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INSCRIPTIONS AND GRAFFITI ON POTTERY FROM PATTANAM (MUCIR/I), KERALA

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Kerala was a blank space on the Early Historic archaeological map of South India but for the few sites of Roman coin hoards till the discovery of Pattanam. Despite their significant role in the Indian Ocean trade and the references to the ports of Muziris, Becare, Nelcynda and Tyndis in literature, archaeological evidence was lacking on the ground for the Early Historic settlements and trade activities. Thus the discovery of Pattanam (tentatively identified with ancient Mucir/i or Muzirs) is truly a landmark in the archaeology of Kerala. The site was first studied by Shajan and the Roman amphora from the site was identified by Roberta Tomber and the Indian ceramics were identified by Selvakumar (Shajan et al 2004; 2005). Subsequent to the discovery, trial excavations were conducted at the site by the Centre for Heritage Studies associating the second author (Selvakumar et al. 2005a, 2005b). The excavations have brought to light many interesting discoveries including an early or Sangam Age Chera coin, evidence for 'megalithic' (Iron Age - Early Historic Transition) occupation, inscriptions and graffiti on pottery. This paper presents a discussion and interpretation of the two inscriptions and two other graffiti found at this site.

The Site, Trenches and Cultural Periods

Pattanam lies in Paravur Taluk under Chittatukara Panchayat in Vadakkekara village of Ernakulam District. It is about 20 km north of Ernakulam, and one kilometre to the north of Paravur Thodu, a distributary of the river Periyar. The site covers 600 m. x 400 m. area and brick architecture is exposed at several dugout areas at the site.

Three trenches, PTM I, PTM II and PTM III, were excavated at the site. Two of them, PTM I and II were excavated in the plot of Mr. Rajagopalan lying in the north-eastern part of the site, and PTM III was excavated covering the small pond dug in the plot of Mr. Rajappan Sastri in the south-western part of the site.

Four cultural periods, viz. (Period I) the Iron Age-Early Historic Transition with black-and-red ware and other typical megalithic or Iron Age pottery, (Period II) the Early Historic period with Roman amphora and rouletted ware, (Period III) the Early Medieval period with Sassanian-Islamic blue glazed pottery and (Period IV) the Modern period with post-15th century Chinese ceramics were identified based on the trial excavations at this site.

Before the discovery of Pattanam, Kodungallur (Cranganore) lying on the northern bank of the Periyar (ca. 5 km. north of Pattanam) was considered to be the location of the ancient port of Mucir/i, despite the lack of archaeological evidence datable to the Early Historic period (Achan 1946; Gurukkal & Whittaker 2001). With the discovery of Pattanam, the old theory on the location of Mucir/i is questioned and a hypothesis that Pattanam was ancient Mucir/i has been put forward, and this needs to be tested by further excavations and research.

Pottery with Inscriptions and Graffiti

Four sherds with inscriptions and graffiti have been discovered from the trial excavations at Pattanam as listed below:

- Sherd 1 (Fig. 1) Post-Firing Tamil-Brāhmī inscription (PTM III, Coarse Red Ware, Period II, Early Historic). The inscription is found on the exterior just below the rim portion. The rim portion is broken and only the neck and the area below are preserved. It is probably a part of a wide-mouthed jar.
- Sherd 2 (Fig. 2) Post-firing Nāgarī character (PTM I, Red Ware of Medium fabric, Period III, Early Medieval).
- Sherd 3 (Fig. 3) Pre-firing graffito (PTM II, Coarse Red ware, Period I, fabric does not appear to be Megalithic).
- Sherd 4 (Fig. 4) Post-firing graffito (PTM I, Red Ware of Medium fabric, Period III, Early Medieval, probably from the same vessel as sherd 2).

