

Cochin, Cranganore, and the Historical Imagination of the Malabar Coast: A Critical Geography of Maritime Networks, Cultural Memory, and Muziris

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Abstract

This article advances a critical geographical and historiographical re-reading of the Malabar Coast through the interlinked trajectories of Cochin, Cranganore, and the lost port of Muziris, situating them within the *longue durée* of the Indian Ocean world. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Fernand Braudel's environmental history, K. N. Chaudhuri's systemic analysis of maritime trade, Michael N. Pearson's concept of littoral society, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's notion of connected histories, the study conceptualizes Kerala's maritime past as a dynamic interface of ecology, commerce, and cultural memory. It foregrounds the monsoon-driven circuits that enabled sustained transregional interactions linking the Mediterranean, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and Southeast Asia, thereby transforming the Malabar littoral into a cosmopolitan zone of exchange.

The article critically examines the archaeological and textual evidence associated with Muziris—identified with Pattanam—highlighting its role as a nodal entrepôt in Indo-Roman trade networks, as attested in classical sources such as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and *Natural History*. Material findings, including amphorae, coins, and industrial remains, are interpreted as indices of a deeply entangled maritime economy and multi-ethnic settlement. Moving beyond economic determinism, the study interrogates Cranganore's layered cultural memory, where Jewish, Christian, and Islamic origin narratives converge, revealing how mytho-historical traditions function as repositories of migratory and mercantile pasts.

A central argument of the paper is that the decline of Muziris—precipitated by the geomorphological transformations following the catastrophic flood of 1341 CE—marks not a rupture but a reconfiguration of maritime space. The rise of Cochin is thus read as an adaptive spatial shift within an evolving coastal ecology, further intensified by early modern European interventions and colonial cartographic regimes. By integrating environmental history, archaeology, textual analysis, and memory studies, the article demonstrates that the historical imagination of the Malabar Coast is constituted through the interplay of material landscapes, transoceanic networks, and enduring cultural narratives. Ultimately, it argues that Muziris persists not merely as an archaeological site but as a palimpsestic construct within Kerala's maritime identity, where geography and memory remain inextricably intertwined.

Keywords: Muziris; Malabar Coast; Cochin; Cranganore; Indian Ocean trade; cultural memory; maritime archaeology; environmental history; Indo-Roman trade; monsoon networks; Kerala maritime history.

The Indian Ocean World and the Sea Life in Kerala

Awareness of Indian Ocean's larger maritime geography is quintessential to any understanding of the history of the Malabar Coast. The seasonal monsoon winds set up the context of larger trade networks which connected the domains of Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, and East Africa for more than 2,000 years. The interconnecting sea routes empowered people to move with their goods, religious traditions, technological knowledge, and cultural practices. In this trans-regional system, coastal semi-urban spaces were the major locations where trade and cultural exchanges took place.

Fernand Braudel's significant observations of maritime history offers a crucial theoretical framework for a proper understanding of the complex significations of pre-european maritime history between Asia-Arab worlds and Africa. Braudel's analysis of the Mediterranean emphasized the importance of persistent environmental frameworks that shape human behaviour across centuries. Braudel referred to the "longue durée" of history as the long-term shifts in the climate, geography, and the environment. Though Braudel's work was mostly focused on the Mediterranean context, the Indian Ocean maritime history and spatial processes where monsoon cycles, coastal geomorphology, and riverine systems had a big effect on the growth of maritime trade. The monsoon wind system paved the way for traders to move between the ports of Arabia and East Africa and the western coast of India along the Malabar Coast. Ships leaving the Red Sea could get to the Malabar Coast in a few weeks during the summer monsoon. The winter monsoon enables the ships to travel back easier. This regular pattern of trade ships moving along the coast led to the growth of permanent business settlements.

K. N. Chaudhuri's pioneering research on Indian Ocean trade enhanced this perspective by examining the economic structures that enabled significant commercial exchanges across the region. Chaudhuri said that the Indian Ocean was a big economic system where trade routes across the sea connected markets in different parts of the world. Port cities were important links between production areas in the interior and international markets in this network. For instance, Kerala's pepper-growing areas were home to one of the most valuable goods in the early global economy which attracted traders from all over the Mediterranean and West Asia.

Gradually, the Malabar Coast became one of the busiest places for ships to trade in the Indian Ocean. Its ports made it easier for spices, textiles, precious stones, and ivory to get around. Cultural transmissions were another phenomenal factor which shaped the early maritime history of Malabar coast. There were merchant communities in these coastal towns from all over the world, including Arabs, Persians, Jews, and later Europeans. Such interactions led to unique forms of cultural pluralism that still shape Kerala's socio cultural landscape.

