. Archaeological excavations and material culture
4. Non-Tamil and Foreign Literature

The Classical Sangam Tamil Literature

The Classical Sangam *corpus* (collection) consists of the *Tholkappiyam*, the *Pathinen Melkanakku* (18 Major works) and the *Pathinen Kilkanakku* (18 minor works) and the five epics.

Tholkappiyam

Tholkappiyam, attributed to Tholkappiyar, is the earliest written work on Tamil grammar. Apart from elaborating the rules of grammar, the third section of *Tholkappiyam* also describes poetic conventions that provide information on Tamil social life.

The texts of *Pathinen Melkanakku* include *Pathupaattu* (ten Idylls) and *Ettuthogai* (the eight anthologies). These texts are the oldest among the classical Tamil texts. The texts of *Pathinen Kilkanakku* belong to a later date.

The *Ettuthogai* or the eight anthologies are

(1) *Nattrinai*   (2) *Kurunthogai*
(3) *Paripaadal*   (4) *Pathittrupathu*
(5) *Aingurunuru*   (6) *Kalithogai*
(7) *Akanaanuru*   (8) *Puranaanuru*

Pathupattu or ten Idylls collection includes ten long songs

(1)   *Thirumurugatrupadai*
(2)   Porunaratrupadai
(3)   Perumpanatruppadai
(4)   Sirupanatrupadai
(5)   Mullaipaattu
(6)   Nedunalvaadai
(7)   Maduraikanchi
(8)   Kurinjipaattu
(9)   Pattinappaalai
(10) Malaipadukadam

Pathinen Kilkanakku (18 minor works)

The *Pathinen Kilkanakku* comprises eighteen texts elaborating on ethics and morals. The pre-eminent work among these is the *Thirukkural* composed by Thiruvalluvar. In 1330 couplets *Thirukkural* considers questions of morality, statecraft and love.

The Five Epics

The epics or *Kappiyams* are long narrative poem of very high quality. They are,

(1) *Silappathikaaram*   (2) *Manimekalai*
(3) *Seevaka Chinthamani*
(4) *Valaiyapathi*   (5) *Kundalakesi*

Epigraphy

Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions. Inscriptions are documents scripted on stone, copper plates, and other media such as coins, rings, etc. The development of script marks the beginning of the historical period.

Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions

Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions have been found in more than 30 sites in Tamil Nadu mostly on cave surfaces and rock shelters. These caves were the abodes of monks, mostly Jaina monks. The natural caves were converted into residence by cutting a drip-line to keep rain water away from the cave. Inscriptions often occur below such drip-lines. The sites have smooth stone beds carved on rock surface for monks who led a simple life and lived in these shelters. Merchants and kings converted these natural formations as habitation for monks, who had renounced worldly life. Mangulam, Muttupatti, Pugalur, Arachalur and Kongarpuliyankulam and Jambai are some of the major sites of such caves with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions. Around Madurai many such caves with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions can still be seen. Many of them are located along ancient trade routes.
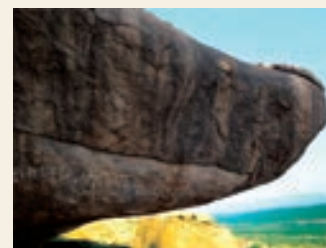
A drip-line at a rock cave with Tamil-Brahmi inscription

Note: You will notice that among the old inscriptions, people (both local and tourists) have marked their names thereby destroying some of the ancient inscriptions. Such acts of destruction of heritage property or property belonging to others are called **vandalism**.

The Tamil-Brahmi inscription at Arachalur

Estampage copy of the above inscription

A rock bed at K. Puliankulam

Hero Stones

Hero stones are memorials erected for those who lost their lives in the battles and in cattle raids. As cattle were considered an important source of wealth, raiding cattle owned by adjoining tribes and clans was common practice in a pastoral society. During the Sangam Age, the *Mullai* landscape followed the pastoral way of life. Tribal chieftains plundered the cattle wealth of enemies whose warriors fought to protect their cattle. Many warriors died in such battles and were remembered as martyrs. Memorial stones were erected in their honour. Sangam literature vividly portrays these battles and clashes, and describes such hero stones as objects of worship. *Tholkappiyam* describes the procedures for erecting hero stones.

Hero stones of the Sangam Age with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions can be found at Pulimankombai and Thathapatti in Theni district and Porpanaikottai in Pudukkottai district. Those of the Sangam Age discovered till now do not have images or sculptures.

Pulimankombai Hero stone

Pulimankomba is a village in the Vaigai river valley in Theni district. In 2006, rare hero stone inscriptions in Tamil-Brahmi script were discovered in this village.

One of the inscriptions from Pulimankombai reads

"Kudalur Akol pedu tiyan antavan kal"

It means "The stone of Tiyan Antavan who was killed in a cattle raid at the village of Kudalur".

Hero stone-Pulimankombai

Hero stones of the post-Sangam Age and the Pallava period occur in large numbers in pastoral regions especially around the Chengam region near Thiruvannamalai district. These hero stones have inscriptions and the images of warriors and names of heroes.

