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EARLY ROMAN TRADE WITH SOUTH INDIA ¹

KLAUS KARTTUNEN

The study of commercial relations between India and the ancient West has advanced enormously in recent years. While the classical standard works² heavily relied on (Western) textual evidence, the focus is now mainly on other kinds of evidence, viz. archaeology and numismatics. Among other things, this has brought about a situation where we can no longer simply speak of Indo-Roman trade referring principally to ships sailing from Roman Egypt to Indian ports. No, Indians themselves as well as Arabians had an important rôle to play, and now it also seems that the one-sided account in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (PME) did not give full recognition to the importance of the Gulf route.

Though early studies mainly relied on textual evidence, numismatics – evidence provided by the Roman coins found in India and Sri Lanka – has contributed its share since the late 18th century and is now among the most important tools used in studying early international trade.³ The rôle of

¹ This is a review article of R. Nagaswamy, *Roman Karur*. Brahad Prakashan, Madras 1995. Two further recent books will be often mentioned, viz. Vimala Begley & Richard Daniel De Puma (eds.) *Rome and India. The Ancient Sea Trade*. The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1991, and Marie-Françoise Boussac & Jean-François Salles, *Athens, Aden, Arikamedu. Essays on the interrelations between India, Arabia and the Eastern Mediterranean*. Manohar Publishers, New Delhi 1995. The last is actually a new edition (with new Preface, new paging and French contributions translated into English) of the thematic “dossier” *Topoi* 3:2, Lyon 1993, 387-623. In this article, these three are referred to with the abbreviations RK, RIAST, and AAA. My thanks are due to M. Cox, Lic.Theol., who has checked my English.

² Such as M. A. Charlesworth, *Trade-routes and commerce of the Roman empire*. Cambridge 1924; M. Hvostov, *Izsledovanija po istorii obmena v èpohu èllinisti českih monarhij i Rimskoj imperii, I. Istorija vostočnoj trgovli greko-rimskago Egipta (332 g. do R.H. – 284 g. po R.H.)*. Kazan 1907; and especially E. H. Warmington, *The Commerce between the Roman Empire and India*. Cambridge 1928.

³ The first small note about Roman coins in India, a letter by Alexander Davidson in 1788, was published in *Asiatick Researches* 2 in Calcutta. The Roman coin finds from

archaeology has been more subordinate, and it really started only with the classical excavations at Arikamedu (Virapatnam) undertaken by Wheeler and Casal.⁴ Now evidence can be adduced from all regions participating in this ancient trade, from Italy, Egypt, Arabia and the Gulf, from India, and Sri Lanka,⁵ but still its volume is meagre in comparison to that of the thousands of Roman coins found in South Asia. Further evidence is also coming to light from such fields as epigraphy (classical and Indian),⁶ papyrology⁷ and Indian philology.⁸

India have recently been studied by Paula J. Turner, *Roman Coins from India*. Royal Numismatic Society, Special Publication No. 22; Institute of Archaeology, Occasional Publication No. 12. London 1989 (with references to earlier works); the recent book by R. Krishnamurti, *Late Roman Copper Coins from South India. Karur and Madurai*. Madras 1994, I have not yet seen (see RK 26f.). For Sri Lankan finds e.g. Reinhold Walburg's dissertation, *Antike Münzen aus Ceylon. Die Bedeutung römischer Münzen und ihrer Nachahmungen für den Geldumlauf auf Ceylon*. Münster (Westf.) 1980, and Osmund Bopearachchi's recent summary, "La circulation des monnaies d'origine étrangère dans l'antique Sri Lanka", in R. Gyselen (ed.), *Circulation des monnaies, des marchandises et des biens*. Res Orientales 5. Bures-sur-Yvette 1993, 63–87 can be consulted.

⁴ After some preliminary work by Jouveau-Dubreuil and others during the Second World War. See R. E. M. Wheeler & A. Ghosh & Krishna Deva, "Arikamedu: an Indo-Roman Trading-station on the East Coast of India", *Ancient India* 2, 1946, 17–124, and J. M. & G. Casal, *Fouilles de Virapatnam-Arikamedu: rapport de l'Inde et de l'occident aux environs de l'ère chrétienne*. Paris 1949.

