

Ceramic Industries Of Poompuhar

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Abstract

Offshore explorations carried out by Marine Archaeology Centre at the ancient celebrated port city of Poompuhar have yielded ceramics of the early historical period (3rd century BC to 3rd century AD) in two zones, one opposite to present Kaveri mouth (zone 2) and the other opposite to Kilayur Wharf (zone 3) at a depth 50cm to 100cm in the seabed in a water depth of 5 to 7m.

Though the potsherds are fragmentary and heavily rolled which makes it difficult to recognise the shapes, a study has been attempted on the basis of fabric and other technical data. The main wares are the Black-and Red Ware, red ware, grey ware and Rouletted associated ware. A potsherd found in onshore exploration is inscribed with the sign for ma in Brahmi script datable to 2nd century BC.

INTRODUCTION

Poompuhar (Lat. 11° 08' 33" N Long. 79° 51' 31" E), the celebrated port city of the Early Cholas, is now an insignificant fisherman's hamlet in Nagai Quaid-e-Milleth district of TamilNadu, where the river Kaveri joins the sea. Sangam texts such as *Ahananaru* and *Purannaru* and later ones like *Silappadikaram*, *Manimekhalai* and *Pattinappalai* vividly describe Poompuhar as a flourishing port city. Sangam literature refers to this city as Mudur (Mudu meaning ancient and Ur meaning village). Various names like Puhar, Kakandi, Pattinam, Purandai, Puraiyam, Sambapathi, Mannakathu, Vanmathi, Cholapattinam and Mudur (Nagarajan : 1993 p. 9), which the city had denote its metropolitan nature. Ptolemy refers to the city as the Kaberi Emporium.

Manimekhalai, a text of late Sangam period mentions that Poompuhar was swallowed and destroyed by the sea due to the wrath of God Indra whose festival had not been celebrated by the inhabitants of the city during the time of the Chola King Ilam Killi.

The art of pottery making is referred to in ancient Tamil works like *Silappathikaram* and *Manimekhalai*. The potters were known as Vetko (Vasanthi : 1992) and Kove.

The onshore explorations and excavations conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India from 1962 to 1973 have clearly established that the ancient city had not been fully engulfed and atleast a few portions of it are still lying buried on land. The exploration by Marine Archaeology Centre (MAC) of National Institute of Oceanography, Goa

in the intertidal zone revealed the vestiges of ancient habitations like ringwells, pottery, brick bats and beads strewn all over the place particularly opposite to Nayakankuppam. The ringwells in the intertidal zone are covered by sand. Offshore explorations by National Institute of Oceanography in 1981 have suggested some conspicuous objects at water depth of 5 to 10m (Vora : 1987), but it is the underwater excavation by MAC which throws light on the submerged part of the city.

The paper deals with the pottery found during the offshore exploration in 1993. Generally, the pottery of this region is made of coarse clay which produces a rough surface. When submerged in the sea for a long time, the slip and wash on pottery surface are lost due to rolling and salt action. Sometimes pottery is not even fired properly as can be inferred from the grey to red colour of the core. The pottery under study was from the sea bed in 50 to 100cm section in two zones, one opposite to present Kaveri mouth (zone 2 as marked by Marine Archaeology Centre) and another opposite to Kilayur wharf (zone 3) at a water depth of 5m to 7m. The pottery comprises of black-and-red ware, dull red ware, associated ware of rouletted ware and a piece of amphora. It is difficult to recognize its shapes as they are heavily rolled and broken.

Black-and-Red Ware : This is one of the most prominent wares of South India from the beginning of the Iron Age. The ware has been obtained from numerous megalithic sites, urn burials and iron age settlement (Gurumurthi : 1981 p. 232). Its clay is well levigated. The shapes include jars, carinated bowls and small pots. The vessel is mostly wheel-turned. However, hand made

pottery is also reported in medium to fine fabric.

GREY WARE :

This ware is represented by a single sherd of a jar and is rare at Arikamedu and Kanchipuram too. It is suggested by the excavators that this pottery was imported from the west (Gurumurthi : 1981). It is of medium thickness and tempering materials have been used moderately.

BLACK WARE :

This ware is of well levigated clay and of medium thickness. It is represented by a deep bowl in Poompuhar.

