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Market Watch

Muziris: Bustling heart of the Malabar spice coast during the Roman rule

BY HUGH & COLLEEN GANTZER, ET BUREAU | DEC 02, 2010, 08.35 AM IST

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It was both a place and a promise. The Ramayana had mentioned it; so had Kalidasa, A first century guide for mariners had described it as "a city at the height of prosperity, frequented as it is by ships". In Sanskrit this entrepot was known as Mucharipattanam, The Pepper City. The colony of resident Roman traders and soldiers probably shortened it to [Muziris](#).

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In AD 410 Rome collapsed. Muziris recovered from this economic blow but 900 years later, a great flood silted up the port and opened up Cochin, further south. Muziris was abandoned and became a phantom city hovering between speculation and fantasy.

Then, unexpectedly, not so long ago, a deluge of evidence began to pour out of the village of Pattanam. Could it have been the original port from which the mega-city of Muziris had grown? Bombay had burgeoned out of the fishing village of Kolaba. Archaeologists with their picks, shovels and brushes moved in.

We drove to the digs just after a drenching monsoon had soaked Kerala's lush coastal lands. Excavations had revealed a brick platform, probably an old wharf. A bright, 12-year old schoolgirl named Artija and her 15-year old brother, Anand, showed us a collection of beads that had welled up out of the flooded earth: rejects from ancient lapidaries' tables?

There was a storeroom filled with bulging sacks of neatly labeled shards of amphorae: ceramic casks that had held wine, olive-oil and wheat. These pointed to a large population of expatriates with Mediterranean tastes.

After that our perceptions grew rapidly. Pepper had been prized in Europe as a preservative, retarding the rotting of meat slaughtered in autumn to conserve fodder. There were no silos. But pepper was a homestead crop and the only place where it was available in bulk was in Kodungallur, further up the coast, from the Temple of the Goddess in Cranganore-Kodungallur: It is the preferred offering to the Devi. The boundaries of our megalopolis of Muziris were expanding.

The [Romans](#) came here for pepper, followed by canny Jewish traders: both people were wine, olive-oil and wheat consumers. From the Kodungallur Temple we drove on to the former Jewish area.

Here, according to Jewish and Christian traditions, Thomas Didymus, an apostle of Jesus, had sailed in on a trading ship in AD 52 and was invited to a royal wedding. There he sang a song in a strange language which a Jewish flautist recognised as a Hebrew bridal song. He was welcomed by his fellow Jews into the Jewish quarter.

We visited St Thomas' Church in Kottakkavu, not far away. This little old church, standing back-to-back with a much larger one, has been renovated many times and now has an ornate altar. It, reputedly, stands on the site of the church established by St. Thomas as the first Christian Church in India. In front of the church, at the far end of a tank, is a diorama depicting a group of people accepting the precepts preached by the Apostle.

All faiths welcome

Clearly, the citizens of the prosperous metro of Muziris did not feel beleaguered by new creeds or faiths. In fact, according to one belief, the last king of the Chera Empire had a vision that led him to Mecca. There he met Prophet Mohammed, was converted to Islam, and gave a letter to one of the followers of the Prophet. Carrying this letter, Malik Ibn Dinar sailed to Muziris where he was welcomed and assisted in establishing the Cheraman Masjid in AD 629. That makes it the first mosque in India!

The Muslims' predecessors, the Jews, must also have had their synagogue in Cranganore, the religious hub of Muziris. According to

Jewish tradition, however, with the silting of the port, the community moved to Chennamangalam, also in the Muziris area. When they migrated to Israel, their neglected synagogue was restored by the state government and work has begun on the Parur Synagogue, about 2 km away.

Old & New

This is all part of the 300 sq km Muziris Heritage Project. It will have themed museums, a visitors' centre, and all the other attractions that people like Benny Kuriakose, conservation consultant to the project, can create. But in their earnestness to capture the tangible heritage of Muziris, we hope that the intangible will not be ignored.

For here, there are still sarpa kavus dedicated to the old snake deities; temples to Shakti, Siva, Vishnu; the first Church, the first mosque and the synagogue of the first Jews in India. Here once thrived a civilization known for tolerance and a harmonious blend of new ways with the old, whose contented citizens had found no time for bigotry. This is the true promise of the resurrected Muziris.

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