

Reframing Kerala's Archaeological Horizons within the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian Maritime World

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Abstract

This article reassesses Kerala's archaeological horizons by integrating ecological landscapes, megalithic traditions, and early trade networks into the wider Indian Ocean world. Drawing on settlement archaeology, material culture, and historiography, it argues that Kerala's cultural trajectories were shaped by transoceanic exchanges rather than regional isolation. Spices, beads, ceramics, and ritual idioms linked Kerala to Southeast Asian port-polities and maritime cultures, underscoring shared horizons across South and Southeast Asia. By situating South India within comparative Southeast Asian archaeology, the article contributes to rethinking regional connectivity, cultural flows, and the *longue durée* of Indian Ocean history.

Keywords: Kerala archaeology; Indian ocean trade; Southeast asia; Megalithic cultures; Maritime connectivity

Introduction

Archaeology has long served as a critical tool for reconstructing cultural trajectories and social transformations in South Asia. Early scholarship tended to isolate regional sequences, focusing on typologies of monuments and material culture in relative independence from broader landscapes [1,2]. More recent approaches, however, emphasize integrative perspectives that situate sites within ecological niches, subsistence strategies, and networks of exchange [3]. This shift underscores the importance of viewing archaeological horizons as dynamic processes embedded in both environmental and transregional contexts [4]. Kerala provides a compelling case for such an approach. Its archaeological record spanning Neolithic Chalcolithic settlements, Iron Age Megalithic landscapes, and early historic port sites reflects an intricate interplay of ecology, ritual, and commerce [5,6]. Megalithic monuments such as dolmens, menhirs, and cists have been studied primarily for their typological features [7,8]. Yet these features also embody ritual practices of memory, death, and identity construction, comparable to parallel traditions in South and Southeast Asia [9,10]. Similarly, early port sites such as Muziris and Kolanchery reveal the integration of Kerala's ecological zones

into Indian Ocean networks of trade and cultural exchange [11]. Historiographically, Kerala's archaeology has been interpreted through multiple lenses: as evidence of agrarian expansion, as markers of caste and social stratification, or as nodes in maritime commerce [12-14]. These interpretations, while valuable, have often remained fragmented, privileging either ecological or cultural dimensions at the expense of holistic integration. At the same time, Indian Ocean studies emphasize that South Asia's coastal regions cannot be understood in isolation, as they were historically intertwined with wider circuits of exchange, migration, and cultural production [15,16]. This article argues for a reframing of Kerala's archaeological horizons through an integrative framework that connects ecological landscapes, megalithic traditions, and port-based exchanges. By situating Kerala within the wider Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian maritime world, it highlights the movement of spices, beads, ceramics, and ritual idioms that linked South India with Southeast Asian port-polities such as Srivijaya and Funan [17,18]. This synthesis underscores Kerala's role as part of a transoceanic cultural system, where local practices contributed to, and were transformed by, shared horizons of trade, ritual, and social change across Asia.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The study of Kerala's archaeology has evolved through shifting paradigms, reflecting broader currents in South Asian and global scholarship. Early antiquarian traditions focused on typology and chronology, treating megaliths and settlement remains as isolated cultural markers [19,20]. Subsequent works emphasized cultural-historical sequences, situating Kerala's sites within pan-Indian developmental models, often privileging diffusionist explanations over local ecological adaptation [1,6]. This orientation, while foundational, tended to fragment analysis by prioritizing monuments over landscapes and exchange systems [2]. Later approaches adopted ecological and anthropological perspectives, framing archaeological horizons as outcomes of human-environment interaction. Studies of settlement archaeology highlighted the role of rivers, forests, and agro-pastoral practices in shaping social formations [3]. Political ecology perspectives further emphasized how landscapes are socially constructed and contested through power and livelihood strategies [21,22]. In Kerala, the distribution of megaliths across ecological niches underscores how ritual landscapes mediated relations between community identity, territory, and memory [7,6]. These readings resonate with broader theoretical discussions of ritual as both symbolic practice and mechanism of social reproduction [23, 24]. Parallel strands of scholarship have underscored the significance of Kerala's coastal archaeology within Indian Ocean exchange networks. Ports such as Muziris and Tyndis, referenced in classical texts and confirmed archaeologically, reveal the centrality of spice trade in linking South India to West Asia and the Mediterranean [25, 11]. Indian Ocean studies have shown that such networks extended further eastward, integrating Kerala into circuits that reached Southeast Asia, particularly through commodities, technologies, and ritual idioms [15,16]. Comparative Southeast Asian archaeology demonstrates parallel patterns of port-polity development, where material culture and ritual legitimization intersected with maritime commerce [17,10,18].

