



Arikamedu Kerala

## The Roman Connection

On the south-western coast of India lies a small fishing village, Arikamedu, which is of tremendous interest to historians, collectors and archaeologists as well as tourists as this was the site of a major trading centre with the Roman Empire. Sandeep Silas visited it recently to trace the roots of history.

*Text by Sandeep Silas*

**S**tanding at the site of Arikamedu I felt my apparel undergo a change. The Roman legionary's leather frock, sandals with high straps, knee caps, arm bands, chest guard and the soldier's metal cap with a menacingly pointed tip at the forehead, was my clothing;

a sword in one hand with a shield in the other was my arm. I was a sailor from Rome and my vessel was anchored on the sea. We had brought delicate ceramics and wine in Italian amphora, and were trading it for Arikamedu coloured cloth, leather spices, and the world



famous beads. Puduke has the finest bead-making centre and accounts a large part of the Roman bead jewellery. The Roman ladies are particularly fond of onyx and coloured glass beads. So, braving the seas, we come to Arikamedu.

Arikamedu flourished as a port town from 200 BC to 200 AD. A village of the same name is located some six kilometres south of Pondicherry town. The commune is called Ariyankuppam and a river of this name flows by unperturbed to the sea, as if nothing has ever changed. The *Periplus Maris Erythraci* of the last quarter of the 1st century AD mentions three market towns and harbour's in the east coast of South India which traded with Rome— "Among the market towns of these countries and harbours where the ships put in from Damirica and from the north, the most important are in order as they be, first Camra, then Poduca, then Sopatma in which there are ships of the country coasting along the shore as far as Damirica." These three port towns are Kaveripattinam, Pondicherry, and Marakkanam.

You may wonder as to why Romans came this far. The Romans being Romans, adventure over perilous seas

was of great attraction to them, then exploring the fabulous Orient; taking silk, ivory, pearl and pepper for the Roman court life was a big lure. And, these items were a status symbol in the Roman Empire! What made it easy for them was the discovery by Hippalus, the Greek, that the monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean have the peculiar knack of swinging the boats in the high seas, around the Indian-Sri Lankan peninsular tip into the Coromandel coast without any humming and hawing at the sailor's wheel or sail ropes. So the Romans cruised into the mart at Arikamedu frequently.

Dr. Mortimer Wheeler carried out the investigations at Arikamedu in 1945 and again under Mon. J.M. Casal, the French Archaeologist in 1947-48. The excavations at the seaward end revealed a simple but large brick structure more than 150 feet long, which was perhaps a warehouse. South of this are courtyards walled with brick and timber containing brick tanks and cisterns, drains, wells and soak pits. Another reservoir unearthed later gives proof of industrial 'dyeing muslin', activity. These form the structural evidence of Poduca-Roman trade. The earliest finds at Arikamedu were a gem with



an intaglio portrait of Augustus, some sherds later identified as the Italian red glazed Arretine Ware. More Amphora pieces, Roman lamp fragments, and another intaglio with a Cupid and bird motif in it.

The bricks found here are unique in appearance and strength. Some are triangular while the others are rectangular. They are almost four inches thick and are a pointer to significant building activity in the area. Fragments of hand made ovens, tiles for the roof, remains of Roman amphora jars used for bringing olive oil and wine are other finds of Arikamedu. Amongst the amphora, those that have been identified for style and place of origin are: Amphora from the Greek island of Rhodes, amphora from the Greek island of Kos, amphora from the Greek island of Knidos, and even amphora from Spain. The round rims, handles, lids, narrate the taste the coastal people and their kings had for imported wine!

That the people played and perhaps gambled is revealed by the recovery of Gamesman Dice. Pieces of Italian lamps with volute nozzles, spouted vessels, soapstone cups, lotus shaped pots, earthen lamps,



decorated pottery, Arretine sherds, black and red ware, black rouletted ware pieces, all denote a vibrant lifestyle. In the 2nd century BC people did not just exist, rather lived a life of game, luxury, taste, and were not wary of interacting with men from far off centuries.

The slate clay pottery of Arikamedu, plates with concentric ring design, other utensils with criss-cross lines cut as decoration, then the perforated clay pottery for decantation purpose, are in a way extremely significant and unique discoveries. The clay seals perhaps indicate that there was some form of rule of law prevalent in the then society and that the seals were affixed to documents to impart them with certain legality. The extent of trade can be imagined from the revelation that the imported Arretine pottery carries four potters stamps viz; VIBIE, ITTA, CAMVRI, and C. VIBI OF. These were famous potters and merchants of Arezzo and Rome in 1st century AD. Of particular mention are the Beads of Arikamedu. Thousands of beads have been recovered from the mounds of Arikamedu. They suggest that there were two types of bead industry— one, of glass, the other of semi-precious stones. Onyx was used for beads but the Romans were particularly fond of cameos— low relief figures carved into layered material,

which gives different colours to different depths of carving. Cameos were also made of onyx (regularly banded white and black agate), and sardonyx (red and white bands).

The coloured glass beads were made by an elaborate process of first colouring the glass by adding iron, copper, lead, manganese and antimony as required. Copper and lead made it blue-green, red, or orange, while manganese made it clear, violet, or black, and antimony opaque. Long tubes of different colours were drawn out and cut into short beads. Beads were produced as per their demand— collar beads, folded beads, pressed tubes and bi-cones. Finally these were gently heated white tumbling them so that heat was even.

This process rounded off the sharply cut edges and made them worthy of a being woven into a bead necklace for a fair long neck. The beads of Arikamedu are lasting legacies to history in the evolution of man. Perhaps, this was the precursor to the fine jewellery making art of India, which has no parallel in the world.

Finally, the Arikamedu artist found rest in a burial urn made of black and red ware, which perhaps he had himself made. Some of these urns in several sizes are in the Pondicherry Museum and your lips get sealed when you hear that in these were kept skulls and bones of dead men and women. The disposal of the dead was a little unconventional. The dead body was kept in a secluded area and exposed to birds and animals of prey. Finally the skull and bones were collected and temporarily kept in the burial urn.

Family members too found 'togetherness after death' in the same urn, till it was time for mortal remains to be interred into terracotta legged coffins called sarcophagi. These sarcophagi were placed inside a 'dolmen' chamber tomb along with weapons, swords, axes, arrows, terracotta objects, semi-precious stones and beads.

The sea, which brought wine and gold to Arikamedu finally poured heaps and heaps of sand onto the port town. The shining beads and the makers of these wonderful objects, lie buried under mounds of earth, quiet and forgotten. If you dig carefully at Arikamedu you are bound to discover a lost world entrapped in the magical colours of the beads. ■



*Old roman beads found in Arikamedu*