Michael N. Pearson's concept of "littoral society" provides a valuable framework for understanding the social dynamics of coastal regions such as these. Pearson asserts that coastal societies often develop distinctive cultural patterns shaped by their interactions with maritime networks. 'Littoral societies' are more culturally fluid that they welcome travelers and merchants from other countries and locations. This is different from areas farther inland, where farming economies and centralized political power are more common.

The Malabar Coast is a great example of this. Historical records show that Jewish traders, Syrian Christian communities, Arab Muslim merchants, and Hindu trading castes all lived in the same port towns. These communities maintained commercial and religious connections with distant regions while simultaneously integrating into the local culture. Because of this, there was a cosmopolitan maritime culture where people of different languages, religions, and cultures cohabited and involved in socio economic activities. Sanjay Subrahmanyam's concept of "connected histories" advances this perspective by emphasizing the interconnections among historical events across various regions of the world. Subrahmanyam asserts that historical events in one region are often incomprehensible when considered in isolation from events in other regions. Maritime trade networks, in particular, facilitated intricate connections among individuals from distant locales. From this perspective, the history of the Malabar Coast cannot be fully understood solely within the limitations of regional or national historiography. It should be seen in the bigger picture of how the Indian Ocean brings people together. The emergence of port cities such as Muziris and Cochin is an example of how global economic forces, local environmental conditions, and cultural traditions interacted to initiate broader fluid spaces.

The Roman Period of Maritime trade at the Port of Muziris.

Muziris, one of the most important ports on the Malabar Coast, is conventionally identified with the archaeological location at Pattanam near Kodungallur which functioned as a pivotal entrepôt within the Indian Ocean maritime network during the early part of the last millennium. Classical Greco-

Roman texts such as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea and Natural History* document Muziris as a principal port facilitating Indo-Roman commerce in pepper, pearls, and precious stones. Archaeological excavations at Pattanam have yielded Mediterranean amphorae, Roman coins, and West Asian ceramics, corroborating textual references to extensive trans-oceanic trade and confirming Muziris as a cosmopolitan hub linking South India with the Mediterranean and Red Sea worlds (Ray 2003; Gurukkal and Whittaker 2001).

The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea mentions ships that travel from the Red Sea to the western peninsula of South Asia often harbor in Muziris. The Roman traders from Egyptian ports like Berenike and Myos Hormos, crossed the Arabian Sea with the help of the monsoon winds, and then arrived at Muziris to trade gold and silver for black pepper, pearls, ivory, silk fabrics, and gems. In the Roman world, pepper was used as a cooking spice, a medicine, and a sign of high status - Roman writers often complained about the gold traded to India due to excessive demand for pepper. Pliny the Elder, who lived in the first century CE, lamented that Rome was losing millions of sesterces for buying expensive things from India and the East. This also showcases the prowess of trade networks between the Malabar Coast and the Mediterranean world. Archaeological evidences affirm the fact that the trade between India and Rome was a historical reality. In Pattanam, archaeologists have found a lot of pieces of Roman amphorae for shipping wine and olive oil. The presence of Roman coins at the site shows that traders from the Mediterranean very much existed there. One of the major reasons behind the idea that Pattanam is where the old city of Muziris was located was the archeological excavations of Roman remnants.

The port also served as a nature location of meetings of foreign merchants with the local traders who have controlled the flow of goods such as spices and other luxurious items. After proper negotiations, goods were exported from Malabar coast through Indian ocean to the Mediterranean coast markets. Because of the capital through trade, the cities along Malabar coast have grown significantly and substantially. From classical narratives, there were houses, markets and the warehouses of merchants from different countries and cultures. Scholars have often contested on the fact that where Muziris was located in Malabar coast. As per classical historical texts, the trade between India and Rome have been substantial and the exchange of goods and capital was a historical fact. Later it was believed that the port was destroyed due to some environmental shifts such as flood.

The archaeological digs at Pattanam that began in the early 21st century have made this debate much clearer. Researchers at the site have found a lot of artifacts that exhibits the contacts and networks with locations across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean world for a long time.

Some of the most important things that have been found are Roman amphorae, ceramics from West Asia, glass beads, and things made of semi-precious stones. The fact that there were workshops for making beads at the site is also remarkable. Structural remnants associated with wharf installations further indicate the existence of harbour facilities capable of accommodating maritime vessels.

These discoveries have completely changed how scholars understand Kerala's early maritime history. Muziris doesn't look like a separate trading post; it looks more like a well-connected port settlement that was part of global trade networks. The port's rediscovery through excavation has given us specific evidences of the stories that classical texts still tell about the past.

The archaeological evidence also shows that people from many different cultures lived in the port. Artifacts from different parts of the Indian Ocean domain show that there were different consortiums of merchants living and working together in the settlement. This diverse environment likely facilitated the evolution of the religious traditions subsequently associated with Cranganore.

