



## Kollam Port : An emporium of Chinese trade

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### ABSTRACT

Kerala had maintained active trade relations across the sea with many countries of the Eastern and Western world. Kollam or Quilon was a major trading centre on the coast of Kerala from the remote past and has a long drawing attraction worldwide. The present paper seeks to analyze the role and importance of Kollam port in the trade relation with China. It is an old sea port town on the Arabian coast had a sustained commercial reputation from the days of Phoenicians and the Romans. It is believed that Chinese were the first foreign power who maintains direct trade relation with Kollam. It was the first port where the Chinese ships could come through the Eastern Sea. Kollam had benefitted largely from the Chinese trade, the chief articles of export from Kollam were Brazil wood or sapang, spices, coconut and areca nut. All these goods had great demand in China and the Chinese brought to Kerala coast goods like silk, porcelain, copper, quick silver, tin, lead etc. Chinese net and ceramics of China had great demand in Kerala coasts and Kollam was an important centre of Chinese goods. Recently the port trust had discovered thousands of Chinese coins and stone age weapons from the Kollam Port, which is revealing the amazing historic background and trade culture of the port city. This is first time that these much of artifacts are getting from a port in India. The emergence of antiques from Kollam Port area reveals that Kollam was the most famous port city in India which served as the business hub of Chinese trade. It is an established fact that Kollam was a repository of all sorts of conceivable commercial centre.

### INTRODUCTION

Kerala had maintained active trade relations with countries of the outside world even from time immemorial. Trade has been one of the important activities of man, ever since the dawn of civilization. Among the few maritime states of India, Kerala enjoyed a position of importance. The long coastline and several natural harbors were the primary preconditions for the development of trade in Kerala. the Assyrians, the Babyloniaus, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs and the Chinese were among the foreign people

who had contact with the Kerala coast in the ancient period. Kerala accepted all of them and the congenial atmosphere prevailing there was able to provide them with opportunities to establish and prosper themselves as trading group. The foreign contact were mainly commercial but they led to the introduction of new religious and cultural practices into the land and helped to mould the culture of Kerala into a composite and cosmopolitan one.

Kollam or Quilon was a major trading centre on the coast of Kerala from the remote past and has a long drawing attraction worldwide.<sup>1</sup> For a longtime Quilon

was famous as an emporium of the east.<sup>2</sup> The antiquity of Kollam is a matter of conjecture. According to the St. Thomas tradition one of the seven churches founded in Kerala Apostle St. Thomas (52 A.D) was located at Kollam. But neither the works of early classical geographers nor the Tamil poems of the sangam age contain references to Kollam in its present name.<sup>3</sup> It is not clear as to when exactly the port of Kollam first came into lime-light. The town of Kollam, according to K.P.Padmanapha Menon, is older than the era (Kollam era) to which it has given a name. Kollam was famous for trade in cotton, pepper, ginger, cardamom and other articles of merchandise. Moreover, plenty of fish, rice, bananas, pineapple, fruits and pulses were available there.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Kollam commanded a pre eminent position as an emporium of the world trade and commerce.<sup>5</sup>

China had been a major country in sustaining the transmarine trading activities with Kollam during the medieval period. The thriving of Indo- Chinese trade played a major role in ancient Sino-Indian relations. These relations not only paved the way for the very first diplomatic and religious contacts, but also played an important role in the exchange of ideas and information. The contemporaneous sources give very little information about these maritime relations at the time when Muslim expansion began in the Indian Ocean. In the Chinese records of the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, all the goods of Ceylon and India are classed, with those of Arabia and Africa, as products of Persia. The straight sea route between India and China, yet, is known to have come into common use by the fifth century. According to the records of the T'ang dynasty (618-913), Kollam was their chief settlement.<sup>6</sup> Ma Huan refers to the products and coinage of Kollam.<sup>7</sup> He records that Kollam was very familiar to the navigators of T'ang dynasty.

