



## Institute for the Advancement of Transdisciplinary Archaeological Sciences

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## PAMA excavations at Pattanam and Mathilakam, Kerala, India

Jan – June 2020

### A brief report

#### **Pattanam Excavations**

After a gap of five years, (since May, 2015), the Pattanam excavations were restarted by PAMA Institute for the Advancement of Transdisciplinary Archaeological Sciences, on March 1 2020.

At the outset PAMA and her associates express their gratitude to Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the local community at Pattanam and Mathilakam, to ensure the continuation of research, respectively by awarding the permission and making available plots for excavations at Pattanam and Mathilakam. We consider it as a major development on PAMA's dream of transforming and conserving the globally important site of Pattanam into a knowledge hub and model heritage village.

Pattanam excavations began by early March 2020, could open up only five trenches. This could be a great feat for any field project, if taken into account the difficulties underwent including the Covid 19 calamity. The multi-disciplinary team of students and researchers from different parts of India, even under litigation or desperation, faced the challenges with scientific temper. The team members from outside the state could only return by early June.

Along with the five trenches of the season the total number of trenches so far excavated at Pattanam stands at 66. This is not even one percent of the total area of the 111 acres of the Pattanam archaeological mound.

#### **Stratigraphy and Chronology**

This year, the site brought out stratigraphically four layers with tentative chronological assumptions (in the brackets,) from the surface downwards, Modern layer (2020 to 1500 CE) Medieval layer (1500 to 500 CE) Early Historic or Sangam Age layer ( 500 CE to 300 BCE) and the Iron Age layer ( 300 BCE to 1000

BCE). In other words, Pattanam tells the story of 3000 years, from 1000 BCE to the present; with the early historic layer or the Sangam Age dominating.

### **Findings**

The large volume of pottery assemblage continued to dominate the findings. Besides substantial quantity of Indian pottery, the site produced impressive count of Mediterranean, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and South China Sea pottery, reconfirming the assumption that Pattanam could be an integral part of the legendary port of Muziris.

Indian pottery types retrieved included Black and Red Ware (BRW), Course Red Ware (CRW) and Black Ware and Indian Rouletted Ware (IRW). The pottery types from outside Indian subcontinent included Amphor and Terra sigilletta fragments from the Mediterranean regions, the Turquoise Glazed Pottery (TGP), Torpedo Jar and Pattanam-Khor Rori Pottery (PKP) from the Arabian region and the Blue on White porcelain from the south China region.

The artefacts unearthed diverse types of glass beads, precious stone beads, gold foiled beads, seal-ring or intaglio, cameo blanks, precious stone debitage (carnelian, amethyst, jasper, quartz chert and banded agates), Greco-Roman head statute, Iron and copper artefacts, architectural remains like fragments of koorayodu (medieval roof tiles) triple grooved tiles of the Sangam Age, large quantity of brick bats of probably built structures, ring-wells, storage jar fragments, ring-well fragments, fragments of pots, bowls, basins, sprouts indicating domestic contexts.

### **Path-breaking finds**

#### **The Pattanam Sphinx**

The seal-ring or the precious stone inlay or gem could be one of the most fascinating finds of the tenth season Pattanam Excavation. The seal-ring made of banded agate carried the carving of Sphinx; one of the hugely influential mythical creatures in the history of the Mediterranean world. Octavianus, later, the first Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar, chose the Sphinx symbol as his seal-ring because of her magical and oracular powers. The biggest surprise was when Dr Giulia Rocco, Director Excavations at Rome and specialist on ancient Roman art (University of Rome) confirmed that the Pattanam Sphinx is similar to the one wore by Octavianus

According to her the Pattanam Sphinx is a gem belonging to a seal-ring that can be considered a good quality example of Greco-Roman carving art. Pattanam sphynx is female not only because of the nipples, but because of the hair style and beardless cheeks. The accuracy of the Pattanam gem style and carving technique suggest a chronology between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, says Prof Giulia Rocco.

The Sphinx gem was found buried at a depth of 115 cm in the trench PT 20 XLV (65), It was identified by Miss Pravitha P A, plus-two student volunteer of the excavation team while sieving the soil from the locus 5. She announced I got "Plastic Button" "Plastic Button". In fact, it weighed very light and hardly resembled a precious stone and looked like a button but oval in shape. It was after several closer examinations, discussions, analyses of a nondestructive kind, verifications and confirmations that the team realized that it was a precious find with the Sphinx intricately carved on a precious stone. It was found from a layer which brought out Non-Indian pottery and precious stone debitage confirming the oversea links and probably a lapidary workshop in the vicinity.

The Sphinx gem is the third intaglio so far found at Pattanam; Before two gems made of carnelian stone were found, one with a carving of a pouncing lion (2010), the other with goddess Fortuna or Tyche (2014). All the three gems were retrieved from a specific area of the 70-hectare Pattanam archaeological mound. The Sphinx gem is made of banded agate, a precious stone belonging to Indian subcontinent, while the theme or symbol of the intaglio is of Mediterranean genesis. This tiny seal-ring, oval in shape, has a length of 1.2 cm, width of .2 cm and thickness of .1 + cm.

### **The Mythical Sphinx**

In Greek legends, Sphinx is referred as a winged, female creature in relation to either Thebes or the mythological hero Oedipus, who accidentally fulfilled a prophecy that he would end up killing his father and marrying his mother, thereby bringing disaster to the city of Thebes.