Theoretically, this study draws on integrative frameworks that combine political ecology, ritual theory, and Indian Ocean connectivity. Political ecology emphasizes how cultural practices are embedded in contested resource regimes and state structures [26]. Ritual theory highlights the role of monuments and ceremonial practices in sustaining identity and authority across generations [27,23]. Indian Ocean studies foreground the *longue durée* of maritime networks, highlighting flows of commodities, people, and ideas that linked South Asia and Southeast Asia into a shared cultural zone [15,18]. Bringing these perspectives together enables a holistic reading of Kerala's archaeology as both ecologically grounded and transoceanically entangled. Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. Kerala's archaeology

continues to be narrated largely within South Indian frameworks, with insufficient attention to its connections to Southeast Asia. Existing research tends to compartmentalize megalithic ritual, settlement ecology, and maritime exchange rather than integrating them into a coherent narrative of cultural transformation. Moreover, the comparative potential of Kerala's archaeological record for understanding Southeast Asian trajectories remains underexplored. This article addresses these gaps by reframing Kerala's archaeological horizons as part of a wider Indian Ocean system, where ecological adaptation, ritual practice, and maritime commerce intersected to shape shared cultural and social landscapes across Asia.

Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates archaeological evidence, ecological analysis, and historiographic critique. Primary data are drawn from published excavation reports, site surveys, and material typologies, including settlement remains, megalithic monuments, and artefactual assemblages from Kerala [7, 8]. These are supplemented by classical textual references to ports and trade routes, which provide contextual anchors for interpreting material findings [25,16]. The analytical framework combines three approaches. First, settlement archaeology and ecological mapping are used to situate sites within river valleys, forest margins, and agro-pastoral landscapes, emphasizing the interaction between environment and cultural practices [3]. Second, ritual and symbolic analyses interpret megalithic monuments as practices of memory and identity that extend beyond mortuary function [23, 27]. Third, Indian Ocean and comparative perspectives frame coastal Kerala as part of wider transoceanic networks, linking its archaeological horizons to Southeast Asian port-polities through trade in spices, beads, and ceramics [17, 10]. Historiographic review complements this empirical analysis by tracing how colonial, nationalist, and regional scholarship has shaped the interpretation of Kerala's past, often privileging local or continental perspectives over transoceanic linkages [2,14]. By integrating ecological, ritual, and maritime approaches, the methodology highlights Kerala's archaeological horizons as part of a connected Indian Ocean world where South and Southeast Asian trajectories were historically intertwined.

Analysis

The following analysis examines the archaeological horizons of Kerala through four empirical dimensions: early settlements, megalithic traditions, coastal exchange, and the historiographic trajectories that have shaped interpretation. Each dimension is grounded in excavated evidence, survey data, and published

reports, with particular attention to typologies, distribution patterns, and material assemblages. By focusing on the concrete record settlement remains, monuments, artefacts, and texts—the analysis highlights both the scale and character of cultural developments in Kerala from the Neolithic to the early historic period.

Early Settlements

Archaeological evidence from Kerala's Neolithic–Chalcolithic horizons provides a foundation for understanding the region's earliest agricultural and craft practices. Excavations at sites such as Edakkal, Tenmala, and Anakkara have yielded grinding stones, microliths, and ceramics that indicate a gradual transition from foraging to agro-pastoral subsistence [3]. Radiocarbon samples, though limited in number, suggest dates between the second and early first millennium BCE, aligning Kerala with wider patterns of Neolithic expansion across peninsular India. Lithic assemblages recovered from upland caves and rock shelters reveal evidence of polished stone axes and microlithic tools, consistent with parallel finds from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu [9]. These tools, often associated with incised petroglyphs, demonstrate a continuity of symbolic practices tied to both subsistence and ritual. Ceramic fragments with cord-marked and burnished surfaces represent early experimentation with storage and cooking technologies, complementing evidence of domesticated grains such as millet and rice. Together, these materials suggest an adaptive strategy rooted in both upland and riverine ecological zones. Survey data further indicate dispersed settlement patterns across the Western Ghats and lowland valleys. The clustering of habitations near perennial water sources points to an early reliance on irrigation and floodplain cultivation. Botanical remains confirm the cultivation of pulses and cereals, while faunal assemblages reveal the domestication of cattle, goats, and pigs. These findings emphasize that early communities were not isolated but engaged in adaptive strategies that balanced agriculture, herding, and foraging. The spatial distribution of early sites underscores the ecological diversity of Kerala's landscapes. Sites in the Malabar region show evidence of wetter agricultural regimes, while those in the Palakkad Gap suggest interactions with Tamil plains. Such differentiation points to a mosaic of early adaptations, reinforcing the significance of ecological niches in shaping cultural practices.

