CHAPTER - 1

INTRODUCTION

The river Amaravathi is one of the major tributaries of the river Kaveri. It rises in the hills of Anaimalai in the Western Ghats. It flows down through the Anjanad valley with combined waters of the Chinnar, the Pambar and the Tennar. Then it receives jungle stream of Kudiraiyar on the right at Kumaralingam. Another comparatively bigger stream Sanmuganadi joins with Amaravathi near Dharapuram. Hereafter, streams Uppar, Kodavanar and Nankanji join with it. Finally, it falls into Kaveri at Thirumukkudalur in Karur taluk near Karur town.

Study Area

The whole watershed of Amaravathi is considered for the study. This watershed lies between 10º 35' and 10º 95 N' and 77º 18' and 78º 23 E' and it includes part of present districts of Idukki (Kerala), Tiruppur, Dindigul and Karur. The major part of the present study area falls in the Tamil Nadu upland region (Map.1).

Scope of the work

The intensive field survey compounded with well planned excavations at Porunthal provided good scope to understand the settlement pattern that existed during Iron Age and Early Historic times and its cultural transformation. It also helped to test the existing hypothesis and provided better data to understand the nature of settlement.

Time limit

The present exploration yielded 211 Iron Age and Early Historic sites besides several medieval temples, sites and inscriptions. In view of the enormous size of the data, the study is restricted between 1st millennium BC and 3rd cent. AD.

Previous study

The archaeological wealth of Kongu region was brought to light in the mid part of 19th century by the colonial administrators as part of their official work. The first archaeological evidence in this part of the region was reported by Breeks in 1837.
and it was followed by the discovery of a Roman coin from a grave packed with cairns in Nilgiris (Congreve 1847:92). Since then several archaeological findings were brought to light in pre-Independence era by various explorers like Breeks (1837), Elliot (1844), Congreve (1847, 1878), William Fraser (1861), Walhouse (1873-85), Ramavarma (1878), Turner (1879), Little (1883), Harding (1894), Sandford (1901), Sewell (1904), Hosten (1905), Rea (1910-11), Longhurst (1913-14), Anglade (1928), Khan (1930-34), Ramakrishna Reddy (1931), Richard (1931) and Aiyappan (1941). At the initial stage, their works were concentrated in and around hill resorts like Nilgiri, Anaimalai and Kodaikanal hills. Subsequently, their areas of observation were extended to plains due to infrastructure developmental activities. Based on the location of sites that they were discovered, one could perceive that their areas of exploration fall in line with Nilgiri-Mettupalayam, Coimbatore-Mettupalayam, Coimbatore-Erode and Coimbatore-Palani railway tracts. Thus, the documentation of archaeological wealth of this region is more incidental than the result of any systematic explorations. Irrespective of these lacunae, the basic characteristic features of Iron Age monuments of this region were recognized.

Coins

In post-Independence era, a large quantity of coins was brought to light. However, the find spots were mostly restricted to a single site namely Karur, the capital city of Sangam Age Cheras. The excavations of the above said sites hardly provided any coins in stratigraphical context except at Karur, Kodumanal and Porunthal, that too with one or two coins. The limited occurrence of Roman coins, Punch-Marked coins and Chera coins in archaeological context poses a problem in understanding their role in a given social context. However, the Tamil-Brahmi inscribed coins, late Roman coins and Satavahana coins collected from Amaravathi river bed at Karur provided a new dimension to the study of Early Historic period. All the coin hoards were reported close to trade centres or on trade routes. This locational aspect provides a clue to understand the trade dimension.

Epigraphy

Since the discovery of famous Tamil-Brahmi cave inscriptions at Pugalur in 1927 (ARE 1927-28: 342-349), only two more inscriptions were noticed in this region, namely the one at Arachchalur and another at Ayyamalai. The Arachchalur Tamil-Brahmi inscription was discovered in 1961-62 by S. Raju (ARE 1962-62:2780-281; IAR 1961-62: 81). In 1973, Ayyamalai Tamil-Brahmi inscription was reported after ten years (ARE: 1973-73:b.231; IAR 1973-74:40; Venkadasamy 1981: 142-144; Mahadevan 2003:387). Unlike the Vaigai river valley (Pandya country), the occurrence of cave inscriptions is limited to three places in the study area. The Kongu region is known for later day Jainism but endowment made to Jain monks during Early Historic times are very limited. In contrast to this scenario, the Kongu region provided the highest number of Tamil-Brahmi inscribed potsherds. In this region, Tamil-Brahmi inscribed potsherds were reported at Kodumanal, Perur, Boluvampatti and Porunthal. Majority of the inscribed potsherds carry the personal names with Prakrit affiliation. The combined study of cave inscriptions, inscribed potsherds, coins and rings provides a better picture on literacy, religion, trade and inter/intra regional cultural contacts.