In Greek literature, the Sphinx is always female and the only male reference is by Herodotus, but that was in relation to the male Sphinx he had seen in Egypt. In fact, creatures mixing human with animal features in Greek art were mostly feminine, to underscore their primordial descentance from the Mother Earth. The Sphinx is described by the Greek tragic poets as a winged young woman with the body of a lion. The fullest description of Sphinx is by the Pseudo-Apollodoros in a compendium of Greek mythology written between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, as having a woman's face and breasts, wings, a lion's body and tail. Some tragedians have replaced some elements of Sphinx with dog's body and snake's tail – hybrid, double natured monsters but without explanation. However, all Greek tragedians emphasize the winged and feminine character of the Sphinx.

Every day she infested Thebes by seizing and devouring men, mostly young. As an escape offered to her victims, the Sphinx posed a riddle, which was composed on the advice of Muses (Goddesses of arts and sciences), referring to three successive phases of human life. She posed the question, what walks in the morning on four feet and at noon with two and in the evening with three? Those who were unable to answer were seized and devoured irrespective of their status and position. The Thebans assembled every day to answer the riddle and get rid of the Sphinx until Oedipus solved the riddle by answering, "Man crawls on all fours as a baby, walks upright in the prime of life, and uses a staff in old age." The Sphinx then killed herself by jumping from her mountain or as in some other versions allowed to be killed by Oedipus.

### **Greco-Roman head statuette**

Another significant artefact of the 2020 season was a Greco-Roman head of a miniature statuette from the same trench, which produced the Sphinx. This head statute happens to be the first ever human image from the 66 trenches so far excavated at Pattanam. It was retrieved from among the huge volume of pottery assemblage from locus 3. Like the intaglio, this one is also small in size with a (maximum) height of 2.6 cm, width of 1.7cm and thickness of 2.2 cm. Thanks to the vigilance of PAMA intern Miss Swagata Boruah of Assam University; covered with muddy soil, it could have been mistaken for the hundreds of similar looking stone and pottery fragments from the sieving net. She was nicknamed by the team as "Bead Queen" for her sharp eyes to retrieve the largest number beads this season. The allied finds from both loci include Mediterranean Amphora, South Arabian Torpedo Jar fragments besides different types of precious stone debitage, cameo blanks, stone and glass beads. It is not sure what could have been the function of the terracotta or limestone male head, perhaps the fragment, of a very small statue, like the votive ones. The coiffure, with the hair combed on the forehead forming a fringe, is popular in the Roman

empire in the Augustan and Julio-Claudian age (40-30 B.C.E. 68 CE), under the emperor Trajan (98-117 CE) and then in the fourth century CE (from the Constantinian age onwards), but the head is too small to be more exactly dated. From the stratigraphic inferences of the Pattanam trenches both finds are from the Early Historic layers which are assumed to be from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Precise dating can only be made on the basis of further studies.

### **Mathilakam Excavations**

The Mathilakam excavations, 17 km north of Pattanam site, were undertaken in the month of January.

Since no stratigraphic or contextual artefactual information were available – PAMA decided to have trial trenches in the first phase of Mathilakam excavation. Six trial trenches were excavated. The sixth trench was temporarily abandoned along with an intact ring-well due to the high ground-water-level; when digging became nearly impossible even after employing pump-sets.

Though Mathilakam could be an archaeologically significant area due to the negative interventions at the site (disturbances) the team failed to identify the cultural sequence or chronology or the site formation process. Only with radio-carbon dating and closer geo-morphological analysis we may be able to generate a scientific hypothesis. The artefactual evidence largely provides a medieval settlement indication, though we cannot completely rule out an early historic habitation in the area. In the last trench we have come across an intact ring-well which looks similar to the Pattanam or early historic ring-wells. Mathilakam did not produce any non-Indian pottery in the trial excavations 2020.

### **Pattanam Research Collaborations (institutional)**

Directorate of Science and Innovation, Amity University, New Delhi, Christ College, Iringalakkuda, Kerala

### **Pattanam Research Collaborations (experts)**

- Prof. K Rajan, (University of Pondicherry), Prof. Steven Sidebottom, (Delaware University), Prof. Federico De Romanins and Prof. Giulia Rocco, University of Rome; Dr. Roberta Tomber (British Museum) Dr.R.Balakrishnan, Author and Researcher; Madhavi Kunnerithu Research Scholar France, Victoria Buffa (University of Pisa), Maanasa Ragavan (University of Chicago); Dr. Preeta Nayar University of Kerala), Dr. V. Selvakumar (Tamil University)

### **Pattanam - Mathilakam Team**

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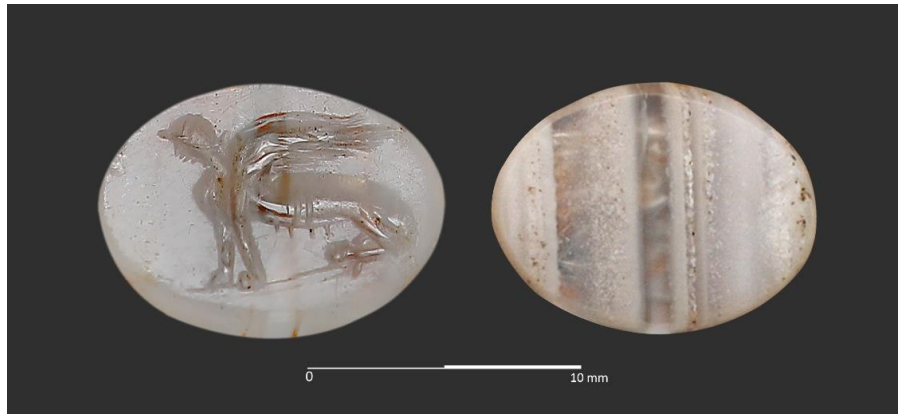
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### Images Photo Credit - PAMA

1 Sphinx Inaglio

2 Greco-Roman Head

A few activity photos











**PJ Cherian**

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