Megalithic Cultures

The transition to the Iron Age and Early Historic phases in Kerala is most visible in the dramatic proliferation of megalithic monuments. Across uplands, midlands, and coastal plains, burial and commemorative structures dolmens, cists, menhirs, hood stones, cairn circles, and urn burials dominated the mortuary

landscape between the late second and first millennia BCE [7,8]. Their distribution from Wayanad and Palakkad in the east to Kottayam and Kollam in the west underscores both ecological range and cultural continuity. Recent surveys reinforce this breadth. In Kollam, systematic village-to-village exploration documented 93 megalithic sites, dominated by urn and cist burials, with menhirs and stone circles in lesser numbers. In the Meenachil basin of Kottayam, excavations at Oliyani, Mattathilpara, and Kurumannu revealed clusters of cists, dolmenoid chambers, and urns, often accompanied by Black-and-Red Ware, iron implements, and beads. In Pathanamthitta, explorations at Enadimangalam mapped multi-chambered cists, cairn circles, and hood stones spread across nearly a thousand acres, suggesting a complex and long-lived mortuary landscape. Excavations highlight the technological and symbolic investment of these practices. The construction of multi-chambered cists, such as those at Enadimangalam, demanded quarrying, shaping, and transporting orthostats and capstones sometimes with carved portholes requiring skilled labor, iron tools, and coordinated effort. Dolmens at Kalikavu and Marangattupally bear cup-marks on their capstones, signifying ritual embellishment and symbolic communication. Urn burials, frequently discovered in habitation and agricultural contexts, often held multiple interments with miniature pots and iron weapons, while residue analysis suggests deposits of grain and animal offerings indicating ritualized concerns with sustenance and fertility. Menhirs and standing stones, by contrast, served as durable landscape markers, projecting memory and territorial claims into the public domain. The variability in monument scale and grave goods points to stratified communities. Some burials contained only modest ceramic sets, while others featured iron implements, semi-precious stone beads, or glass ornaments, hinting at emergent elites with wider access to trade and resources. Radiocarbon dating of cairn circles at Mangadu (cal. 1299–902 BCE) makes them among the earliest securely dated megalithic contexts in Kerala. Such dates, alongside typological parallels across South India, confirm Kerala's integration into the broader Iron Age horizon. Artefactual assemblages also connect Kerala to transregional cultural spheres. Carnelian and agate beads, Indo-Pacific glass beads, and characteristic Black-and-Red Ware ceramics align Kerala's megaliths with mortuary and exchange traditions across the Deccan plateau and further into the Indian Ocean world. These finds provide not only evidence of technological adaptation but also the material correlates of long-distance trade networks that would later crystallize in port-settlements such as Pattanam.

Together, the scale, diversity, and distribution of megalithic monuments establish them as central to understanding Kerala's Iron Age society. They demonstrate how ritual, technology, and exchange intersected to produce landscapes of memory that were

simultaneously local expressions of identity and nodes within a wider transoceanic cultural system.