Religious Groups and Cranganore's Cultural Memory

The historical memory of Cranganore has been embedded with stories of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus all link their origins to the ancient port. This shows how long the area has been a place where different cultures have come together.

Jewish sources say that Cranganore, which is called 'Shingly' in Hebrew, was one of the first places in India where Jews lived.

Jewish migration to the Malabar Coast is traditionally associated with the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), while firm historical evidence confirms Jewish communities in Kerala by the medieval period. In *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era*, Joan G. Roland critically examines traditions linking Jewish migration to India with the **Siege of Jerusalem (70 CE)**. She argues that while such narratives persist in communal memory, reliable historical evidence appears mainly in medieval records confirming established Jewish mercantile communities on Kerala's Malabar Coast. In *A History of the Jews of Cochin*, J. B. Segal examines the debated origins of Jewish settlement on Kerala's Malabar Coast. Segal records community traditions that associate the first migration with refugees dispersing after the **Siege of Jerusalem (70 CE)**, while noting that these narratives rely largely on oral memory rather than contemporary documentation. Through historical analysis, he emphasizes that firmer evidence for Jewish presence emerges in the medieval period, when Jewish merchant groups were integrated into Indian Ocean trade networks centered around ports such as Cranganore. These communities developed stable settlements, maintained religious institutions, and participated actively in long-distance commerce linking Kerala with West Asian markets. Historians don't all agree on the exact order of these migrations, but archaeological and written evidence show that there were Jewish communities in Kerala by the Middle Ages.

Christian traditions say that the Apostle Thomas came to Kerala in the first century CE and built a number of churches along the Malabar Coast. Many Christian communities in Kerala maintained ecclesiastical connections with the Syriac Christian domain of West Asia.

Islamic traditions also trace their origins to the cultural milieu of Cranganore, exemplified by the narrative of Cheraman Perumal, the Chera king who purportedly converted to Islam following a miraculous celestial occurrence. Historians are cautious regarding this narrative; however, the existence of early mosques along the Malabar Coast indicates that Muslim merchants participated in the region's maritime trade networks.

The Environmental Changes of 1341 and the End of Muziris

The demise of Muziris exemplifies the impact of environmental changes on maritime economic geography in the Indian Ocean region. Classical texts and archaeological evidence confirm the port's significance in the early centuries of the Common Era; however, historical sources indicate that significant ecological transformations along the Malabar Coast during the mediaeval period fundamentally reshaped the region's coastal landscape. The catastrophic flood of 1341 CE profoundly altered the geomorphology of the Periyar River basin and marked the decline of the ancient port traditionally identified with Muziris near Kodungallur. Historical traditions and geological studies indicate that the flood reconfigured the river's course, silted harbour channels, and disrupted maritime activity, thereby weakening Muziris's prominence in the Indian Ocean trade network. Subsequent commercial activity gradually shifted toward emerging ports such as Kochi. Archaeological interpretations and historical analyses suggest that this environmental transformation played a decisive role in the decline of the Muziris entrepôt and the reorganization of trade along the Malabar Coast (Gurukkal and Whittaker; Menachery).

Merchants began to move their businesses to new coastal inlets further south along the Malabar littoral as the harbour became harder to get to.

Historians of ecology and environment envisage that cataclysmic changes would happen profusely in deltaic and estuarine landscapes where river systems meet coastal currents and seasonal monsoon cycles. The Malabar Coast's geomorphological instability, which includes moving sandbars, tidal lagoons, and backwater networks, has changed significantly the design of coastal ports a lot over the years. The decline of Muziris can be seen as a gradual process rather than a sudden disappearance in

view of such drastic shifts and paved the way for the port's commercial importance and maritime infrastructure.

The flood of 134, one of the most substantial events in Kerala's maritime history, changed the hydrological system that functioned with the Periyar River finally converted the economic geography of the area. The ports, major locations of international port slowly lost their significance. New settlements grew up to take advantage of the changing coastlines, according to recent archaeological and geological investigations and interpretation. Sediment analysis in the Periyar delta proved that river channels and coastal formations changed a lot during the late mediaeval period. These factors provide scientific corroboration for historical narratives describing environmental disruptions that restructured the Malabar coastline.

The historical significance of Muziris did not vanish immediately upon its decline. Even though the port wasn't a major trade center for hundreds of years, people still remembered it in their traditions and religious stories. People from towns that used to have businesses in Cranganore slowly moved to other ports along the coast with them memories of the old port's cultural heritage. The harbour that would later become the port city of Cochin was one of the places that benefited the most from the gradual transformation of geographical space of Muziris.

The Growth of Cochin as a Port

The emergence of Cochin as a major port in the late middle ages is an example of how changes in the environment can create new business opportunities in maritime economies. When Muziris collapsed on hard times, merchants along the Malabar coast began to search for other ports that could accommodate large vessels engaged in long-distance trade.

