

## Locating the ancient port of Muziris: fresh findings from Pattanam

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Ancient writers, including the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, considered Muziris on the Malabar coast of India to be among the most significant ports for Indo-Roman trade. Despite its legendary status, identification with a physical location has been elusive, although it has been widely accepted as being near the mouth of the Periyar river. This is in contrast to other sites likely to have played a less important rôle in the Indo-Roman trade, such as Arikamedu (e.g., Wheeler *et al.* 1946; Begley *et al.* 1996) and Alagankulam (Nagaswamy 1991) on the Coromandal coast, where ample Roman finds reflecting cultural interaction between the two regions have been recorded.

This discrepancy between the historical and archaeological evidence has ensured that the search for Muziris remained in the forefront of scholarly inquiry, despite the lack of new evidence. The most recent contribution is a detailed synthesis of the historical, archaeological and topographical evidence by Gurukkal and Whittaker in *JRA* 14 (2001); they suggested the most probable location for Muziris, but still lacked significant archaeological evidence. Recent fieldwork in the lower Periyar river basin has now identified archaeologically the first urban settlement with Roman finds, and it is this which is reported on here.

### Muziris on the ground?

The focus of the search for Muziris has generally been the N bank of the Periyar river, in the region of Thiruvanchikulam (a suburb of Kodungallur/Cranganore), because of its identification with Vanji, the Chera capital mentioned in the Sangam literature (Menon 1991, 50) and the *Periplus* (Casson 1989, 217-18). Gurukkal and Whittaker (2001, 348) presented a strong argument placing the ancient site of Muziris in the region of Kodungallur in the modern state of Kerala, and more precisely to the northwest of the confluence of the Periyar river and the Pullut backwaters. They attributed the inability to identify Muziris on the ground to coastal changes resulting from erosion and monsoonal activity (*ibid.* 342).

Fieldwork undertaken by the first-named author between 1993 and 1997, as part of a geo-archaeological survey, identified a number of archaeological sites, including an Early Historic (c.300 B.C.–A.D. 300) settlement at Pattanam in the Kodungallur-Paravur region (fig. 1; Shajan 1998; *id.* in press; *id.* and Seralathan 1999). Pattanam (76°10' E, 10°10' N) lies 1.5 km northwest of Paravur, which is a taluk headquarters in the Ernakulam district of Kerala, on the S side of the Periyar. The site is located c.3.5 km east of the modern coast and c.4.5 km southeast of the mouth of the Periyar. Its location, scale and place-name all suggest that Pattanam could be linked to ancient Muziris. Equally compelling are the artefacts collected. This paper will briefly outline the arguments, with emphasis on both the geological and archaeological evidence. Gurukkal and Whittaker have provided much of the broader context, which need not be repeated here.

### The geological setting

The evolution of Kerala's coastal area is pivotal to understanding ancient habitation since it has dramatically affected the distribution and preservation of archaeological sites. Extensive geomorphological studies along the coast between Cochin and Chetwa show the shoreline to have progressively extended into the Lakshadweep Sea (fig. 2; Mathai and Nair 1988; Shajan 1998). In this context it is necessary to describe the palaeo-geographical characteristics of the study area, including the formation of the coast, changes in its configuration, and the shifting of the course of the Periyar, with its meandering channels, during the last few thousand years.