Discussion on the Inscriptions and Graffiti

(Notes contributed by Iravatham Mahadevan)

The earliest epigraphical reference to Mucir/i occurs in the name Mucir/i Kōtan found in the Tamil-Brāhmī cave inscription at Muttupatti, Madurai District, Tamil Nadu (Mahadevan 2003, *Early Tamil Epigraphy*, No. 56, ca. 1st Cent. BCE). This record is more or less contemporary with the references to Mucir/i in the Caṅkam poems (Akam. 57:15; 149:1 J. Puram. 343:10) and in the Western classical literature (Pliny and the Periplus). The continued existence of Mucir/i even in the medieval period is attested by the reference to Muiṛi-k-kōṭu in the Cochin Plates of Bhaskara Ravivarman in ca. 10th cent. CE (*Epigraphia Indica* III: 66-69).

Sherd 1 (Fig. 1)

The fragmentary sherd has preserved five characters read as follows:

... ūr pāva o ...

The word *ūr* 'village, town', clearly indicates that the language is Tamil. The next word *pāva* may be compared with Ta. *pāvai*, Ma. *pāva*, 'young woman or doll'. The last extant letter is the vowel *ō*, probably part of the pronominal ending *-ō!* or *-ōr* which can only be conjecturally restored. Tentatively, the inscription can be translated as follows: 'Woman/doll of the village ...'. In the absence of other clues, this fragmentary text cannot be interpreted further, though the language is decidedly Old Tamil. The occurrence of the Pre-Malayalam form *pāva* at this early period is noteworthy. Palaeographically, the script can be identified as Late Tamil-Brāhmī, ca. 2nd cent. CE. The writing on the sherd may be compared to that of the Cēra cave inscriptions of about the same period at Pugalur in Tamil Nadu and Edakal in Kerala.

Sherd 2 (Fig. 2)

A single large-sized character is incised on the sherd. It appears to be *ke* of the Nāgaṛī script of the early medieval period (ca. 7-8th cent. C.E.). As only one letter is seen on the sherd, nothing definite can be said about the language. This is the only known occurrence of the Nāgaṛī script in pottery inscriptions from the Tamil country. Nāgaṛī inscriptions on stone begin to appear in the Tamil country only from the Pallava Period (from ca. 7th cent. C.E.).

Sherds 3 & 4 (Figures 3 & 4)

Each exhibits a solitary large-sized symbol, one of them (No. 3) incised before firing and the other (No. 4) after. A visual comparison shows that both symbols are identical, one of them (No. 3) being cursive and other (No. 4) rectilinear in style.

The symbol on the sherds is easily identified by its characteristic and unmistakable shape, looking somewhat like the English capital letter 'P' in manuscript style. B.B. Lal (1960: symbol 47) has identified this symbol on the megalithic pottery at Sanur (see Fig. 5) and elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. He has compared the symbol with a sign of the Indus script incised on pottery from Kalibangan (see Fig. 6). More recently, the same symbol has been found on megalithic pottery excavated at Mangudi in Tamil Nadu (Shetty 2003: pp. 45, 47, 48). Iravatham Mahadevan has identified this symbol with Sign Nos. 47 and 48 of the Indus script (*The Indus Script*, sign list, Mahadevan 1977). He has traced the evolution of this symbol from the Harappan seals and pottery graffiti to the later art motifs as well as to the megalithic graffiti of Tamil Nadu (Mahadevan 1999, 2001). According to him, the symbol represents an anthropomorphic deity "seated on his haunches, body bent and contracted, with lower limbs folded and knees drawn up". For a realistic representation of this symbol in human form, one may refer to the figures impressed on terracotta tiles from Harwan, Kashmir, ca. 4th cent. CE (see Fig. 7).