⁵ On Egypt, see S. E. Sidebotham in *RIAST* 12ff., on the Gulf J.-F. Salles in *AAA* 115ff. on India many contributions in the *RIAST*, on Sri Lanka John Carswell in *RIAST* 197ff. and O. Bopearachchi's forthcoming survey in *South Asian Archaeology* 1995, to mention just a few recent sources.

⁶ Only a few classical inscriptions (and these mainly in Egypt) contribute to the history of Eastern trade. See e.g. Sidebotham in *RIAST* 12ff. The evidence provided by the Greek inscriptions of the East and by the South Asian inscriptions dealing with Greeks has been summarized by myself in two articles, "Easternmost Greek Epigraphy", Adalbert J. Gail & Gerd J. R. Mevissen (eds.), *South Asian Archaeology* 1991, Stuttgart 1993, 493–500, and "Yonas, Yavanas, and related matter in Indian Epigraphy", A. Parpola & P. Koskikallio (eds.), *South Asian Archaeology* 1993. *Annales Academiæ Scientiarum Fennicæ B:271*. Helsinki 1994, 329–336. On the few Indian inscriptions from Egypt see R. Salomon, "Epigraphic Remains of Indian Traders in Egypt", *JAOS* 111, 1991, 731–736, with addenda in *JAOS* 113, 1993, 593.

⁷ See e.g. Otto Stein, "Indien in den griechischen Papyri", *Indologica Pragensia* 1, 1929, 34–57 (repr. in Stein, *Kleine Schriften*. Hrsg. von F. Wilhelm, *Glasenapp-Stiftung* 25, Stuttgart 1985, 163–186), and for the most important recent find H. Harrauer & P. Sijpesteijn, "Ein neues Dokument zu Roms Indienhandel, P. Vindob. G 40822", *Anzeiger der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-hist. Klasse* 122, 1985, 124–155.