Inscriptions on Pottery

Pottery vessels from the Early Historic Period have names of people engraved on them in Tamil-Brahmi script. Potsherds have been discovered in Arikkamedu, Azhagankulam, Kodumanal, Keezhadi, and many other sites in Tamil Nadu. Pottery inscribed with names in Tamil-Brahmi script have also been found in Berenike and Quseir al Qadhim in Egypt and in Khor Rori in Oman indicating that early Tamils had trade contacts with West Asia and along the Red Sea coast. People etched their names on pottery to indicate ownership. Many of the names are in Tamil while some are in **Prakrit**.

A motif of a ship on pottery from Azhagankulam

Prakrit was the language used by the common people in the Northern part of India during the Mauryan period.

Archaeological Sites

Archaeological excavation refers to systematically digging a site to recover material evidence for exploring and interpreting societies of the past.

Archaeological excavations at the early historic sites are the source of evidence of the activities of the Sangam Age people. Excavations at Arikkamedu, Azhagankulam, Uraiyur, Kanchipuram, Kaveripoompattinam, Korkai,

Vasavasamudram, Keezhadi, Kodumanal in Tamil Nadu, and Pattanam in Kerala provide the evidence we have of this period.

Arikkamedu, near Puducherry, is a Sangam Age port, excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). British archaeologist, Robert Eric Mortimer Wheeler, French Archaeologist, J.M. Casal, and Indian archaeologists, A. Ghosh and Krishna Deva, excavated this site. They found evidence of a planned town, warehouse, streets, tanks and ring wells


A ring well at Arikkamedu

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is a Central government agency that manages archaeological sites and monuments in India. The Government of Tamil Nadu has its own department for archaeology called the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology. The Indian Treasure Trove Act (1878), the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act (1972), the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act (1958) are legislation related to the preservation of archaeological remains in India.

Material Culture

Archaeologists have found evidence of brick structures and industrial activities, as well as artefacts such as beads, bangles, cameos, intaglios, and other materials in these sites. Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions on pottery and coins have also been unearthed. Evidences of the various arts, crafts and industries together help us reconstruct the way of life of the people of those times. From this we learn and understand how they might have lived.
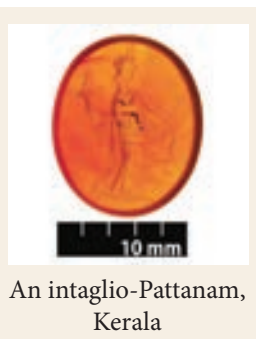
An intaglio-Pattanam, Kerala

Cameo – an ornament made in precious stone where images are carved on the surface.

Intaglio – an ornament in which images are carved as recess, below the surface.

Coins

Coins as a medium of exchange were introduced for the first time in the Sangam Age. The coins of the Cheras, the Cholas and the Pandyas, punch-marked coins, and Roman coins form another important source of evidence from the Sangam Age. Punch-marked coins have been found at Kodumanal and Bodinayakkanur. Roman coins are concentrated in the Coimbatore region, and are found at Azhagankulam, Karur, and Madurai. They were used as **bullion** for their metal value and as ornaments.

Roman Coins - Pudukkottai

Bullion means precious metal available in the form of ingots.

Punch-marked coins are the earliest coins used in India. They are mostly made of silver and have numerous symbols punched on them. Hence, they are known as punch-marked coins

Punch-marked coins

Non-Tamil Sources (Foreign Accounts)

Non-Tamil literary sources also offer information on early Tamil society. The presence of the non-Tamil sources reveals the extensive contacts and interactions of the early Tamil society with the outside world.

Arthasastra

Arthasastra, the classic work on economy and statecraft authored by Kautilya during the Mauryan period, refers to Pandya kavataka. It may mean the pearl and shells from the Pandyan country.

Mahavamsa

Mahavamsa, the Sri Lankan Buddhist **chronicle**, composed in the Pali language, mentions merchants and horse traders from Tamil Nadu and South India.

Chronicle is a narrative text presenting the important historical events in chronological order.

Periplus of Erythrean Sea

Periplus of Erythrean Sea is an ancient Greek text whose author is not known. The term Periplus means navigational guide used by sailors. Erythrean Sea refers to the waters around the Red Sea. It makes references to the Sangam Age ports of Muciri, Thondi, Korkai and Kumari, as well as the Cheras and the Pandyas.

Pliny's Natural History

Pliny the Elder, was a Roman who wrote *Natural History*. Written in Latin, it is a text on the natural wealth of the Roman Empire. Pliny speaks about the pepper trade with India . He states that it took 40 days to reach India, from Ocealis near North East Africa, if the south west monsoon wind was favourable. He also mentions that the Pandyas of Madurai controlled the port of Bacare on the Kerala coast. The current name of Bacare is not known. Pliny laments the loss of Roman wealth due to Rome's pepper trade with India indication of the huge volume useful of the pepper that was traded.

Ptolemy's Geography

Ptolemy's *Geography* is a gazetteer and atlas of Roman times providing geographical details of the Roman Empire in the second century AD (CE). Kaveripoompattinam (Khaberis Emporium), Korkai (Kolkoi), Kanniyakumari (Komaria), and Muciri (Muziris) are some of the places mentioned in his *Geography*.

Peutingerian table

Map of Peutingerian table

Peutingerian table is an illustrated map of the Roman roads. It shows the areas of ancient Tamilagam and the port of Muziris.

