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Foreign Chronicle and Archaeological Evidences of Sangam Literature (As gleaned from archaeological evidences)

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Abstract

In view of the above mentioned extensiveness we have to undertake a variegated enquiry and search for corroborative evi-dences from other disciplines as well to determine the dates of various sangam works. The sources that could be tapped use-fully in this regard are enlisted hereunder But there is a general consensus among the entire Sangam corpus could not have been produced within an uninterrupted and exclusive span but that several works might have been created in seperate groups and collections interspaced over a long stretch of time.

Keywords: *Panchmark coin, Chinese coins san-Chu, Roman coin, popyrus records.*

Introduction

Sangam literature is an important source for understanding the history, culture, and economic life of ancient Tamil society. It provides valuable information about the kings, trade, and social practices of the Sangam period. Foreign historical accounts and archaeological discoveries help us understand the age and historical background of these literary works. Coins, pottery, inscriptions, and other archaeological findings provide evidence of the trade and cultural

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contacts between ancient Tamils and foreign countries. This article examines foreign chronicles and archaeological evidence to understand the antiquity and historical significance of Sangam literature.

I) FOREIGN CHRONICLES

a) Accounts of Megasthanese

Megasthanese the renowned Greek scholar and traveller vis-ited India in fourth cent. B.C. He had stated that when Herocles was in India, a girl by name Pandeya was born and a portion of the territory adjoining the southern most sea shore was given to her as grant1 A levy was also arranged to be collected from every village to be paid for the girl. Although the verasity of the statement may be questioned, we can surmise that the southern tip of the land was under the reign of a dynasty called Pandyas during fourth cent. B.C.

b) Chinese Chronicles

That there was commercial ties between China and the country known as Huang Tse even from the era of the Emperor Vu Vin (140-86 B.C.) is a fact found recorded by Pan Kou, a Chinese writer of first century A.D.2 That place is considered to be none other than Kanchi with which the Chinese had trade links during Han's reign. Discovery of Chinese coins of San-chu and Wu-chu belonging to second century B.C. at Olayakkunnam near Pattukkottai3 provide further evidence in this respect and confirms existence of trade connections with China from ancient times.

c) Greek and Vianna Papyrus

The trade contact between South India and Egypt is believed to have started during the period of powerful Ptolemies (third century B.C.), the Greek ruling family of Egypt after Alexander the Great's death. It would be interesting to note in the words of Dr.Zannas, "Romans have not initiated this trade but inherited it They simply continued a well established for centuries sea-rout which has been well organized by the powerful Ptolemies. Romans conquest of Egypt was fulfilled on 31 B.C. They inherited not only the wealth, the elaborate administration, but also the famous trade with the East and the South that the Ptolemies had organized4

The Papyri records of Egypt mention that the Ptolemies acquired merchandise from South and East not only for their own needs but also for the purpose of re-exporting them to the North-east and North-west, partly as merchandise in simple transit, partly in the form of manufactured articles, produced in the workshop of Alexanria and Egypt in general.

d) Greek Medallion

A medallion of Ptolemy II (284-249 B.C.) or his successors dwon to Ptolemy X (117-81 B.C.) had been found in association of two gold rings, a gold chain, four small gold beads and six Roman coins of first second centuries A.D., in the year 1932 in a treasure trove from Karivalamvandanallur in Nellai Kattabomman District.5 The photograph was sent to British Museum for identifi-cation by the reputed scholar, professor Balakrishna Nair. It was examined by Mr.G.K. Jenkins, keeper of the museum, and identified as of Ptolemy II of Egypt or of anyone of his successor, who ruled till 81 B.C. However, it is clear from this discovery that the Ptolemies had commercial contact with Tamils even in third century B.C.

A papyrus document written in Greek datable in the second century A.D., recently deciphered in the Museum at Vianna, Austria throws welcome light on trade contact between the Musiris, the port of Cheras and Alexandria in Egypt during Roman period,6

e) Accounts of Alexander Kondratov

In his treatise 'Riddles of Three Oceans' Mr.Alexander Kondratov has stated that the vast extent of land identifiable as Lemuria could be found under the sea to the South West of Kanyakumari and has drawn the inference that not only the Lemur, man's ancestor, but civilized mankind itself could have flourished during prehistoric times in Lemuria7. This information is cor-roborated by references in this regard in the commentary to Irayanar Kalaviyal as well as by Adiyarkunallar in his commen-tary to Silappathikaram.

II ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES

a) Punch Marked Coins

These coins have been gathered from various parts in Tamilnadu. The coins which were in currency in North India during fifth-fourth cent. B.C. have been found at Mambalam and Vembavur in Tamilnadu.8 We can therefore, easily come to the conclusion that there had been considerable amount of com mercial dealings between Tamilnadu and north India in those days. That is why we find that Sangam poets were quite familiar with Nanda rulers and their wealth.

b) Northern Black Polished ware

These ware were in widespread usage in North India around Maurya period. The period of these ware has been determined to be between sixth century B.C. to third century B.C. In Tamilnadu these wares have been found in considerable quan-tity at Korkai and Alagankulam.9 Dr.B.B. Lal the renowned Ar-chaeologist has assigned the NBP ware found at Alagankulam to sixth-fifth cent, B.C. Dr.I.K. Sharma brings to our notice that some NBP ware

have been unearthed in the excavations near Mahachaitya in Amaravati10 in Andhra Pradesh datable to Fourth-third centuries B.C.