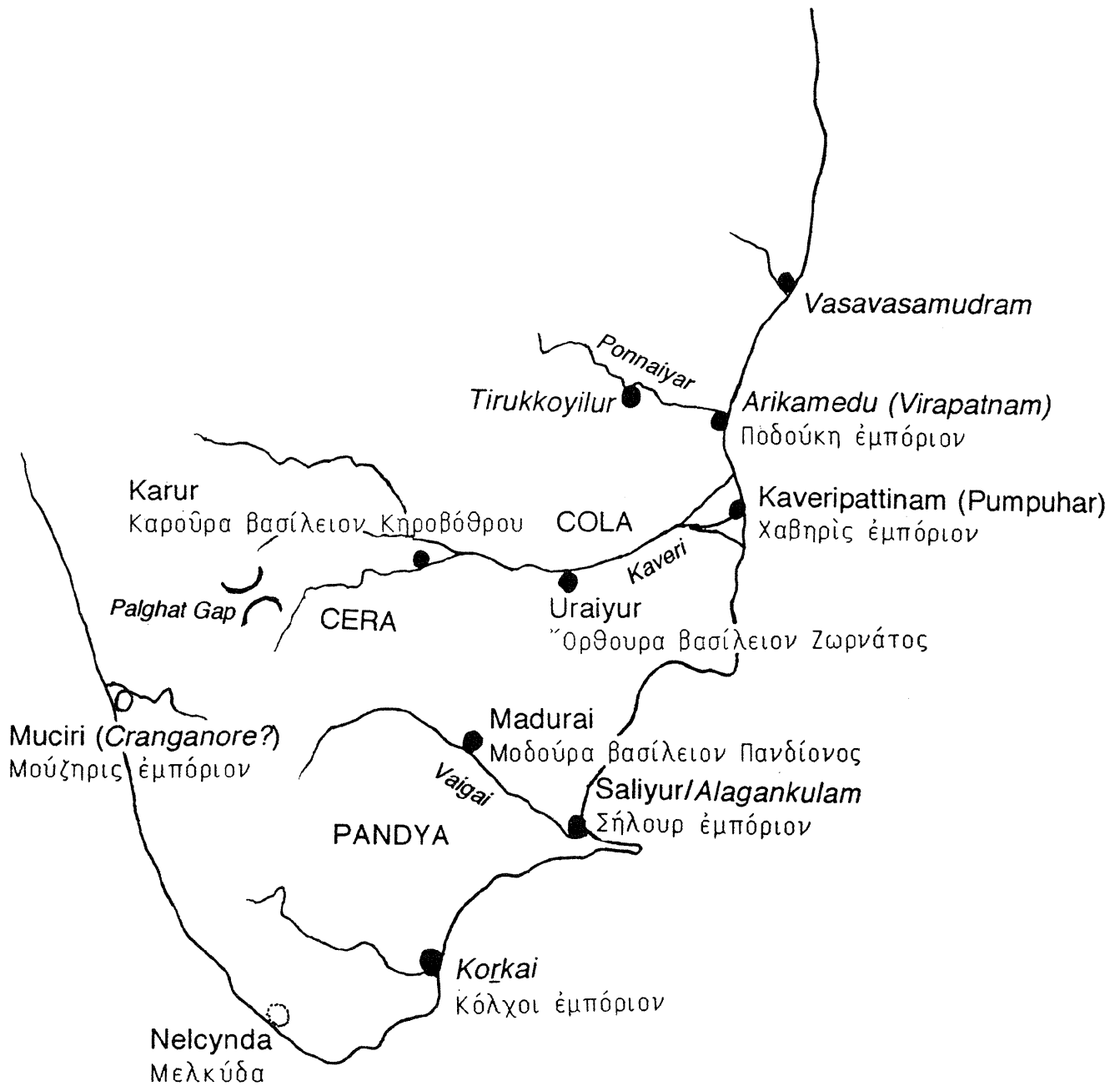
If there has been a need to revise the commercial history in its Western end and add South Arabia (with the Nabataeans), the Gulf (with Palmyra) and – in the late period – Ethiopia (Axum) beside Egypt, it is also important to note that the South Asian end, too, should never be considered as a uniform whole. This already comes out from a careful reading of the PME, and is fully confirmed by archaeology and especially by numismatics.⁹ In the first-century trade described in the PME we can thus distinguish between at least four different spheres of trade with the main marts of Barbarice (for the Indus country and Kushan empire), Barygaza (for North India), Suppara (for Maharashtra) and Muziris (for the South). To these, of course, can be added other names of ports, but the spheres themselves stand. In the second century, new markets on the east coast were added and Western ships seem to have ventured at least as far as Bengal.

In this article, however, we shall concentrate on South India. In his recent book the former Director of Archaeology of Tamil Nadu, Dr. R. Nagaswamy, discusses under the challenging title *Roman Karur* the numismatic and archaeological material from Karur and other South Indian sites. As the book, published by a small publishing house in Madras, is not likely to attract attention among classical scholars, an attempt briefly to present and evaluate its contribution to the history of Western trade in South India is given in these pages.

Karur (*Karuvūr*), a small town in the Trichy (Tiruccirappalli) district in the middle of Southern Tamil Nadu, can boast of a glorious past. In the early centuries A.D. it was the capital of one of the three classical Tamil kingdoms, the Cera. It is situated rather close to the other two capitals, Uraiyur of the Coḷas and Madurai of the Pāṇdyas (see map). None of the three, as inland towns, is mentioned in the PME, but Ptolemy knew them all, as Καροῦρα βασίλειον Κηροβόθρου (7,1,86), Μοδούρα βασίλειον Πανδίου (7,1,89), and Ὀρθουρα βασίλειον Σωρνάτος (7,1,91). All three

⁸ The references in classical Tamil literature have been collected by Pierre Meile ("Les yavanas dans l'Inde tamoule", JA 232, 1940 = Mélanges Asiatiques 1940–1941, 85–123) and Kamil Zvelebil ("The Yavanas in Old Tamil Literature", *Charisteria Orientalia praecipue ad Persiam pertinentes ... Ioanni Rypka sacrum*, Praha 1956, 401–409), now also in RK 96ff. For Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit sources Sylvain Lévi's old dissertation *Quid de Graecis veterum Indorum monumenta tradiderint*. Paris 1890, is still indispensable, though badly antiquated. The present writer is preparing a new study of them.