Note: Taprobane refers to Sri Lanka as Island. Muziris refers to the port of Muchiri.

Vienna Papyrus

Vienna **papyrus**, a Greek document datable to the second century AD (CE), mentions Muciri's trade of olden days. It is in the Papyrus Museum attached to the Austrian National Library, Vienna (Austria). It contains a written agreement between traders and mentions the name of a ship, Hermapollon, and lists articles of export such as pepper and ivory that were shipped from India to the Roman Empire.

Papyrus, a paper produced out of the papyrus plant used extensively for writing purposes in ancient Egypt.

3.2 The Sangam Age

The Sangam Age or the Early Historic period is an important phase in the history of South India. This period is marked out from prehistory, because of the availability of textual sources, namely Sangam literature and Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions. Sangam text is a vast corpus of literature that serves as an important source for the study of the people and society of the relevant period.

Chronology

There is considerable debate among scholars about the age and chronology of Sangam society. The Sangam texts are generally dated to between third century BC (BC (BCE)) and the third century AD (CE). The references in Greco-Roman texts, Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions and the references to the Cheras, Cholas and the Pandyas in the **Ashokan** inscription corroborate this date. It is generally agreed that the Sangam poems were composed in the early part of the historical period, but were compiled into anthologies in the later period.

Ashokan Brahmi - the Brahmi script used in Ashokan edicts or inscriptions.

The Thinai

The concept of *Thinai* is presented in the Tamil Grammar work of *Tholkappiyam* and this concept is essential to understand the classical Tamil poems. *Thinai* is a poetic theme, which means a class or category and refers to a habitat or eco-zone with specific physiographical characteristics. Sangam poems are set in these specific eco-zones and reveal that human life has deep relationships with nature.

The themes of the poems are broadly defined as *akam* (interior) and *puram* (exterior). *Akathinai* refers to various situations of love and family life, while Purathinai is concerned with all others aspects of life and deals particularly with war and heroism.

Ainthinai: The Five *Thinais* or landscapes.

Tamilagam was divided into five landscapes. Each region had distinct characteristics – a presiding deity, occupation, people and cultural life according to its specific environmental conditions. This classification has been interpreted by scholars to reflect real life situations in these landscapes.

The five landscapes are *Kurunji, Mullai, Marutham, Neythal and Paalai.*

- *Kurunji* refers to the hilly and mountainous region.
- *Mullai* is forested and pastoral region.
- *Marutham* is the fertile riverine valley.
- *Neythal* is coastal region.
- *Paalai* is sandy desert region.

3.3 Sangam Age Polity: Political Powers of Tamilagam

The Sangam Age has its roots in the Iron Age. In the Iron Age people were organised into **chiefdoms**. From such communities of Iron Age emerged the Vendhars of the early historic period and the Velirs of the Sangam Age were chieftains.

The Mauryan emperor, Asoka, conquered Kalinga (Odisha) and parts of Andhra and Karnataka regions.

The Muvendhar

Among the political powers of the Sangam Age, the Cheras, the Cholas and the Pandyas occupied pre-eminent positions. They were known as *Muvendhar* (the three kings). The *muvendhar* controlled the major towns and ports of the Sangam period.

The Cheras

The Cheras, referred to as Keralaputras in the Ashokan inscriptions, controlled the region of present-day Kerala and also the western parts of Tamil Nadu. Vanci was the capital of the Cheras while Muciri and Thondi were their port towns. Vanci is identified with Karur in Tamil Nadu while some others identify it with Thiruvanchaikkalam in Kerala. Pathirtruppathu speaks about the Chera kings and their territory. The Cheras wore

A Chera coin with bow and arrow, and an elephant goad on the obverse and elephant on the reverse

A map of major Sangam Age sites

garlands made from the flowers of the palm tree. The inscriptions of Pugalur near Karur mention the Chera kings of three generations. Coins of Chera kings have been found in Karur.

The *Silappathikaram* speaks about Cheran Senguttuvan, who built a temple for Kannagi, the protagonist of the epic. Legend has it that Ilango who composed the *Silappathikaram*, was the brother of Cheran Senguttuvan. The bow and arrow was the symbol of the Cheras.

The Cholas

The Cholas ruled over the Kaveri delta and northern parts of Tamil Nadu. Their capital was Uraiyur and their port town

was Kaveripoompattinam or Pumpuhar, where the river Kaveri drains into the Bay of Bengal. Pattinappaalai is a long poem about Kaveripoompattinam composed by the poet Kadiyalur Uruthirankannanar. Silappathikaram describes the trading activities at Kaveripoompattinam. Karikalan is notable among the Chola kings and is credited with bringing forestlands under the plough and developing irrigation facilities by effectively utilising the water from the river Kaveri.

The foundation for the extensive harnessing of water for irrigation purposes, which reached its zenith in later Chola times (10th to 13th centuries) was laid in his time. Karikalan fought battles with the Pandyas, the Cheras and other

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chieftains. The Chola emblem was tiger and they issued square copper coins with images of a tiger on the obverse, elephant and the sacred symbols on the reverse.