Cochin had many geographic advantages to accomplish this trade project. The port was located along a huge network of backwaters that connected it to the interior, where spices were grown. This made it easy to get to the places where peppers were grown, which had been a part of the international spice trade for a long time. Mostly the natural calamities changed the shapes of the coast, making a natural harbour which safely harbored ships from all over the Indian Ocean.

By 1500, Cochin became the most important business centers on the Malabar Coast and merchants from Arabia, Persia, and Southeast Asia often conducted business at the port. The kings and queens of the Cochin kingdom actively encouraged merchants by offering them special rights and protection for their businesses.

These rules helped make the city a place where people of different religions could live together. Jewish merchants who had lived in Cranganore before moved to Cochin and set up new homes there. At the same time, the number of Syrian Christian communities around Cochin grew. Muslim traders kept doing business with ports all over the Arabian Sea. This made Cochin even more connected to trade networks that crossed regions.

When European navies came to the Indian Ocean, it became even clearer how important Cochin was for military purposes. When Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese navigator, got to the Malabar Coast in 1498, European traders quickly saw how important the spice trade was there. The Portuguese were mostly interested in Calicut at first, but political problems between the Zamorin of Calicut and the Portuguese made them move their base to Cochin.

The Portuguese support for the Cochin rulers made the port's political position in the area stronger. The Portuguese built forts that made Cochin a major European trading post. This connected the city directly to Portugal's growing maritime empire. Because of these changes, the port became an important center for global trade in the early modern period.

The Portuguese and the Dutch made maps of Cochin when they were colonising it.

European colonial powers came to the Indian Ocean and brought with them new ways of learning about geography that changed how maps of the ocean were made. Portuguese sailors and mapmakers made very detailed maps of the Malabar region's coastlines. These maps were made for both business and military reasons because they were useful for finding your way around the ocean.

These maps tell us a lot about how Cochin's role as a port city has changed over time. Early Portuguese maps show that the harbour of Cochin was a safe place to anchor. There were backwaters and rivers that connected the coast to the land. These maps show the strategic advantages that helped the port take over Cranganore as a major business center.

In the 1600s, Dutch mapmakers who took over Cochin added to these surveys of the area. Dutch colonial maps often showed cities, fortifications, and trading warehouses near the port in great detail. These pictures show how Cochin went from being a small trading post to a big center of colonial government.

Cartographic archives from the Portuguese and Dutch periods also show that people still use older names for places that are connected to Cranganore and Muziris. Even though new sea routes were made stronger and drawn up, maps of the area still showed old ports. These maps are both useful for finding your way and keeping track of history, as they show parts of old maritime environments.

The study of colonial cartography offers a distinct perspective on the relationship between geography and historical memory. Maps documented the evolving coastal landscape of Kerala, influencing and mirroring contemporary perceptions of the region's maritime history.

Maritime Identity, Myth, and Memory

The lasting impact of Cranganore on Kerala's culture shows how historical events and storytelling traditions can work together in complex ways. The ancient port's physical structure has been gone for hundreds of years, but the symbolic meaning of Muziris still affects how people in the area see themselves and their history.

People in many different communities tell religious stories about Cranganore. Jewish histories say that the port was one of the first places in India where Jews lived. Christian traditions link the area to Saint Thomas's mission as an apostle. Islamic stories also say that the story of Cheraman Perumal and the building of the Cheraman Juma Masjid is where Muslim groups got their start.

These tales illustrate the integration of maritime connectivity into cultural memory. These stories are more than just symbolic folklore; they also keep real-life experiences of migration, trade, and cultural exchanges alive. In coastal societies with limited written records, oral traditions often serve as vital repositories of historical knowledge.

From a historiographical perspective, the concurrent presence of archaeological evidence and mythic narrative presents both challenges and opportunities. Historians must distinguish between actual historical occurrences and symbolic representations. But it's just as important to remember that myths can also teach us a lot about how groups of people see their past.

The archaeological digs at Pattanam that led to the rediscovery of Muziris show how well material evidence and narrative memory can work together. For hundreds of years, people mostly knew about the port from written records and local customs. The recovery of physical artefacts associated with the site has now confirmed that these narratives were grounded in a historically significant maritime settlement.

This is how the historical imagination about Cochin is a mix of different kinds of knowledge. Changes in the environment changed the physical geography of the Malabar Coast. Maritime trade networks connected the area to faraway civilisations, and storytelling traditions kept the memory of older ports alive even though most of their physical traces had disappeared.

The story of Muziris and Cochin shows how important maritime landscapes are to our understanding of history. Even after the old port was lost, Cranganore's cultural memory still had an effect on the growth of coastal communities along the Malabar Coast. Because of how geography, trade, and stories all work together, the lost port of Muziris is still very much a part of Kerala's maritime identity.

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