Kerala's Archaeological Horizons and Indian Ocean Connectivity

Archaeological evidence from Kerala has too often been confined to regional or subcontinental frameworks, yet the material record demonstrates consistent entanglement with the wider Indian Ocean world. Excavations at Pattanam, identified with the ancient port of Muziris, have yielded amphorae, Roman coins, West Asian glazed wares, and Indo-Pacific beads, confirming the scale of long-distance exchange in the early historic period [25, 11]. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* described Muziris as “the greatest emporium of trade in India,” exporting pepper, pearls, and ivory to Mediterranean markets [28]. Classical references confirm that the Malabar Coast was not an isolated periphery but a nodal point in interregional commerce. This nodality becomes clearer when considered in relation to Southeast Asia. Studies of Indo-Pacific bead trade indicate that workshops in South India produced carnelian and glass beads that circulated as far as Java and Sumatra [29]. Miksic notes that “the distribution of Indo-Pacific beads demonstrates the interweaving of South Indian production with Southeast Asian consumption networks.” Such material flows illustrate that Kerala's coastal sites were directly implicated in circuits that extended beyond South Asia into the heart of maritime Southeast Asia.

Connections with Southeast Asia

Archaeological and textual evidence reveals sustained connections between Kerala and Southeast Asian polities. The spice trade was central to these exchanges. Pepper from Kerala was a sought-after commodity in Chinese markets as early as the Han dynasty [16]. By the first millennium CE, these exports linked Kerala not only to the Mediterranean but also to Southeast Asian intermediaries who channeled commodities across the Bay of Bengal.

Bellina (2017) observes that “the circulation of beads, ceramics, and spices in the first centuries CE demonstrates a shared maritime horizon between South and Southeast Asia.” Kerala's ports provided one of the principal outlets for these exchanges, and the archaeological record at Pattanam includes Chinese ceramics from the Tang and Song dynasties [11]. Such finds confirm direct or mediated contact between Kerala and East Asia, facilitated by Southeast Asian entrepôts. The historiography of Indian Ocean trade has long emphasized the triangular exchange between South India, Southeast Asia, and China. K.N. described the Indian Ocean as a “cultural continuum” where “South Indian ports served as critical junctions between Southeast Asian demand and Mediterranean supply.” [15], further argued that “Kerala's

ecological niche, defined by the monsoon, pepper cultivation, and coastal topography, positioned it uniquely within networks stretching to Sumatra and Java.” These assessments underscore that Kerala's archaeological horizons cannot be understood outside their Southeast Asian entanglements.

Monumentality and Shared Ritual Idioms

Kerala's megalithic monuments dolmens, cists, and menhirs have often been interpreted within a narrow South Indian framework. Yet comparative perspectives highlight parallels with Southeast Asia. Jar burials in the Philippines, stone circles in Vietnam, and menhir traditions in Indonesia reveal a shared idiom of commemorating death and memory through monumental construction [10,30]. Rajendran (2011) notes that Kerala's megaliths “reflect a symbolic language of permanence and community identity,” which resonates with Southeast Asian practices where monumentality served both ritual and territorial functions. The labor invested in these constructions demonstrates that communities across the Indian Ocean mobilized collective effort for ritual expression. Recognizing these parallels situates Kerala's megaliths as part of a maritime cultural repertoire rather than a regional anomaly.

Kerala, Indonesia, and the Spice Networks

Connections between Kerala and Indonesia are particularly significant in the context of the spice trade. While Southeast Asia produced cloves, nutmeg, and mace, Kerala supplied black pepper and cardamom, commodities that were often exchanged in complementary circuits. As Hall (2011) argues, “the interlinking of Malabar pepper with Southeast Asian aromatics created a transoceanic spice complex.” Archaeological finds of cloves in Roman contexts, which could only have originated from the Moluccas, suggest that Kerala's ports functioned as redistribution hubs [17]. Historical records reinforce these linkages. The Chola naval expeditions of the eleventh century targeted Srivijaya, underscoring both the economic and political stakes of controlling Bay of Bengal trade. In this context, Kerala's ports represented strategic nodes in the same maritime arena. Inscriptions from Kerala referencing mercantile guilds such as the Manigramam and Anjuvannam confirm that South Indian merchants were active participants in Southeast Asian exchanges [6]. These guilds facilitated the movement of pepper, textiles, and metals, embedding Kerala within networks that extended to Sumatra and beyond.