Chola Coins with a tiger on the obverse, elephant and the sacred symbols on the reverse

The Pandyas

The Pandyas who ruled the southern part of Tamil Nadu are referred in the Ashokan inscriptions. Madurai was the Pandya's capital. Tamil literary tradition credits Pandyan rulers with patronizing Tamil Sangams (academies) and supporting the compilations of poems. The Mangulam Tamil-Brahmi inscription mentions the king Nedunchezhiyan. Nediyon, Mudathirumaran, Palayagasalai Mudukudumipperuvazhuti were some of the important rulers of the dynasty. The Pandyan symbol was the fish.

Sangam Age Pandya coin with fish symbol

Velirs / Chieftains

Apart from the *Vendhars*, there were *Velirs* and numerous chieftains who occupied territories on the margins of the *muvendhar*. The *velirs* were the seven chiefs Pari, Kari, Ori, Nalli, Pegan, Ai and Athiyaman. Sangam poems write extensively about the generosity of these *velirs*. These chiefs had intimate relations with the poets of their time and were known for their large-heartedness. These chieftains had alliance with one or other of the *muvendhar* and helped them in their battles against the other *Vendhars*.

3.4 Society in Sangam Age

Many of the communities of the Iron Age society were organised as tribes, and some of them were Chiefdoms. The Sangam Age society was a society in transition from a tribal community ruled by a chief to a larger kingdom ruled by a king

Composition of the Society

Social stratification had begun to take root in Tamil society by the Sangam times. There were several clan-based communities including groups such as Panar, Paratavar, Eyinar, Uzhavar, Kanavar, Vettuvar and Maravar. The *Vendhars*, chiefs, and their associates formed the higher social groups. There were priests who were known as Antanars. There were artisan groups specialising in pottery and blacksmithy. The caste system we find in northern India did not take root in Tamil country as social groups were divided in to five situational types (tamil) and related occupational patterns.

The development of agriculture and pastoral ways of life might have harmed the eco-system and the naturally available forest and wild animals. It is possible that some of the hunter-gatherers might have been pushed to the forest areas and a few might have taken up the occupation of manual labourers. The development of agriculture in the wet-land region depended on the use of certain groups of people as labourers.

Women

Women are frequently referred to in Tamil texts as mothers, heroines, and foster-mothers. friendly Women from Panar families, dancers, poets, and royal women were all portrayed in Sangam literature. There are references to women from all five eco-zones. For example, Vennikkuyathiyar is identified as a poetess from the village of Venni. There are references to

women protecting Thinai fields from birds and Umanar kula women selling salt showing that women were involved in primary production. Instances where women preferred to die along with their husbands also occur in the literature of the times.

3.5 Economy

The *economy* was mixed as elaborated in the Thinai concept. People practiced agriculture, pastoralism, trade and money exchange, hunting-gathering, and fishing depending upon the eco-zones in which they lived.

Agricultural Production

Agriculture was one of the main sources of subsistence. Crops like paddy, sugarcane, millets were cultivated. Both wet and dry land farming were practiced. In the riverine and tank-irrigated areas, paddy was cultivated. Millets were cultivated in dry lands. Varieties of rice such as *sennel* (red rice), *vennel* (white rice), and *aivananel* (a type of rice) are mentioned in the literature. Rice grains were found in burial urns at excavations in Adichanallur and Porunthal. People in the forest adopted *punam* or shifting cultivation.

Pastoralism – nomadic people earning livelihood by rearing cattle, sheep, and goat.

Industries and Crafts of the Sangam Age

Craft production and craft specialization were important aspects of urbanization. In the Sangam Age there were professional groups that produced various commodities. The system of production of commodities is called industry.

Pottery

Pottery was practised in many settlements. People used pottery produced by *Kalamceyko* (potters) in their daily activities and so they were made in large numbers. Black ware, russet-coated painted ware, black and red ware potteries were the different types of pottery used.

Different types of pottery from Porunthal excavations.

Russet coated painted pottery with wavy line decoration

Iron Smelting Industry

Iron manufacturing was an important artisanal activity. Iron smelting was undertaken in traditional furnaces and such furnaces, with terracotta pipes and raw ore have been found in many archaeological sites. For instance evidence of iron smelting has been found in Kodumanal and Guttur. Sangam literature speaks of blacksmiths, and their tools and activities. Iron implements were required for agriculture and warfare (swords, daggers, and spears).
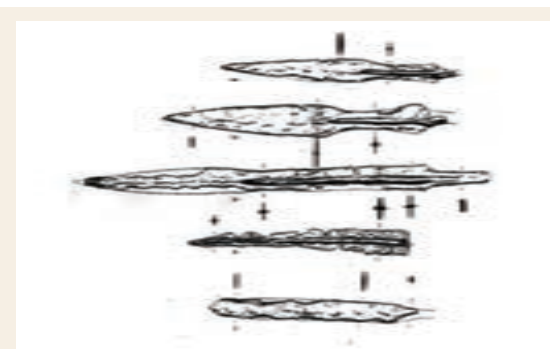
Iron Swords from Puducherry

Stone Ornaments

Sangam Age people adorned themselves with a variety of ornaments. While the poor wore ornaments made of clay, terracotta, iron,

and leaves and flowers, the rich wore jewellery made of precious stones, copper, and gold.