Iravatham Mahadevan (1999) has identified this symbol on linguistic grounds as the earliest representation of the Dravidian deity *muruku* (Ta. *Murukan*). Cf. especially, Ta. *muri* 'to bend', Ka. *muruhu*, 'a bend', Pa. *murg* 'to be bent', Ga. *murg* 'to bend', Go. *moorga* 'hump-backed', etc. (DEDR 4977). Applying the technique of rebus, the intended meaning of the symbol can be recognized from the homophonous words, Ta. *murukku* 'to destroy, kill', Ma. *munuka* 'to cut', Kol., Nk. *murk* 'to break', Malt. *murke* 'to cut into bits', etc. (DEDR 4975). These terms reveal the original meaning of *muruku* 'killer or destroyer'. As P.L. Samy (1990: 9-16) has pointed out, this is the meaning of the word *muruku* in the earliest layer of Tamil Caṅkam poetry. In Tamil Nadu, this symbol occurs on pottery of the Iron Age (Megalithic) assigned broadly to the second half of the first millennium BCE. The reported occurrence of this symbol at Pattanam (Mucir/i) as late as in the early medieval period is surprising and may be due to the site being disturbed. Further excavations will hopefully shed more light on the chronology of this symbol. In any case, the occurrence of this symbol on pottery at

Mucir/i in Kerala is a major discovery in the chain linking the signs of the Indus script with the 'megalithic' graffiti of South India.

Acknowledgements

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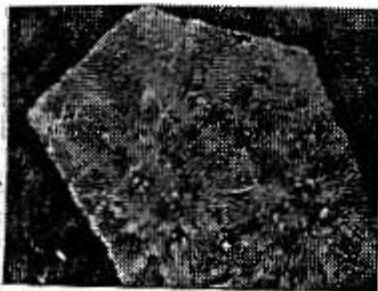


Fig. 1
Tamil-Brāhmī inscription
on pottery from Pattanam
(Mucir/i)



Fig. 2
Nāgaṛī character on pottery
from Pattanam (Mucir/i)

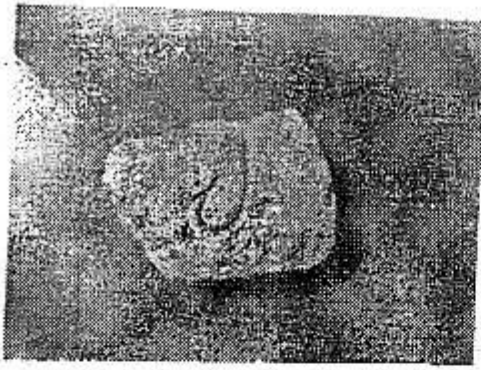


Fig. 3
Pre-firing graffito on pottery
from Pattanam (Mucir/i)



Fig. 4
Post-firing graffito on
pottery from Pattanam
(Mucir/i)