c) Wharf of Pumpuhar

Ruins of a wharf, a Buddha vihara and a water reservoir have been uncovered when excavations were conducted at Kaviripumpattinam by Archaeological Survey of India in 1965.26 Two wooden posts were found in front of the wharf. Carbon dat-ing analysis of the pieces of this wood revealed that they be-longed to fifth-fourth centuries B.C.,11 We know from literary evidence of Sangam period that Pumpuhar was a celebrated port-city and the swaying sea going vessals moored in the whard were pictured as rocking elephants tied to their post. We may there fore assign without hesitation, the date of some of the pieces of sangam works to be around fifth-fourth centuries BC

d) Celucidian Coins

R. Krishnamurthy, editor of Dinamalar has discovered some Celucidian coins belonging to third century B.C. and Phonecian coins of Second century B.C. from Karur, the capital of Ceras and written on these coins in recent issue of Studies in South Indian Coins.12 These are the clear indications for the Tamils contract with Westerners from third century B.C. onwards.

e) Republican Coins

A few coins issued in second century B.C. during Republi-can rule in Rome were discovered at lyyla in Kerala13 which formed part of the western coast of ancient Tamilnadu. This clearly establishes that there had been commercial links between Tamils and Rome around second century B.C.

Moreover, a coin of Republican period has recently been discovered near Krishnagiri in Dharmapuri district. It has been held that the coin was minted and issued in 79 B.C. by Govern-ment currency authority. Dr. Peter Burges who is a renowned numismatist on Roman coins has confirmed that this coin be-longs to Republican period.14

Another coin of the same period is said to have found from Tiruppur in Coimbatore District.15 This is assigned to 46 B.C.

f) Colns of Sangam age

Four categories of coins pertaining to Sangam period have so far tumed up.

1) Square and rectangular copper coins.

2) Copper coins bearing the legend of Peruvaludi

3) Lead coins of Andipatti

4) Coins of Kollippurai and Makkothai

But, it is not known whether references found in Sangam works relate to the above mentioned classes of coins. Informa tion, however, is available in Sangam poems of coins which were perhaps in the early stages of circulation of coins. Reference has been made of gold coins in the shape of Kumizham fruit,"16 Margosa fruit,17 Uga fruit,18 Nelli fruit19 and Kondrai flower.20 It is leamt that womenfolk used to wear them as necklace after stringing the coins together. The coins in the shape of beads and pellets are known in Sanskrit as "Hiranya Pindam". We may, therefore, infer that some of the poems in Natrinai, Kurunthokai and Akananuru which make mention of such gold pellets, as belonging to sixth-fifth centuries B.C.

The square and rectangular coins could be considered as the development of the punch marked coins. Therefore, they might have been issued during the fifth-fourth century B.C. Peruvaluthi copper coins and the Andipatti lead coins without the image of the ruler may belong to fourth-third century B.C. Kollippurai and Makkothai lead coins with the image of the ruler embossed thereon might have been issued during the second-first centuries B.C.

R. Krishnamurthy considers Peruvaluthi coins as belonging to third century B.C.21 Kollipurai and Makkothai coins with the kings image thereon might have come into circulation due to the influence of the Greeks.

g) Potterles of Western Countries found in Tamilnadu

Dr.Vimala Begley is of the opinion22 that although the rou letted variety of pot sherds found at Arikkamedu near Pondicherry might have been produced in Tamilnadu itself, the designs ap pearing on them should have been patterned after Helenistic in-Buence. They are assigned to second century BC. Moreover, she is of the opinion that the trade dealings between Coromandal and Mediterranean regions should have been in existence from second century B.C. Ibelfie. two centuries before the time of Periplus.23

h) Tamli legend potsherds found In Egypt and Jaffna

During excavation held at Quseir al Quadim, an ancient port on the Red sea coast of Egypt, two potsherds with legend written in archaic Tamil character datable to first century A.D are said to have been found.24 One sherd bears the name of Catan, while the other bears Kanan, Both legends are the names of Tamil origin. Since these were found in a port of Egypt, it is clear that the Tamils had commercial contact with Egypt and stayed there selling their

products. It is possible that more num-ber of evidences could emerge if more excavations are held there.

Recent surface explorations have yielded in Jaffna of Srilanka several potsherds bearing legends written in archaic Tamil character, assignable to about the third or second centu-ries B.C. I. Mahadevan has written in his recent article that this is an exiting development and being the first discovery of indis-putable archaic Tamil inscription in Srilanka in third century B.C. itself.25 One of these sherds bears the word 'Velan', a typical Tamil masculine singular noun. This discovery proves that the Tamil Velars mentioned in Sangam literature were in existence in third century B.C. and the poems sung on them belonged to the same period.

I) Test stone and a copper coln of Tailand

A test stone bearing the legend 'Perumpatan Kal' denoting the stone of a master goldsmith, has been located in Thailand. The legend is written in Archaic Tamil script which is assignable to first-second century A.D.26.

Conclusion

A square copper coin bearing the figure of a chariot drawn by a horse and an elephant on the observe and the tiger emblem on the reverse is reported to have been located in a local mu-seum of the ancient port city known as Luk Pat, in the west coast of Tailand. Similar such coins have already been reported in Tamilnadu by R.Krishnamurthy. These coins are assignable to fifth-fourth centuries B.C. The above find throw light on the com-mercial contact of Tamils with East Asian countries from very early period.

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