As for medieval times, several temple inscriptions, a few hero stones inscriptions, oil-press inscriptions and trade guild inscriptions were reported. Among the inscriptions, the occurrence of oil-press and trade guild inscriptions (particularly
Ainurruvar inscriptions) is very interesting. All these trade-related inscriptions were reported on ancient trade routes and in many occasions close to trade or industrial centres. There is a similarity between the Early Historic and Medieval trade centres and trade routes.

Irrespective of the availability of material evidence in Kongu region, the Amaravathi river valley was not explored systematically till 2005. The solitary excavation carried out by State Archaeology Department at Karur could not be taken as a representative site of the region as Karur lies at the confluence of the river Amaravathi with Kaveri. The excavation carried out at Nedungur in 2007 is also limited in nature. The limited and controlled excavations however provided clues to generalize the data.

The integration of archaeological, epigraphical and numismatic data compounded with intensive micro-regional study enriched our understanding on the cultural pattern that emerged in the region during Iron Age and Early Historic times. Therefore, the study of this region is entirely based on present intensive explorations and the subsequent excavations at Porunthal. Keeping in view of this, the present researcher explored this region to a maximum extent and more than 180 archaeological sites were brought to light. Porunthal is, one among the several sites, identified as a potential site for excavation.

In the present work, an attempt is made to study the material culture of the Iron Age and Early Historic period with the following objectives:

1. To identify the Iron Age, Early Historic and Medieval sites on ground
2. To locate trade centres and trade routes
3. To study the settlement pattern and their distribution
4. To estimate the cultural transformation process that had taken place from the Iron Age to Early Historic
5. To test the existing theories pertaining to Iron Age and Early Historic

The Amaravathi river valley, particularly the basin part, occupies a position of greater importance in serving as a connecting link between the West Coast and Kongu region. This geographical location has favoured the growth of a distinct cultural landscape. This is one of the regions where one could observe the continuous
archaeological records since the Iron Age. Iron Age sepulchral monuments and the Early Historic sites were located in large numbers. But still there is hardly any excavation to prove inter and intra cultural relationship both stratigraphically and chronologically.

The region has six rock-shelters with Jain beds. Of these six rock-shelters, three were engraved with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions. Attempts should be made to link these rock-shelter inscriptions with visible nearby habitation mounds. The preliminary investigations conducted in this valley show some remarkable evidence on the linkage between the Jain beds and the nearby Early Historic habitation. Therefore, an attempt is made to situate a site in a given cultural context.

The excavation of an Early Historic site at Karur, the Chera capital, located on the mouth of Amaravathi river yielded data on cultural linkages between Tamil Nadu and other parts of the country. The trade goods that were exchanged at this place were brought in from several places. Likewise Roman coins were also unearthed in large quantity. However, the archaeological context of the coins is yet to be satisfactorily discerned. It is necessary to locate archaeological sites, trade centres and trade routes in Amaravathi river valley based on coin hoards, inscriptions and mineral resources. Thus, a methodology is designed to achieve this goal.

Methodology

The area of study primarily falls between the Iron Age and Early Historic period. The former period does not have any written records. This deficiency is tackled by making an intensive village-to-village survey. The later period holds three types of data namely archaeological, epigraphical and numismatics that are integrated to understand the cultural process that took place during Early Historic time. The habitation mounds, graves, sites yielding archeological artifacts, Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, Roman coins and Sangam Age coins are some of the available records. Each primary source is not seen in isolation rather an attempt is made to see cultural context in a given landscape.

The data from the State Archaeology Department, Archaeological Survey of India, and Geological Survey of India and from individual scholars were used. A village-to-village survey was undertaken to obtain full information of the sites like
location, geo-coordination, geological wealth, flora, fauna, cultural items, etc. On collecting all this information, computerized data base was created. The field data was transformed on to a digital map by using GIS platform. Several theme based maps were prepared for clarity and authenticity.

The excavations at Arikamedu, Kaveripattinam, Kanchipuram, Alagankulam, Korkai, Mangudi, Kodumanal and Uraiyyur yielded a comprehensive view on the archaeological wealth of Tamil Nadu. But, there is hardly any excavation in this valley except the Karur and Nedungur. Therefore, Porunthal a potential archaeological site was identified and this site was excavated for two seasons in the years 2009 and 2010. The results of the excavations are integrated with the existing data to draw a comprehensive picture of this river valley.

Scheme of Chapters

I Introduction
II Physiography
III Archaeological Explorations in Amaravathi River Valley
IV Archaeological Excavations in Amaravathi River Valley
V Iron Age in Amaravathi River Valley
VI Early Historic Archaeology of Amaravathi River Valley
VII Conclusion

This thesis comprises seven chapters including the introduction and conclusion. In the introductory chapter, area of the study, scope of the study, aims and objectives of the study, available primary sources and their limitations are explained.