⁹ See also S. B. Deo in RIAST 39ff.



are often mentioned in Old Tamil Sangam (*Cankam*) poetry.

Tamil *Cēram* is given in Aśokan inscriptions as *Keralaput(r)a*, which is easily connected with Ptolemy's Κηροβόθρος and Pliny's (6,26,104) *Caelobothras*.¹⁰ As the Ceras have since antiquity been connected with Kerala, on the west coast,¹¹ the location of their capital in Tamil Nadu has sometimes been questioned, despite its name being well attested in Sangam poetry, but the evidence given by Nagaswamy seems to settle the matter.¹²

A closer look at the map shows that the location of Karur actually fits in very well with a Cera expansion to Kerala. Even in Tamil Nadu, the Ceras were the westernmost of the Tamil kingdoms, and Karur as their capital is situated on the main route, in fact the only important one connecting Kerala and Tamil Nadu through the Palghat Gap between the Nilgiri and Annamalai Mountains. Its importance was further enhanced by the neighbouring rich beryl mines, already exploited in antiquity. In the west, the route probably ended at Muziris, the great western mart of the Ceras. As Muziris (and Tyndis) are known as Cera ports in classical literature as well as in Sangam poetry, the Central Kerala must have already belonged to them in the early centuries A.D., but the capital was still in the east. Only when Karur was conquered by the Pallavas was the Cera focus definitely shifted to Kerala.

All three Tamil capitals were inland towns, but each had one or several marts on the coast. For Uraiyur, the main port was Kaveripattinam, also called Pumpuhar, on the Kaveri Delta, Χαβηρίς ἐμπόριον of Ptolemy (7, 1, 13). For Madurai, a direct river connection along the Vaigai led to Saliyur (modern Alagankulam), Σήλουρ ἐμπόριον Βάτων of Ptolemy (7, 1, 11) near Rameswaram, but in the first century its most important mart for Western trade seems to have been Nelcynda in Southern Kerala.¹³

¹⁰ Cf. Pāṭaliputra : Παλιβόθρα and the note ad l. in J. André & Jean Filliozat, *Pline l'Ancien. Histoire Naturelle. Livre VI, 2^e partie. Texte établi, traduit et commenté.* Paris 1980.

¹¹ Their famous emporium, Muciri of the Sangam poetry, Μούζιρις of the PME (53f.), Muziris of Pliny (6, 24, 104) and Μούζηρις ἐμπόριον of Ptolemy (7, 1, 8) is situated on the west coast, probably somewhere in the neighbourhood of present-day Cranganore.

¹² In addition to the first inscribed coins of the Cera kings (RK 9ff.) he mentions thousands of non-inscribed copper coins provided with the Cera emblem of the bow and arrow and a few Cera inscriptions found in the neighbourhood of Karur. From later material he can also show that the name Karur has been continuously attached to this same town.

¹³ Νελκύνδα in PME 55, Μελκύδα in Ptolemy 7, 1, 9, *gens Nelcyndon* in Pliny 6, 24,

It has been often pointed out that the PME is detailed until the southern end of India, but gives only cursory, often second-hand information about the east coast. The navigation account of Pliny (6, 26, 103-105) also ends with *regnum Pandionis*, the Pāṇḍya country. This fits in well with the numismatic evidence. It has been repeatedly pointed out¹⁴ that most of the first-century A.D. coins have been found in Kerala, in the region around the Palghat Gap and in the interior of Tamil Nadu (Karur!), but very few on the east coast. In the second century A.D. the situation completely changed. Ptolemy has a great deal of details to give concerning the east coast and the greatest concentration of Roman coins is found around the Krishna river in Andhra Pradesh. In addition, first-century Roman coins seem to be rare in Sri Lanka, where late bronze coins have been found in great numbers. The logical conclusion is, of course, that in the first century direct trade with the West was mainly restricted to Keralan marts, visited by Roman and other merchant ships, and that further to the east trade was mainly carried by land through the Palghat Gap.