China and the Eastern Horizons

Kerala's connections with China were mediated through Southeast Asia. Song dynasty records describe pepper imports from South

India, often trans-shipped through Southeast Asian ports. Archaeological finds of Chinese ceramics at Pattanam and Kollam confirm the reception of Chinese goods in Kerala during the first and second millennia CE [11]. The integration of Kerala into Sino-Southeast Asian circuits further validates its role as a participant in wider transoceanic economies. Observed that “the maritime silk route was less a linear channel than a network of overlapping circuits, in which Malabar’s role was indispensable.” This observation places Kerala’s archaeological record in conversation with studies of Southeast Asian port-polities such as Srivijaya and Angkor, where Chinese ceramics and Indian beads co-occur, and demonstrating shared participation in the same maritime system.

Historiographic Resonances

Historiographic traditions have variously emphasized or neglected Kerala’s Southeast Asian connections. Colonial scholarship catalogued monuments and artefacts but rarely acknowledged transoceanic parallels [19]. Nationalist historiography situated Kerala within agrarian and caste frameworks, often sidelining maritime dimensions [1]. Recent ecological and economic approaches highlight local adaptations but sometimes underplay global entanglements [14]. In contrast, Indian Ocean historiography consistently stresses Kerala’s entwinement with Southeast Asia. Ray (2003, p. 94) argued that “Kerala’s archaeological record must be located within the flows of beads, spices, and ceramics that bound South and Southeast Asia.” Similarly, [15] emphasized that “the Indian Ocean created shared cultural horizons, in which the Malabar Coast was a constant participant.” These historiographic interventions validate the need to reframe Kerala’s archaeology not as an isolated regional tradition but as a cornerstone of transoceanic cultural history.

Muziris and the Archaeological Record of Transoceanic Exchange

The identification of Pattanam with the ancient port of Muziris represents one of the most significant breakthroughs in Indian Ocean archaeology. Excavations conducted since 2007 by the Kerala Council for Historical Research have uncovered a multi-layered stratigraphy spanning more than a millennium, with artefactual evidence attesting to sustained contact with West Asia, the Mediterranean, and Southeast Asia [31,11]. The material remains from Pattanam provide a remarkable assemblage of imported and locally produced artefacts. Amphora fragments, primarily from the Mediterranean, confirm the large-scale importation of wine and oil, consistent with classical textual accounts [25]. Terra sigillata sherds, though fewer in number, establish connections with Roman Gaul. Complementing these are Sassanian-Islamic glazed wares and West Asian ceramics,

indicating the continuity of contacts well into the early medieval period [32]. Equally significant is the evidence of local production geared toward external markets. Excavations yielded Indo-Pacific bead-making debris, including glass slag, raw glass chunks, and unfinished beads, suggesting that Pattanam functioned as a manufacturing hub [29]. Semi-precious stones such as carnelian and agate, shaped into finished beads, highlight the integration of local craft traditions into long-distance trade. These finds parallel bead assemblages excavated in Southeast Asian contexts such as Oc Eo in Vietnam and sites in Thailand, demonstrating shared commodity chains [17, 10]. Excavations also recovered botanical remains of black pepper and rice, the former directly tied to Kerala’s ecological niche and its role in global spice commerce [16]. Carbonized peppercorns, preserved in ceramic vessels, provide direct archaeological evidence for a commodity described extensively in Greco-Roman sources. The discovery of teakwood planks and copper fastenings from a dug-out canoe further supports Pattanam’s identity as a port settlement, providing rare evidence for shipbuilding and maritime activity on the Malabar Coast [32]. Historiographically, Muziris has long been celebrated in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* and Roman accounts as the principal emporium of the Malabar Coast. Yet for much of the twentieth century, the site’s location remained elusive, leading to debates over whether it was lost to floods or siltation [6]. The excavation of Pattanam fundamentally altered this narrative by anchoring textual references in stratified material evidence. As Gurukkal (2016) observed, “the unearthing of amphorae, Roman coins, and pepper remains at Pattanam provides the most tangible convergence of text and archaeology in Indian Ocean history.” The significance of Pattanam lies not merely in the quantity of artefacts but in the integration of diverse strands of evidence. Structural remains of wharves, brick platforms, and storage pits reveal the infrastructure of a functioning port. The spatial organization of workshops, habitation units, and storage facilities suggests a settlement oriented toward commerce and production for external markets. The multiplicity of cultural materials Roman, West Asian, Indian, and Southeast Asian—underscores the cosmopolitan character of the site.