RED WARE :

It is made of thick grained clay, consisting of large quantities of sand particles. Generally the vessels do not bear any slip or polish. They are ill-fired and hence fragile. Storage jars and cooking vessels are prominent shapes in this ware.

CONCLUSIONS :

The enormous coastal erosion, swell and current in the sea bury small objects. Pottery however survives in the sea and can be relied upon for dating associated brick structures submerged in the sea at 5 to 7 m water depth in Poompuhar region. The Black-and-Red Ware has been firmly dated to megalithic period on land. The identical ware and shapes occur in the sea bed. The date of Black-and-Red Ware is corroborated by the 14c date of the wood samples from the brick structure of Kilaiyur, a suburb of Poompuhar. So far as the dating of structures of the first few centuries of Christian era is concerned another dated ceramic ware, namely the amphora of Roman origin is found useful. In Arikamedu even the name of the factory from which the amphora came is well known. Thus ceramic evidence for dating onshore and submerged buildings and associated artefacts of Poompuhar is very important. It is now possible to say that the brick structures of 5 to 7m depth are datable to 3rd to 4th century BC and the Ring wells etc of intertidal zones are of the first four centuries of the Christian era.

Acknowledgments : I am thankful to Director, National Institute of Oceanography, Goa for his kind permission to present this paper. I am very grateful to Dr. S. R. Rao for his continuous encouragement and guidance. Thanks are also due to K.H. Vora, Scientist-in-Charge, Marine Archaeology Centre for providing the facilities during this study and to Dr.K.Rajan, Tamil University Thanjavur, for various suggestions. I am obliged to all my colleagues in

Marine Archaeology Centre Shri.S.B.Chitari, Shri.V.M.Date and Shri.Umesh.Sirsath for their co-operation.

POTTERY DESCRIPTION (Fig.-1-2)

1. Jar of red ware with a flat rim projected externally, short and narrow neck. Surface treatment of slip lost due to water action, medium fabric and ill fired. Zone No.3.
2. Jar with short neck and bulbous body. Flat topped rim, smoky section, well fired and medium fabric. This is heavily rolled Grey Ware:
3. Jar of red ware with splayed out rim and bulbous body. Heavily rolled, smoky section. Medium fabric and ill fired.
4. Body part of a big jar, heavily rolled and pale reddish surface. Ill fired and medium fabric.
5. Dish of a red slipped ware with an inward projected rim, coarse fabric and treated with slip both internally and externally. Compare with type 48 of Vasavasamudram and type 2 of Arikamedu.
6. Dish of a red ware with sharpened incurved rim and having sagger base.
7. Basin of a red ware with clubbed rim and slightly concave sides. Medium fabric, ill fired. Compare with Vasavasamudram type 32 and type 84 of Arikamedu.
8. Body part of a carinated *handi* or a small jar, heavily rolled, thin section. Red ware, pinkish in colour. Fine fabric and well fired.
9. Flat base of a bowl, heavily rolled and smoky section. Medium fabric and ill fired. This is a black ware.
10. Body part of a carinated vessel. Heavily rolled and surface treated with red slip. Medium fabric and ill fired.
11. Shoulder part of a Grey ware bowl, with a groove on the exterior. Greyish in section. It is a variant of black-and-red ware, heavily rolled, porous surface, well fired and medium fabric.
12. Body part of a bowl, heavily rolled, pinkish surface and greyish section. A thin layer of red slip is visible in the section. It also appears to be like a variant of Rouletted ware, well fired and fine fabric.

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13. Body part of a black & red ware bowl, heavily rolled, interior grey and exterior pinkish in colour. A groove on the shoulder portion, well fired and fine fabric.
14. Part of a belly of a jar of thin section in Black and Red ware. Heavily rolled. Pale reddish in colour the exterior and greyish on the interior. Corrugated profile. Pitted surface due to wave action, ill fired .Medium fabric.
15. Body part of a jar, heavily rolled, ill fired and fine fabric.
16. Body part of a bowl interior is black and reddish exterior. Ill fired and medium fabric.
17. Body part of an amphora ware. Corrugated profile and heavily rolled. Barnacles growth on surface also noticed.

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