Carnelian Beads of Sangam Age

Carnelian beads with etched designs of Sangam Age

Gold ornament axe

Gold pendant, Porunthal

Gold ornaments, Pattanam

Gold jewellery

Gold ornaments were well known in this period. Gold coins from Roman was used to make jewellery. Evidence of gold smelting has been found at Pattanam in Kerala. Gold ornaments have been unearthed at the megalithic sites of Suttukeni, Adichanallur and Kodumanal, and towns of Arikkamedu, Keezhadi and Pattanam.

Glass Beads

The presence of glass beads at the sites reveals that people of the Sangam Age knew how to make glass beads. Glass material (silica) was melted in a furnace and drawn into long tubes which were then cut into small beads. Glass beads came in various shapes and colour. Arikkamedu and Kudikkadu, near Cuddalore show evidence of glass beads industry. It is possible that people who could not afford precious stones used glass beads instead.

Pearl Fishery and Shell Bangle

The Pamban coast is famous for pearl fishery. A pearl has been discovered in recently excavated Keezhadi site. Shell bangles were very common in the Sangam Age. The Parathavars collected conch shells from the Pamban Island, which were cut and crafted into bangles by artisans. Whole shells as well as fragments of bangles have been found at many sites. Sangam literature describes women wearing shell bangles.

A terracotta seal with rice husk impression, Keezhadi

Textiles

Textile production was another important occupation. Evidence of spindle whorls and pieces of cloth have been found at Kodumanal. Literature too refers to clothes called *kalingam* and other fine varieties of textiles. Periplus also mentions the fine variety of textiles produced in the Tamil region.

Spindle whorls were used for making thread from cotton.

Exchange, Trade, Merchants, and Trade Routes

We saw the primary production of grains, cattle wealth, and various commodities. These goods were not produced by everybody and were not produced in all settlements. Resources and commodities were not available in all regions. For example, the hill region did not have fish or salt and the coastal regions could not produce paddy. Therefore trade and exchange was

important for people to have access to different commodities. This system was known as barter system.

Traders

The terms *vanikan* and *nigama* (guild) appear in Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions. There were different types of merchants: gold merchants, cloth merchants, and salt merchants. Salt merchants were called Umanars and they travelled in bullock carts along with their family.

Means of Transport

Bullock carts and animals were used to transport goods by land. Trade routes linked the various towns of Tamilagam. Various types of water crafts and sea-going vessels such as Kalam, Pahri, Odam, Toni, Teppam, and *Navai* are also mentioned in Tamil literature.

Barter and Coins

Barter was the primary mode of exchange. For instance, rice was exchanged for fish. Salt was precious and a handful of it would fetch an equal amount of rice. The extensive availability of coin hoards of the Sangam Age of the Cheras, Cholas, Pandyas, and Malayaman indicates that they were used widely.

Tamilagam and Overseas Interactions

Tamil country had connections with countries overseas both in the east and west. Roman ships used monsoon winds to cross the Western Sea or the Arabian Sea to connect Tamilagam with the Western world. Spices including pepper, ivory, and precious stones were exported. Metal including gold, silver and copper and precious stones were imported.

Yavanar referred to the Westerners, including the Greeks, Romans and West Asian people. Yavana derives from the Greek region of Ionia.

Tamil Nadu to Red Sea Coast

An Indian jar with 7.5 kg of pepper, teak wood, a potsherd with Tamil-Brahmi inscription and Indian pottery have been

A bronze tiger with carnelian stones, Kodumanal
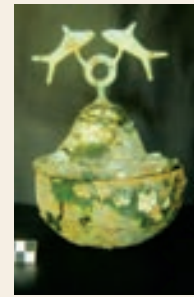
A bronze vessel from a megalithic burial Auroville, Puducherry

Glass beads from Porunthal excavations

A spindle whorl, Pattanam

Textile and spindle whorls from Kodumanal

Shell wastes of bangle craft production

discovered at Berenike, a port on the Red Sea coast of Egypt.

At Quseir al Qadhim, another port located north of Berenike on the Red Sea Coast, three Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, *Panaiori*, *Kanan*, and *Cattan*, have been found on pottery discovered here.

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Akanaanuru poem 149 describes the trading at the port of Muciri as follows: "the well crafted ships of the Yavana came with gold returned with pepper at the wealthy port of Muciri".

The trade route from Tamilagam to Rome.

A stone with the name "Perumpatankal" has been found at Khuan Luk Pat, Thailand. Southeast Asia was known as Suvarna Bhumi in Tamil literature. This stone was used by a person called Perumpattan, probably a goldsmith. It was a touchstone used to test the purity of gold.

Ceramic Jars from Tamilagam with preserved pepper, Berenike, Egypt

Pottery with the name "Cattan"
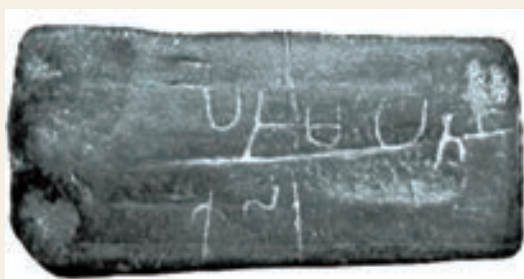
Perumpatankal, Kuan Luk Pat, Thailand

3.6 Emergence of towns and ports

The Sangam Age saw the first urbanization in Tamilagam. Cities developed and they had brick buildings, roof tiles, ring wells and planned towns, streets, and store houses. The towns worked as ports and artisanal centres. Arikkamedu, Kaveripoompattinam, Azhagankulam and Korkai on the east coast and Pattanam in Kerala were port centres. Kanchipuram, Uraiyur, Karur, Madurai and Kodumanal were inland trade centres.