The archaeological evidence seems to be somewhat incongruent with this. The most famous case is of course the Arretine Ware or terra sigillata of Arikamedu, on the east coast near Pondichery. The site has been identified as Poduce, known not only to Ptolemy (7,1,14 Ποδούκη ἐμπόριον) but also in the PME (60 Ποδούκη). In addition to the terra sigillata, certainly datable to the early first century A.D., Arikamedu has yielded e.g. Roman amphorae and much glass. The amphoras, too, show many first-century types, and not only wine, but also *garum* and olive oil containers.¹⁵ While both Western and Tamil sources confirm that wine was commonly imported in South India, it has been suggested (e.g. by Will) that *garum* and oil must have been provided for Roman merchants living in the town. The absence of coins is perhaps not so serious, as most finds of Roman coins in India come from hoards, and hardly ever from excavations.

105.

¹⁴ See e.g. Turner, o. c. 5ff.

¹⁵ All these received a special discussion in the RIAST, see 134ff. H. Comfort on Arretine Ware, 151ff. E. L. Will on amphoras and 113ff. E. M. Stern on glass. See further A. Tchernia's review of the RIAST in AAA 147ff. The question of the so-called Rouletted Ware, often connected with Western trade, is less important here. It seems to be commonly accepted that at least part of it was actually manufactured in India (and by Indians) and even if the original inspiration was brought from the West, its presence at a particular site does not indicate direct trade relations. See V. Begley in RIAST 176ff., Tchernia in AAA 151f. and Nagaswamy in RK 77f.

It is not surprising that Wheeler called the place an Indo-Roman trading-station.

There is no doubt of the fact that Arikamedu must have been an important place. Trade between South and North India was important, too, and even the east coast is not completely unknown in the first-century Western sources. But the very uniqueness of its finds can also be used against it, as has been done by Nagaswamy. In the whole of India there is no other confirmed find of the terra sigillata,¹⁶ and Nevasa in Maharashtra is the only other place where amphoras have been found in greater quantity.¹⁷ Even if Poduce was visited by western ships in the first century, it might have been a rare, perhaps exceptional occurrence. The explanation offered above for the rarity of Roman coins at a particular site does not upset the general pattern of coin finds, and this pattern fits in so well with the literary evidence¹⁸ that it cannot be a mere coincidence.

Now it is time to take a closer look at Karur and its position in ancient trade. The flourishing capital of the Ceras is often described in Sangam poetry with its crowded shopping-street, abounding in gold and jewels. Hunters came there to exchange elephant tusks for wine.¹⁹ According to the PME 56, ivory was among the wares purchased by Western traders in South India, and wine is mentioned among the imports. Wine brought by the Yavanas is also known from a Sangam reference.

Archaeologically Karur is not too well known. The only excavations were carried out in 1974 by Nagaswamy and are briefly summarized here (RK 63ff.). According to him, the site has been continuously occupied since

¹⁶ Such have been occasionally mentioned, but never clearly identified or published. Even for Karur, "Arretine sherds" are mentioned in passing as surface finds (RK 64).

¹⁷ According to Tchernia o. c. 154, out of the 30 sites in India yielding remains of amphoras, only these two have yielded more than thirty sherds, the others never more than five each.

¹⁸ The Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram*, describing the Yavanas (Greeks) in Pumpuhar, cannot be used as evidence for the first century A.D. (as has been done by Stern in RIAST 113f.). The dating of Tamil classics is a vexed problem; some scholars place the epic in the first, but many in the fourth or even fifth century A.D. In any case it is later than the Sangam anthologies, and these Nagaswamy has now dated to the first-second century A.D. Several kings named in them now have their historicity confirmed by Tamil Brahmi inscriptions and inscribed coins dated in this period both through palaeography and indirectly through the archaeological context of inscribed coins and sherds with Roman coins and antiquities.