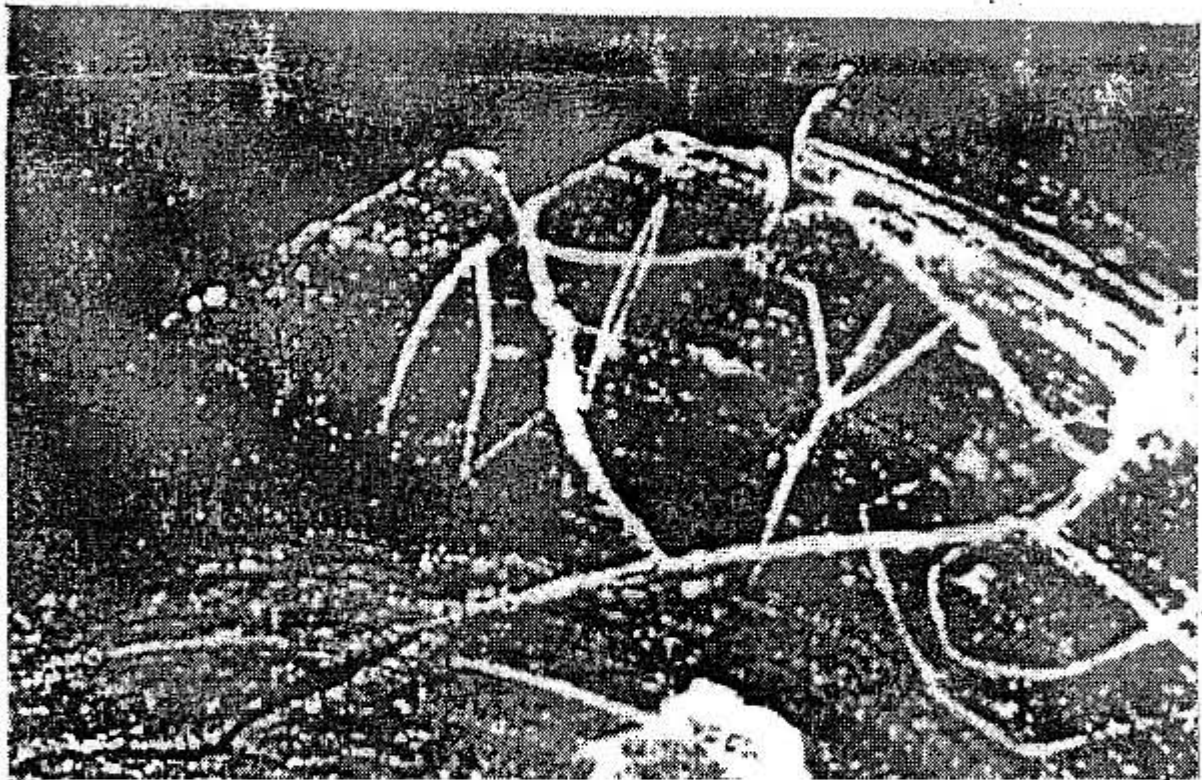


Fig. 5
Megalithic pottery graffiti from Sanur, Tamil Nadu (B.B. Lal 1960: Pl. XXXI-B)

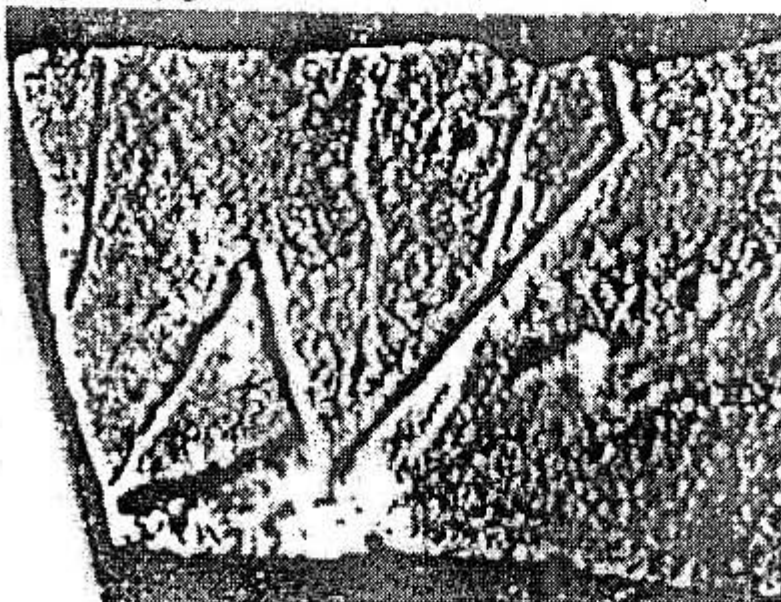


Fig. 6: Pottery graffiti, Kalibangan (Photograph Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi. Also in B.B. Lal 1960)