Many goods and commodities were produced in these centres and were exported to various regions. Though few in number, large towns appeared in the Sangam Age. Small villages however were found in many areas. Bronze vessels, beads, shell bangles, glass beads, pottery with names of people written in Tamil-Brahmi script were found at these sites.

What is an urban centre?
A planned town with brick architecture and a proper layout. Urban centres have a larger population involved in non-agrarian, commercial and political occupations. Various industrial activities are seen in these towns.

3.7 Faith and Belief System

Like the diverse nature of the society and economy, the belief system of the Sangam Age was also diverse. It consisted of animism, ancestor worship, hero worship and worship of several deities.

Tholkappiyam lists the presiding deities of Kurunji, Mullai, Marutham, Neythal and Paalai landscapes, as Murugan, Thirumal, Indiran, Varunan and Kotravai, respectively.

However, people also worshipped natural forces and dead heroes, and ancestors. The force of anangu is mentioned in the literature which indicates the prevalence of animistic beliefs.

Jainism was present as evidenced by the caves with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions. Performance of *Yagna* is also evidenced. Buddhism was also present in certain centres. Different groups practiced various forms of worship.

3.8 Fine Arts

Various art forms too existed in the Sangam Age. Performances of ritual dances called Veriyatal are referred to in the literature. Composition of poems, playing of music instruments and dances were also known. The literature mentions the fine variety of cuisine of the Sangam Age. People took care of their appearance and evidence of antimony rods (kohl sticks) made of copper has been found in archaeological sites. They were used by women for decorating their eyebrows.

Antimony rods (kohlsticks)
were made of bronze

Copper rods used for decorating eyelashes

Pattanam, Kerala

Pattanam is located near North Paravur in Vadakkekara village of Ernakulam district of Kerala. It was an ancient port town that had overseas connections with the western and eastern worlds.

Pottery sherds from West Asia

Cameo blanks in Carnelian

Canoe excavated at Pattanam

Gold ornaments from Pattanam

Turquoise glazed pottery, West Asia

3. **Early Tamil Society and Culture**

Kodumanal, Tamil Nadu

Kodumanal is located near Erode in Tamil Nadu and is identified with the Kodumanam of *Pathitrupattu*. Evidence of iron, stone bead and shell work, as well as megalithic burials have been discovered at this site. More than 300 pottery inscriptions in Tamil-Brahmi have also been found.

Excavated Megalithic Burial at Kodumanal

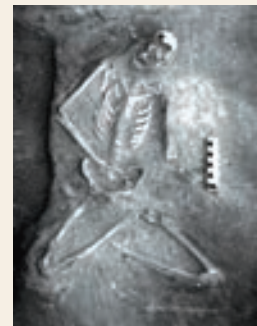Iron objects (horse equipment) from Kodumanal

Shell bangle bragments and a conch, Kodumanal

Carnelian beads, Kodumanal

Human skeleton from Kodumanal

Jar with writing in Brahmi

Keezhadi near Madurai, Tamil Nadu

Keezhadi is located near Silaimaan east of Madurai, on the highway to Rameswaram. In a large coconut garden, called Pallichandai Tidal, the Archaeological Survey of India and Tamilnadu state Archaeological Department excavated an ancient town dating to the Sangam Age. Archaeological excavations have produced evidence for brick buildings, drainage, Tamil-Brahmi inscription on pottery, beads of glass, carnelian and quartz, pearl, iron objects, games pieces, and antimony rods. Further excavation may shed light on the nature of the craft production and the cultural activities undertaken at this settlement.

Brick Structures at Keezhadi
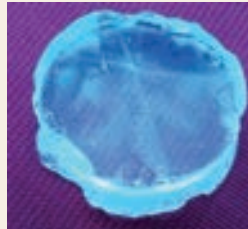

A brick structure, Keezhadi

Furnace, Keezhadi

A brick built tank, Keezhadi

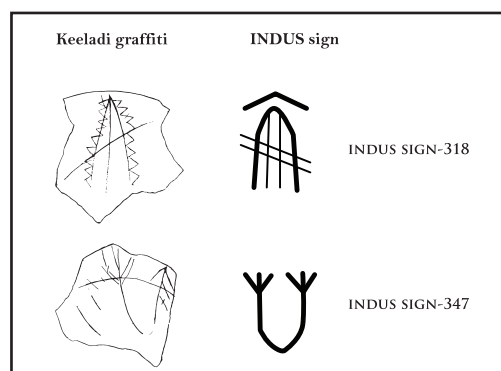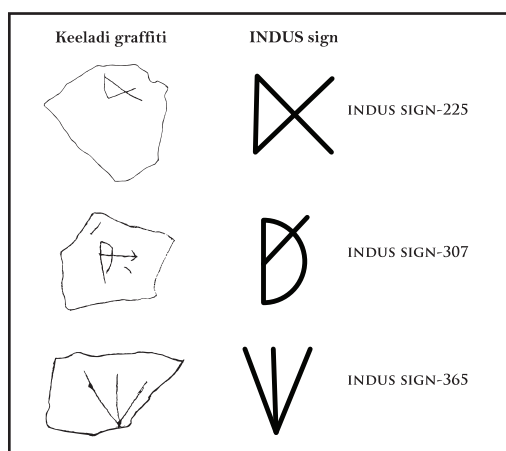Crystal ear
ornaments, Keezhadi