¹⁹ The *Patirruppaṭṭu* quoted in RK 113.

the third century B.C. (when the Ceras are mentioned by Aśoka). Of the four periods, I is purely South Indian, with no Western imports. We are here mainly interested in Period II, supposedly corresponding to the first two centuries A.D. According to Nagaswamy, it has yielded some amphora sherds, rouletted ware, Indian black and red ware with inscriptions in Tamil Brahmi,²⁰ and, what is remarkable in a stratigraphic context, one Roman silver coin and one square Cera copper. The Roman coin is unfortunately badly corroded and unidentified.

In addition to excavations the dry river bed of the Amaravati by Karur has yielded an incredible harvest of coins and some other antiquities. They include a few inscribed Cera silver coins bearing names of three Cera kings known from Sangam poetry and, according to Nagaswamy, clearly imitating Roman models (RK 9ff.). More than 5,000 late Roman coppers ranging from Marcus Aurelius to Theodosius have been reported, but for these the reader is referred to Krishnamurti's book mentioned above in note 3 (RK 26f.). Thousands of non-inscribed Cera coppers obtain a chronological framework from the one piece found in excavations, confirming the numismatic argument deriving their earliest types from North Indian punch-marked models (RK 40ff.). In addition a few Pāṇḍya and a considerable number of Coḷa coppers have been reported (RK 50ff.).

No Roman gold or silver is reported among these finds, but on the other hand Karur with its neighbourhood has long been famous for its Roman coin hoards. A hoard of Aurei was reported as early as 1874 and several other finds, also of Denarii, have been made since (RK 21f.).

There are some other important recent finds discussed in the RK. The excavations at Alagankulam, at the now dried up mouth of the Vaigai river on the south-eastern coast of Tamil Nadu (see map) were also conducted under Nagaswamy. They show Alagankulam, the ancient Saliyur, as an important port, worthy of being mentioned beside other similar sites on the east coast of Tamil Nadu (such as Vasavasamudram, Arikamedu, Kaveri-

²⁰ Because of their clear stratigraphy they are important for palaeography. Their content is not so interesting, and in any case the reading of the short Tamil Brahmi inscriptions seems to be a vexed problem. Without being able to offer any explanation of my own, I must frankly confess that I find it unlikely that a small cup would bear an inscription stating that it is a 'small cup'. A cup is a cup and does not need an explanation. The name of the owner or producer, an indication of its intended use or something like that would be more easy to accept.

pattinam and Kor̄kai).²¹ Alagankulam was occupied from the third century B.C. until c. 600 A.D. (Nagaswamy) or at least from the first century B.C. until the fourth/fifth century A.D. (Raman). The finds include sherds of amphoras, of Rouletted Ware, of Indian NBP ware, and of what Dr. Potter, of the British Museum, who was consulted by Nagaswamy, has identified as “late African red slipped ware”. Three Roman coppers are also mentioned, probably as surface finds, though this is not clearly stated. Two are worn out and unidentifiable, one comes from the reign of Valentinianus.

A great hoard of Roman coins was found in September 1992 at Soraiyappattu near Tirukkoyilur in the South Arcot district of Tamil Nadu (RK 24ff.). It consists of 200 gold coins ranging from Tiberius to Caracalla. The most numerous are coins of Hadrian (42 coins) and Antoninus (63), but some first-century emperors are fairly well represented, too: Nero (18), Vespasian (20) and Titus (15). All are fresh, with no wear marks, but some contain holes or cuts. Nagaswamy points out that Tirukkoyilur was the capital of the local Malaiyaman dynasty, who were allied with the Ceras. From the map we also note its situation by the Ponnaiyar river, at the mouth of which was situated the great port of Poduce (Arikamedu).