Early Christian and Arab travelers spoke very high of Kollam and its commercial importance.<sup>8</sup> The name Kollam mentioned differently by the foreigners Male by Cosmos, an early work of 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, Kaulam- Male by Suleiman (AD 851) Kulam by the Chinese, Koyilon and Koyilur by Abdul fida (AD 1273)<sup>9</sup> and the Mahlai of the Chinese records of the Tang dynasty may be identified with Kollam. The Arab traveler Suleiman who visited Kerala in 851 A.D. had reported about the flourishing trade that existed between Kollam and China. According to Suleiman, the Kollam port was so wide and deep which had helped the Chinese ship to enter the

port without any difficulty. The Chinese ship also going to the Persian Gulf was also stopped for a while at the port of Kollam. The Jewish traveler from Spain, Benjamin of Tudela who travelled in the East between 1159 AD and 1173 AD, wrote about the trust worthy nature of the trading community of Kollam.<sup>10</sup> The Venetian traveler Marco Polo who reached Kerala during the last decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and Ibn Batuta, The African Arab traveler who came to Kerala in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century had given vivid description about the Chinese traders and Chinese ships.<sup>11</sup> Ibn Battuta also emphasized the strict control of foreign trade by Chinese officials, and the excellence of the *Junks* built at Canton, thirteen of which he saw lying off Kollam, awaiting the summer monsoon to return to China.

Kollam had become a very busy and well known entrepot deserving a separate notice during the time of Chinese ruler Zhou Qufei (1178 A.D). He states "The ships took forty days from Gung – Zhou to Lambri (Lan-li) where the Chinese spent the winter and resumed journey next sailing season to reach Kollam in about a month. From here, those Chinese traders who wished to go to the Arab countries embarked on small boats".<sup>12</sup> Ibn Khurdadhbeh records the Jewish traders on their return from China used to carry back musk, aloes, camphor, cinnamon, and other products of the eastern countries.<sup>13</sup> Recently Chinese coins and artifacts have been largely obtained from Kollam cargo port while dredging. The emergence of these artifacts from the sea could be used to establish that Kollam was a rich port city and trade centre of yore.<sup>14</sup>

The rulers of China and Kollam exchanged Embassies and there was a flourishing Chinese settlement at Kollam in the medieval period. The Chinese Annals described that in 1282 AD some envoys from king of Quilon landed at Zayton port in China. Marco polo, the celebrated Venetian traveler who visited Kollam towards the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and gives interesting description of the country.<sup>15</sup> He had gone to the court of Kublai Khan in 1275 AD and raised high in Chinese Service. He subsequently visited Kollam and other places as diplomatic representative of Kublai Khan. According to Yule " Kublai Khan" had a good deal of diplomatic intercourse of him usual kind with Kaulam (Quilon).<sup>16</sup> Regarding the trade of Kollam, Marcopolo says: "The merchants from Manzi (South China) and their ships and their merchandise make great profits both by what they

import and what they export".<sup>17</sup>

Kollam had benefitted largely from the Chinese trade, the chief articles of export from Kollam were brazil wood or sapang, spices, coconut and areca nut. All these goods had great demand in China and the Chinese brought to Kerala coast goods like silk, porcelain, copper, quick silver, tin, lead etc. Chinese net and ceramics of China had great demand in Kerala coasts and Kollam was an important centre of Chinese goods.<sup>18</sup> Ibn-Batuta, the African Arab traveler who came to Kerala in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup>, had given vivid description about the Chinese traders and Chinese ships.<sup>19</sup> Ibn Batuta mentions about these types of Chinese ships that had reached the Kerala coast. "They are *Junks*, *Sou* and *Kalam(kakam)*. *Junks* were big ships middle sized one are *sou* and *Kalam* were "smaller ships. Kollam was the first port where Chinese ships touched while reaching India and most of the Chinese merchants frequented it.