Various objects and
ornaments from Keezhadi

Tamil-Brahmi Script
used in the Sangam Age for writing the Tamil Language

3. **Early Tamil Society and Culture**

Similarities between graffiti of Keeladi and signs of Indus

Keeladi graffiti	INDUS sign	
		INDUS SIGN-225
		INDUS SIGN-307
		INDUS SIGN-365

Keeladi graffiti	INDUS sign	
		INDUS SIGN-318
		INDUS SIGN-347

Keeladi Excavation on the banks of Vaigai suggests that urbanization occured in Tamil Nadu too around 6th century BC (BCE) like in the Gangetic plains.

Porunai: The Cradle of Tamil Civilisation

Porunai (Thamirabarani) is the only perennial river in Tamil Nadu. It flows through Thirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts. In Porunai river basin, the first archaeological excavation was done in Adichanallur (1876) by a German explorer named Dr. Jagor. Then the British archaeologist Alexander Rea conducted excavation during 1899-1905 and displayed the artefacts he had collected in Madras Government Museum. Nearly after a century, the Archaeological Survey of India conducted excavation in 2004. Its report has been published recently. The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology began excavations (2019 - 2021) in burial and habitation mound of Adichanallur. Korkai, an ancient port mentioned in Sangam and Greek texts. The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology conducted here excavation in 1968. The on-going excavation (2020 – 2021) at Korkai has yielded interesting details about the Korkai Port and its overseas contacts.

The samples of husk removed paddy in an urn, unearthed during the excavations conducted at Sivakalai (2019), a place situated a few kilometres away from Adichanallur by the Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department was sent to the Miami-based Beta Analytic Laboratory, Florida, USA for determining the age. This Laboratory, after radiocarbon dating analysis has come to the conclusion that it dates back to 1155 BC (BCE). Which means Thamirabarani civilisation is nearly 3200 years old.

Objects Unearthed in Adichanallur, Sivakalai and Korkai

Burial urns: Buried under a rocky surface at a depth of 3 to 12 feet, these urns contained bones, utensils, gold, high tin bronze and iron objects, believed to have been used by the dead.

Gold diadems

Long circular gold diadems made of thin plates with small dots of triangles with holes at the extreme ends to fasten with a string.

High tin bronzes

Small and big high tin bronze utensils of different sizes and shapes.

Female figurines

Excavated in Indus   *Excavated in Adichanallur*

Female figurines similar to those found in Indus Civilisation.

Iron weapons

32 in number, including lances, spears, stilettos.

Earthenware (Black and Red)

The black - and - red earthen pots of various sizes, more than 500 graffiti and Tamili (Tamil-Brahmi) script inscribed potsherds

Ornaments

Rings made of copper and iron, beads and bangles made of gold, glass, ivory, bone and shell.

Water and Sewage Management

The raised brick structure, using sand and laterite stones, with a big pot placed at its centre, has 29 courses of bricks, terracotta pipes with perforations in 9 courses kept one above the other is considered the cutting-edge technique of that period.

Shell Bangle Industry

Conches in full, cut-conch shell bangles and shells providing evidence to the existence of conch industries in Korkai. Sangam poems mention about the settlements of shell bangle makers.

Ceramics and Coins indicating overseas trade

The presence of foreign ceramics and black polished earthenware confirm that Tamils had a trade relationship with different parts of the world even before 6th century BC (BCE).

3. **Early Tamil Society and Culture**

Recap

- Primary production and exchange and social relationships in the landscapes and mercantile activities across the seas led to urbanization and development of culture paving way for the development of literature during this period.
- The texts were compiled through the Tamil Academies (Sangam) at a later date.
- The Thinai concept is a distinct classification of land and people as elaborated in *Tholkappiyam*.
- The Sangam age witnessed the transition from tribal society to kingdom-centred polities.
- Sea borne trade with the Indian Ocean regions developed.
- Large towns with buildings made of bricks appeared in Tamil country.
- The society was diverse in nature.

