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New investigations at the port of Arikamedu

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Largely due to the publications by Sir Mortimer Wheeler,¹ Arikamedu has come to be recognized as the most important site in south India for the study of commerce with the Mediterranean basin in the early imperial Roman period. The site, called Virapatnam (Virampatnam) in the travel account (1779) by Guillaume Legentil,² was identified by G. Jouveau-Dubreuil with the emporium Podukê of the *Periplus maris Erythraei*.³ In the 1940s and 1950s seven seasons of excavation were undertaken by L. Faucheux, Wheeler, and J. M. Casal, and they established beyond doubt that Arikamedu was a center for overseas commerce⁴ and had its own industrial base. However, little was learned about the layout of the town, the identity of the settlers and traders, or the operation of communication networks with the hinterland and overseas. In the 1980s I began to examine finds from the earlier excavations, particularly unpublished materials in the Pondicherry museum and the Musée Guimet, and artefacts in private collections, and then conducted three seasons of limited excavations (1989-90 to 1991-92).⁵ The team includes specialists in Indian and classical archaeology. Two volumes are being prepared, but in the meantime this brief essay will summarize our team's current understanding of the site.

The site is located 4 km S of Pondicherry in a curve of the Ariyankuppam (the northern outlet of the Gingee) just before it enters the Bay of Bengal (figs. 1-2). Today the Ariyankuppam is normally no more than a shallow lagoon of brackish water, but maps and other records of the 17th-18th c. suggest that it was the major branch of the Gingee and navigable at its mouth,⁶ and the same was probably true in antiquity. Because of the bend in the river, the site is sheltered from the open sea yet has access to it: this fact may have been instrumental in the selection of the site for a port on a coastline which has almost no natural harbors.

Since one of our objectives was to study the layout of an ancient Indian port town, we prepared a plan on a 10m² grid oriented N-S (for an abridged version see fig.3). Features visible above ground are plotted on it, as well as our new trenches and the earlier trenches and structural remains found in those trenches by Wheeler, Ghosh, and Krishna Deva⁷ and by Casal and Casal.⁸ Wheeler divided the site into N and S

1 See especially his *Rome beyond the imperial frontiers* (London 1954).

2 G. Legentil, *Voyage dans les mers de l'Inde* (Paris 1779) vol.2, 109-11.

3 G. Jouveau-Dubreuil, "Les ruines romaines de Pondichéry," *Bulletin de l'École française de Extrême-Orient* 40.2 (1941) 448-50; he called it a "ville romaine" after recognizing Mediterranean amphora fragments on the surface.

4 Wheeler even called it an "Indo-Roman trading-station" (R. E. M. Wheeler, A. Ghosh and Krishna Deva, "Arikamedu, an Indo-Roman trading-station on the east coast of India," *Ancient India* 2 (1946) 17-125.

5 The Arikamedu excavation project of The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, and Madras University was made possible by a generous grant from the Smithsonian Institution, Office of International Relations. In India the project was sponsored by the American Institute of Indian Studies. I am grateful to the Archaeological Survey of India for permission to excavate at this protected site, to Prof. K. V. Raman, Dept. of Ancient History and Archaeology, for his support, and to Dr. Pradeep Mehendiratta, Director of the American Institute of Indian Studies, for resolving many administrative problems. I wish to thank M. C. Joshi, Director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India, K. Rajaram, Curator of the Pondicherry Museum, and Dr. J. F. Jarrige, Director of the Musée Guimet, for allowing us access to their collections. I am also grateful to several individuals who have shown us their collections, and particularly to J. Kanagarayan who has since donated his collection including the clay seal impression (see fig.10) to the Pondicherry Museum. Finally, I wish to thank the members of the project for their important research. For detailed bibliography of previous work see V. Begley, "Ceramic evidence for pre-Periplus trade on the Indian coasts," in Begley and R. D. De Puma (edd.), *Rome and India: the ancient sea trade* (Madison, WI 1991) 192-93, n. 49. Photographs here (except figs. 4, 11 and 13) were taken by S. E. Sidebotham.

6 For references see J. Deloche, *La circulation en Inde avant la révolution des transports* (Paris 1980) 144-47.

7 Supra n.4, fig.1.