Political dilemma which broke out in China in the latter part of the ninth century distorted maritime trade with the west. When conditions in china again became favorable to the trade, steps were taken by the Chinese government to monopolies the luxury trade with foreigners and regulate all foreign trade.<sup>20</sup> This is recorded in the Song Annals as follows: In the 4<sup>th</sup> year K'ai-pao (AD 971) a merchant shipping office was established at Hang-chou and Ming-chou (Ning-po). All Ta-shih (Arabs) and foreigners from Ku-Lo (Kalah), She-p'o (java), Chan-Cheng (Annam), P'o-ni (Borneo), Ma-l (phillipine island) and San-fo-ts'I (Palembang, Sumatra) exchanged at these places for gold, silver, strings of cash, lead, tin, coloured silks and porcelain – ware. In Emperor Tai-tsu's time (AD970-976), a license office was established at the capital.<sup>21</sup> Besides steps to monopolies the luxury trade with foreigners and regulate all foreign trade, the Chinese government also endeavored successfully to increase its volume by sending a trade mission abroad and offering special licenses. This new trade movement reached its greatest extent during the period of the song dynasty in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in course of time, the growth of illicit trade in luxuries bought about a drain of metallic currency that created anxiety in China.<sup>22</sup> So they prohibited the export of precious metals and coined money and put restriction upon the trade with Coromandel Coast and Kollam. The restriction point out the fact that the ports of Malabar Coast had brisk trade relations with china at that time.<sup>23</sup>

By the late thirteenth century several political changes took place in China. The Yuan dynasty had replaced the Sung in china. When Kublai Khan had gained control over China, the Yuan Empire made efforts to establish official relations with diverse countries along the coasts of Asia. Embassies were dispatched and the Yuan were particularly interested in Malabar and Kollam.Both land and sea maritime relations were encouraged by the Yuan dynasty.<sup>24</sup> During that time, the Chinese traveller, Wang Ta Yuan visited twice to India and returned with pepper. There was a increase in the number of Chinese junks visited in Kollam. The diverse trading communities of Kollam including the Thomas Christians and the Muslims sent messengers and gifts to the Kublai Khan of China. In 1282, a messenger was sent with gifts to the Great Khan, "a gorget set with different kinds of jewels and also flacons of drugs which was reciprocated by an official mission despatched by the Chinese ruler in 1283 carrying with it a golden badge for the king of Kollam.<sup>22</sup> The Chinese coins recovered from the sea bed of Kollam substantiate the testimonials of contemporary writers. The last mission from Kollam during Yuan dynasty is dated around September 1296. With the advent of the Portuguese the cordial relationship that had existed at the coastal areas of Kerala was broken and conflicts developed. As the Chinese traders found it impossible to resist the onslaught of the European, they withdrew gradually from Kerala. When the European dominance became a reality the century's old Chinese trade lost for Kollam.

The most important impact of Chinese trade was the emergence of Kollam as a principal port in South India. According to William Logan, the British collector of Malabar, there was a large Chinese colony in Kollam. The fourteenth century Chinese records mention Kollam on the Western coast of India having very flourishing trade. This was considered a principal port of all the lands of the western ocean by them. Pepper, dry betel-nuts, jackfruit and coloured cotton stuffs were purchased by the Chinese from this port. Sapan-wood, frankincense, pearls, corals, butter and jasmine flowers were brought to Kollam. The works of Chinese travellers Wang Ta-yuan, Ma Fei Hein and Huang Shan-ts'eng make mention of the Chinese trade conducted on the Malabar coast. Chinese names of several items used in Malabar such as *Chinacatti*, *Cinavala* and *Cinavedi* speak for the long Chinese contacts with the Malabar Coast. The most eloquent testimony to the Chinese trade at Kollam is the

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pottery and potsherds obtained from the coastal areas of the town. Chinese coins in thousands have been recovered from the sea as a result of dredging of the Kollam port in 2014. This proves the vigorous trade relation between China and Kollam.

### Conclusion:

The Kollam Port was one of the most important ports in the east west trade of the Indian Ocean. Among the ancient Port of Kerala, Kollam Port had enjoyed a prominent place till 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. It had a long history of maritime trade with other part of the world. The literary and non literary evidence showed its glorious antiquity. Chinese legacy in Kollam was so strong that centuries later its effect was noted by the association with Kollam is perpetuated to this day by the commercial hub of Kollam which is even now known as Chinnakada- a term which evolved from “ Cheenakada” meaning Chinese shop/market. The Chinese coins and artifacts recovered from the sea bed off Kollam could be used to establish that Kollam was rich port city and trade centre of Yore. The emergence of antiques from Kollam Port area reveals that Kollam was the most famous port city in India which served as the business hub of Chinese trade. It is an established fact that Kollam was a repository of all sorts of conceivable commercial centre.

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