Timeline

ca. 1300 BC (BCE) to 300 BC (BCE)	Iron Age or Megalithic Period
ca. 300 BC (BCE) to 300 AD (CE).	Early Historic Period / Sangam Age / Sangam Literature
ca. 400 BC (BCE) to 300 BC (BCE)	Introduction of Tamil-Brahmi Script
1st Century AD (CE)	Periplus of Erythrean Sea
1st Century AD (CE)	Pliny's Natural History
2nd Century AD (CE)	Ptolemy's Geography
2nd Century AD (CE)	Vienna Papyrus G 40822
ca. 300 AD (CE) to 500 AD (CE)	Post Sangam Age

EXERCISE

I. Choose the correct Answer:

1. The name of the script used in the Sangam Age
   a) English   b) Devanagari
   c) Tamil-Brahmi   d) Granta

2. The Sri Lankan chronicle composed in the Pali language mentioning about merchants and horse traders from Tamil Nadu
   a) Deepa vamsa   b) Arthasastra
   c) Mahavamsa   d) Indica

3. The notable Chola king credited with bringing forest lands under the plough and developing irrigational facilities
   a) Karikalan   b) Rajarajan I
   c) Kulothungan   d) Rajendran I

4. Inscription that mentions the Cheras
   a) Pugalur   b) Girnar
   c) Pulimankombai   d) Madurai

5. (i) Coins as a medium of exchange were introduced for the first time in the Mesolithic Age.
   (ii) Prakrit was the language used by the common people in Northern India during the Mauryan period.
   (iii) Vienna Papyrus, a Roman document, mentions trade related to Muziri.
   (iv) The concept of Thinai is presented in the Tamil grammar work of *Pathupaattu*.

a) (i) is correct

b) (ii) is correct

c) (ii) and (ii) is correct

d) (iii) and (iv) is correct

6. (i) Pathitrupathu speaks about the Pandya kings and their territory.

(ii) The Akanaanuru describes the trading activities at Kaveripoompattinum.

(iii) The Chola Emblem was the tiger and they issued square copper coins with images of a tiger.

(iv) Neythal is a sandy desert region.

a) (i) is correct
b) (ii) and (iii) are correct
c) (iii) is correct
d) (iv) is correct

II. Fill in the blanks

1. _____ are documents scripted on stones, copper plates, coins and rings

2. _____ refers to systematically digging a site to recover material evidence for exploring societies of the past

3. _____ the classic work on economy and statecraft authored by Kautilya during the Mauryan period.

4. _____ is a poetic theme which means a class or category and refers to a habitat or eco-zone with specific physiographical characteristics.

5. _____ referred to the Westerners, including the Greeks, Romans and West Asian people.

III. Find out the correct statement

1. a) Evidence of iron smelting has been found in Kodumanal and Guttur.

b) Periplus of Erythren Sea mentions about the pepper trade with India.

c) Punch marked coins are the earliest coins used in India mostly made of gold.

d) The Sangam Age has its roots in the Bronze Age.

2. a) The Cheras ruled over Kaveri delta and their capital was Uraiyur.

b) The Maangulam Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions mention the King Karikalan.

c) The terms Vanikan and Nigama appear in Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions were different types of merchants.

d) Salt merchants were called Vanikars and they travelled in bullock carts along with their family

IV. Match the following

1. Epigraphy   -   a narrative text presenting the important historical events

2. Chronicle   -   a Sangam Age port

3. Pastoralism   -   an ornament made in precious stone.

4. Cameo   -   the study of inscriptions

5. Arikkamedu -   nomadic   people earning livelihood by rearing cattle.

V. Answer the following questions briefly

1. Archaeological sites provide evidence of past history - Discuss.

2. How important are coins as a source of evidence for the study of Sangam Age?

3. Agriculture was one of the main sources of subsistence in Sangam Age. Give reasons.

4. Overseas interactions brought glory to ancient Tamilagam. Give examples in support.

VI. Answer the following in detail

1. To what extent do you think the political powers of Tamilagam   influenced Sangam Age polity?

2. Indicate how the industries and crafts of the Sangam Age contribute to their economy.

FUN WITH HISTORY

Student Activities

Mark on the map of south India, the ancient Tamilagam and the territories of Tamil kingdoms.Visit a museum and collect information about inscriptions, coins and instruments used by the ancient people.

Visit the early historic sites of Arikkamedu, Kaveripoompattinam, Keezhadi etc.,

Conduct a study on materials excavated from prehistoric sites and on Tamil - Brahmi script.

Assignment with teacher's guidance

A power-point presentation on the origin of human life

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2. Champakalakshmi. R, *Archaeology and Tamil Literary Tradition. Puratattva*

3. Rajan Gurukkal, *Social Formation in South India.* Oxford University Press.
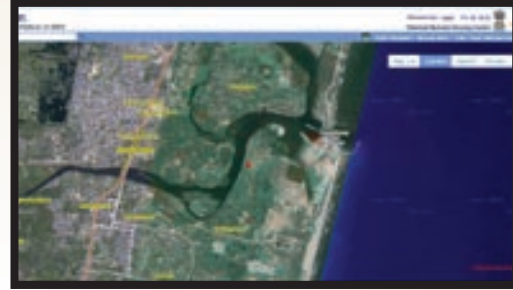
INTERNET RESOURCES

1. https://www.britannica.com

2. https://sangamtamilliterature.wordpress.com

3. http://www.archeologia.univ.

ICT CORNER

Finding Arikamedu

Let's Find

Steps

1. Type the given URL in browser or scan the QR code.
2. Click 'Bhuvan 2D'.
3. Type Arikamedu in search box. Click 'Search' button or press the 'Enter key'.
4. Select the 'Satellite' option given at the right side to watch the area in satellite view. Click '+' or '-' signs given at the left side to' zoom in 'or 'zoom out'.

Website URL:

http://bhuvan.nrsc.gov.in/bhuvan_links.php#

Website URL:

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.prajwal.history.science.isro.bhuvan.earth.map.satellite