In the second chapter, the Physiography of Tamil Nadu in brief and Amaravathi river valley in detail are discussed to understand their geological and geomorphological features, along with rainfall, forest cover, drainage system, flora and fauna. The terrain played a great role in the formation of settlements. Nearly 80% of the archaeological sites are found on the banks of small streams and major tributaries of Amaravathi river valley.
The third chapter deals with previous explorations carried out by various scholars in pre and post-Independence era in addition to the present explorations carried out by the researcher. The archaeological and historical sites discovered by the researcher are mostly situated in the plains and a few sites in stunted rainy forests. Nearly 175 sites ranging from Iron Age to Historic period were discovered during the course of explorations. The Iron Age sepulchral monuments like cairn circles or stone circles entombing urns, simple cists, double cists, transepted cists, cist with urns, menhirs and dolmens found in this river valley are discussed. The antiquities like semi-precious stone beads, shell bangles, iron objects, iron furnaces, ceramics, etc unearthed in the course of exploration are placed in proper archaeological context. Thus, this chapter provides a brief note on all archaeological sites. The digital maps were prepared based on geo-coordination using Arc GIS platform.

The fourth chapter deals with the excavations conducted in this region by various institutions. Karur was excavated by Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology in 1984. This site is having archaeological evidence from Iron Age to Medieval period. Um burials, brick structures, Roman artifacts, graffiti marks, Punch-Marked coins, Tamil-Brahmi inscribed coins, inscribed pot sherds, etc, were discovered from the excavations. Besides, several scholars collected important artifacts from the Amaravathi river bed at Karur. Nedungur site was excavated by Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology in 2007. Much emphasis is given to the artifacts collected from recent excavations conducted at Porunthal, in the years 2009 and 2010 by the Department of History, Pondicherry University, Pondicherry. The present researcher actively participated in the excavation programme.

This site is having Iron Age and Early Historic habitation and graves. In total, three trenches were laid on the habitation mound. The southern and western parts of the mound yielded brick structures and glass beads. The central part of the mound is having strong evidence of glass polishing furnace and several associated important cultural material like glass and paste beads, glass bangles, a gold pendant, a copper bell, terracotta ear lobes, hopscotches, terracotta figurines, gamesmen, stoppers, spouts, glass slag, bones, brick structure, ivory dice, etc., The occurrence of more than 2000 beads from 50 sq. m area speaks of its importance.
The burial site was excavated further 2 km west of the habitation mound. Four graves were opened within the burial complex. The excavation yielded several important grave goods. More than 16,000 beads made of steatite, camelian, agate, quartz and paste were collected in association with legged jars and pots of red polished ware, bowl of black-and-red ware and plates of black slipped ware and iron objects like swords, arrow heads and stirrups. Other interesting and important findings were Tamil-Brahmi inscribed ring stand and paddy grains kept in a four-legged jar. The historical and cultural significance of these findings are discussed in this chapter.

The fifth chapter deals on Iron Age culture of Amaravathi river valley. The Iron Age monuments are analyzed in greater details along with the works of previous explorers and excavators who had done tremendous work in this field. A comprehensive study of this culture is also attempted to understand the situation with more clarity, because in most of the cases, the burial system is not uniform and does not express homogenous cultural tracts due to varied environmental settings. The restricted nature of the excavation also augmented the problem. This is due to the concentration of excavations on burials rather than the habitation mound. Further, the features of sepulchral monuments in Tamil Nadu based on the architectural development and $^{14}$C dates are discussed. A detailed analysis is made on the settlement pattern, size of the settlement and distribution of habitation sites in Amaravathi river valley. The habitation mounds are analyzed based on soil and drainage matrix. General architectural features of the Iron Age monuments of the Amaravathi river valley are discussed. A detailed study on the distribution of Iron Age and Early Historic burials is also attempted. Apart from this, a comparative study based on special features of the sepulchral monuments of Amaravathi region is made. The cultural materials encountered in the excavations in the form of ceramics, iron and copper objects and beads are discussed.

The sixth chapter deals with the Early Historic period. The archaeological material like graffiti marks, Tamil-Brami inscribed potsherds, coins and Jain beds, brick structures, beads, earlobes, shell bangles, terracotta figurines, glass polishing furnace, inscribed coins, Roman coins, inscribed rings, etc., collected from exploration and excavations were integrated and analyzed to provide a comprehensive
picture on Early Historic period. The social, cultural and economic conditions are discussed based on literary, epigraphical, numismatic and archaeological evidences.

The seventh chapter summarizes the important findings of Amaravathi river valley and situates them in broader cultural context of South India. It also explains the merits and demerits of the study. The future course of action required for further advancement of the knowledge is addressed.