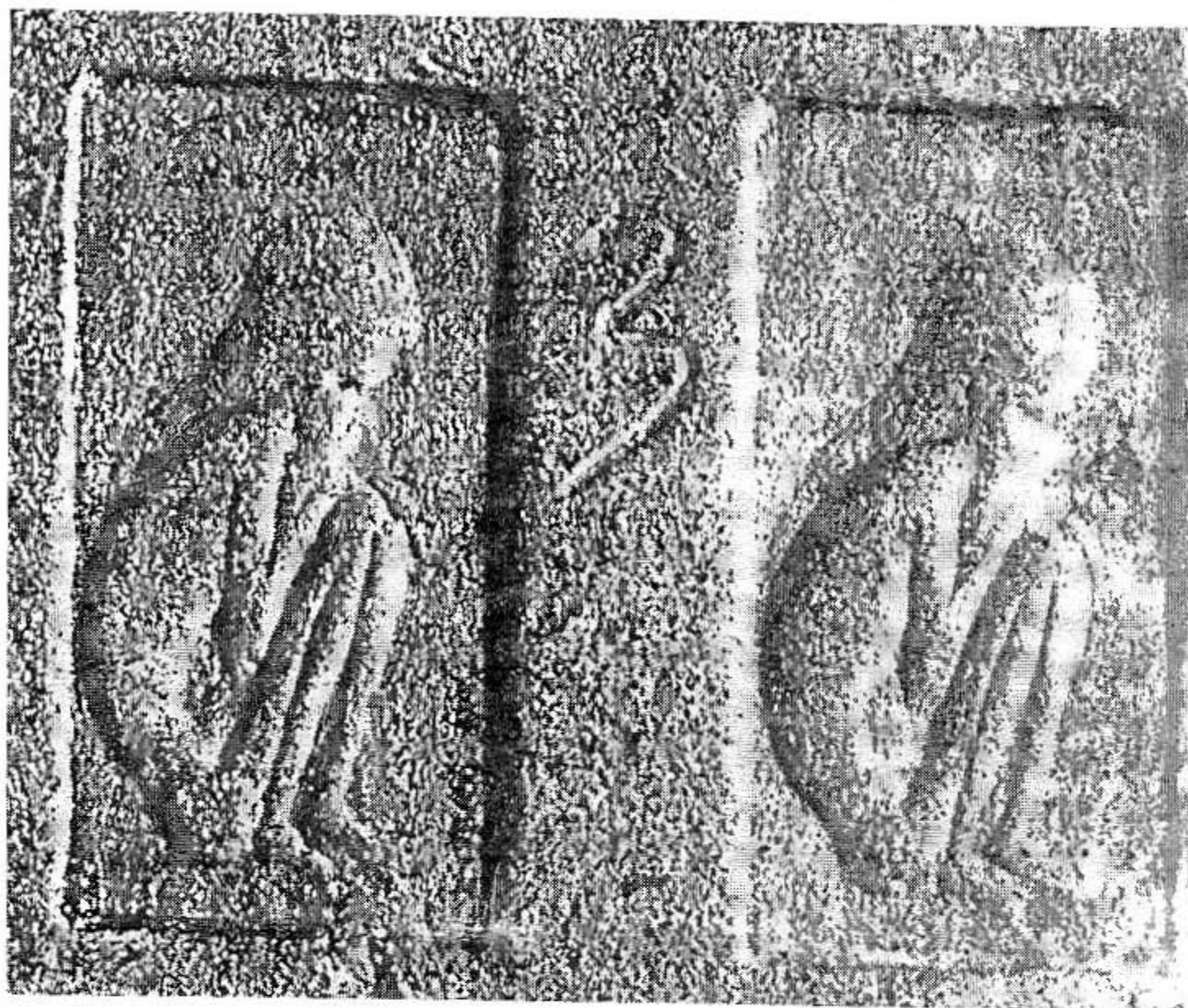


Fig. 7

The Emaciated Ascetics. Impressed figures on terracotta tiles from Harwan, Kashmir (Photograph Courtesy: Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai).

A LINGUIST VISITS BANGLADESH

Sanghamitra Saha, 2001, PB, Demy 1/8, pp. iv+96, Rs. 75/- (US\$ 5/-)

A most interesting travelogue of a linguist whose parents came from Bangladesh and several relatives still live there. It reads like a detective novel.