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In search of Muziris

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The importance of Muziris in Roman trade with India does not need any underlining. The port on the Malabar coast of modern Kerala figures prominently in the descriptions of classical geographers, it receives mention in the earliest Tamil poems, and it has come into the news more recently through the publication of a Greek papyrus from Egypt. It is also clear from the amount of Roman silver and gold coin found in S India — which gives some substance to Roman estimates of money haemorrhaging out to India — and from the value of the eastern cargoes recorded coming into Egypt and Rome that the trade was neither casual nor modest. All this is well known and has been carefully studied.¹ The oddity, or pity, is that, despite the many ports listed in ancient authors along some 600 km of the Malabar coast, not a single one has been identified for certain, and not one has produced any serious archaeological evidence of Roman contact. As for Muziris, the most important of them all, we have only a vague idea of where it was located.

Almost every earlier study has placed Muziris at Kodungallur (Cranganore/Cranganur in its Europeanised form) at the mouth of the Periyar river and north of Kerala's main modern port of Kochi (Cochin) (fig. 1). That is reasonable enough. The Periyar is the greatest river in Kerala and runs down from the towering western ghats to the sea. But where exactly on the Periyar? Kodungallur is the name given to a large zone, incorporating a number of small towns of which Kodungallur itself is one, strung out along the road that runs north for several kilometres from the Periyar parallel to the coast and the inland waters of the river Pullut. But how certain is this, anyway? These were the questions we had in mind when a group of us² decided to take a closer look at the evidence, both in the literature and on the ground. Ultimately, only an excavation can answer the questions for certain, but perhaps we could narrow down the options.

The ancient literary sources

The first task was to re-examine the ancient literary evidence. The anonymous Greek pilot who wrote the trader's handbook entitled the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* is the earliest and the most precise about geographic directions.³ Muziris, he said, lay between the port of Tyndis to the north and Nelkynda to the south, each stage being about 500 stades (= c.92 km) or roughly a day's run for a ship. But the figure included the fact that both Muziris and Nelkynda were inland river ports, Muziris 3½ km from the coast and Nelkynda some 22 km from the coastal station at Bakare.⁴ A few years later, Pliny the Elder, a Roman naval official whose maritime information about the crossing to India has been proved generally reliable, added that in his day the danger from pirates made Becare, which belonged to a tribe called the Neacyndi, a preferable trading port to Muziris. This was partly because the traders had to lie a long way off shore at Muziris and to be loaded from lighters.⁵ Although Pliny did not explain

- 1 An excellent guide to recent bibliography is given by De Romanis and Tchernia 1997, reviewed by C. R. Whittaker in *JRA* 13 (2000) 691-92.
- 2 Including R. Thapar, of the Jawaharlal Nehru Univ., Delhi, the present authors, and various colleagues from universities in Kerala, to whom we offer our thanks.
- 3 Easily the best edition of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (hereafter referred to as *PME*) is by Casson (1989); its date is now more or less accepted as c.A.D. 50, some 10-20 years before Pliny the Elder wrote. The main relevant passage is *PME* 54-56.
- 4 *PME* 54; the text is damaged but probably reads '(Muziris) lies on a river 500 stades (furlongs) from Tyndis by river and sea, and from [?the river mouth/coast/sea] about 20 stades. Nelkynda is just about 500 stades from Muziris, likewise by river and sea ... It too lies on a river about 120 stades from the sea.'
- 5 The main information is in Pliny, *NH* 6.104-5: *NH* 6.104 says 'Muziris, the first emporium of India, is not to be sought because of pirates nearby ... Furthermore, the shipping station is a long way from the