All this brings out two problems, where the evidence seems to be insufficient for the conclusions which I, too, should prefer to reach. The first concerns the beginnings of Indo-Egyptian trade, often placed in the first century A.D. From literary evidence we can surmise that it started very early. Though the cinnamon known to Herodotus was brought by middlemen and its real origin was unknown, the famous *Pompa bacchica* of Ptolemaeus Philadelphus contained a number of Indian products also known to be such, and I cannot see how we could deny the historicity of the expedition of Eudoxus in the second century B.C. In the first half of the first century B.C. the Ptolemies had an Epistrategus τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς καὶ Ἰνδικῆς θαλάττης. However, none of this points directly to *South* India. Here the archaeological evidence seems to suggest a start in the late first century B.C. or early first century A.D., while the numismatic evidence has been often interpreted to support still later dates. It has been repeatedly emphasized, e.g. by Turner, Macdowall, P. L. Gupta, and Nagaswamy (RK 22ff.), that Roman Republican coins (which in any case are rare in India) have never

²¹ Kor̄kai at the mouth of the Tamraparni well south of Alagankulam was another Pāṇḍya mart, the Κόλχοι ἐμπόριον of Ptolemy (1,7,10) and the PME (58). Some of these coastal sites have been discussed by K. V. Raman in RIAST 125ff.

been found except in the context of early (and sometimes even not so early) Imperial coins. But what about Greek coins? While so much is written about Roman coins in India, we rarely hear about them. They might be rare, but certainly not non-existent. According to Tchernia,²² Ptolemaic bronzes are not uncommon in India and the earliest known Hellenistic coin is a 3rd-century B.C. silver of Cyzicus.

The second problem is the presence of Western traders and artisans in South India. Tamil sources clearly state that the Yavanas not only visited, but also lived in South India. In addition to the Yavana ships trading at Muciri we read of Yavana quarters in Kaveripattinam, of Yavana soldiers serving the Pāṇḍya king as bodyguards, of resident Yavana artisans and carpenters and their products. From the classical side we can add the detailed information of South Indian geography shown in the PME and by Ptolemy. It would be tempting to mention here, as has sometimes been done, the *templum Augusti* shown in the *Tabula Peutingeriana* near Muziris (illustrated in RIAST 116). In another part of India, in Maharashtran inscriptions we actually meet resident Yavanas, but cannot say whether they were related to maritime trade. In any case even the merchants, using the monsoon winds, had to remain quite a while in India. However, I cannot see that the archaeological evidence really warrants any conclusions about the activities of resident Westerners. Nagaswamy is rather keen to suppose their interference. But why could not Cera artisans copy Roman Denarii for the silver coinage of their own kings? It is absolutely impossible to say who were actually applying Western models (if they were applied) to locally made Rouletted Ware or who were responsible for the bead industry of Arikamedu, even if the glass came from the West. The fact that genuine pieces of Western jewellery have been found in South India makes it entirely possible that they were imitated by local artisans. Again, no "Roman" artisans are needed for producing the beautiful golden signet rings found at Karur (RK 66ff.).

In conclusion, we see that Karur and other new evidence generally supports the old theory of first-century Western maritime trade being mainly (but not completely) restricted to the West coast (Kerala). The importance of the Palghat Gap route can be again emphasized. In the second century, the East coast was probably included in direct trade. Actually, this might have

²² Tchernia in AAA 155, referring to Peter Berghaus' article, inaccessible to me, in A. K. Jha (ed.), *Coinage, Trade and Economy*, 3rd Int. Colloquium. Nashik 1991.

been happened on Coḷan initiative. While the Ceras and Pāṇḍyas had direct access to Keralan ports, the Coḷas were dependent on their neighbours as middlemen. This must have been expensive, and the numerous wars described in Sangam poems must often have interrupted the trade. With the East coast also Sri Lanka became directly involved in maritime trade. The scarcity of third-century coins and the relative silence of literary sources points to a less active phase in trade, but in the fourth and fifth centuries it was again flourishing. Though the Axumite must now have had an important intermediate position, the great number of Roman and early Byzantine coins in South India and Sri Lanka as well as rather numerous literary accounts of Indian journeys (made e.g. by Christian missionaries and by the informant of Cosmas) show that even the Roman East was still actively participating in it.

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