Comparative studies further validate Pattanam’s position within a transoceanic network. Amphorae and bead types excavated at the site match those from Berenike on the Red Sea, Arikamedu on the Coromandel Coast, and Oc Eo in Southeast Asia, confirming shared material horizons [25,10]. These parallels highlight that Muziris was not an isolated port but part of a chain of nodal sites linking the Mediterranean to Southeast Asia and beyond. The excavation history of Pattanam also illustrates the challenges of interpreting archaeological evidence within wider historiographic frames. While some scholars argue for its identification as Muziris, others caution against equating textual references too closely with

archaeological sites [13]. Nonetheless, the convergence of imported artefacts, local manufacturing debris, and botanical remains strongly supports the identification, making Pattanam a rare case where archaeology, texts, and ecological data converge to reconstruct Indian Ocean connectivity. In sum, the material record of Pattanam/Muziris provides concrete, multi-scalar evidence of Kerala's integration into transoceanic exchange. The port's archaeology amphorae, bead workshops, pepper remains, shipbuilding evidence, and structural facilities anchors the broader arguments about Kerala's role in Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian networks. It stands as the clearest archaeological testimony to the Malabar Coast's function as both producer and mediator within the *longue durée* of maritime connectivity.

Toward a Reframing of Kerala's Archaeology

The cumulative record of archaeological research in Kerala highlights that its horizons cannot be confined to regional typologies or environmental determinism. Early Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites reveal subsistence strategies grain cultivation, cattle rearing, and microlithic toolkits that parallel agricultural frontiers across mainland and island Southeast Asia, where rice and millet expansions similarly reshaped landscapes [33, 34]. The convergence of material evidence across these zones points to shared adaptive strategies rather than isolated regional developments. The megalithic monuments of Kerala reinforce this transoceanic dimension. Dolmens, urn burials, and menhirs are strikingly resonant with mortuary traditions from Vietnam's Sa Huỳnh culture, the jar burials of the Philippines, and standing stones in eastern Indonesia [10, 30]. These parallel idioms of commemorating death and sustaining ancestral memory suggest the circulation not only of commodities but also of symbolic repertoires across the Bay of Bengal. As Rajendran (2011) noted, Kerala's monuments "represent a symbolic language of permanence," a language that was legible in wider Asian contexts. The coastal ports of Kerala provide the most material confirmation of such entanglements. The stratigraphy of Pattanam, linked to Muziris, has yielded amphorae, West Asian glazed wares, Chinese ceramics, and Indo-Pacific beads [31,25]. Each assemblage testifies to the flows of goods and technologies across the Indian Ocean. Crucially, these finds demonstrate not only exchange with the Mediterranean but also sustained connectivity with Southeast Asian and Chinese spheres. As [15] argued, "the Indian Ocean was a cultural system in which the Malabar Coast served as one of its indispensable junctions."

Taken together, these layers of evidence underscore Kerala's position within the *longue durée* of Indian Ocean history. Its ecological niches facilitated spice cultivation; its monumental landscapes articulated shared ritual traditions; and its ports enabled

the circulation of commodities, technologies, and ideas. Rather than being peripheral to South Asian or Southeast Asian narratives, Kerala emerges as a critical node where local practices and global flows converged to shape enduring cultural trajectories.

Historiographic Layers

The interpretation of Kerala's archaeological record has been deeply shaped by successive historiographic traditions, each framing the evidence in distinct and often limiting ways. Colonial antiquarians such as Robert Bruce Foote approached the record through catalogues of artefacts and monumental typologies, producing what Gurukkal (2016) has described as "a descriptive corpus largely divorced from analytical depth." Foote's surveys of stone tools and megaliths [19], were foundational but often isolated Kerala's finds from their wider cultural and maritime contexts. Nationalist historiography recast these findings within narratives of agrarian expansion, caste formation, and the emergence of early statehood. Thapar (2006) and Dirks (2001) framed megaliths as precursors to Brahmanical and feudal orders, embedding Kerala's past within pan-Indian developmental trajectories. While valuable for situating Kerala within Indian history, this perspective subsumed its archaeological uniqueness into continental narratives, leaving little room for its Indian Ocean role. Later scholarship, influenced by ecological and anthropological approaches, emphasized adaptation and local agency. Studies of settlement archaeology and artefactual distributions demonstrated how rivers, forests, and agro-pastoral practices shaped Kerala's cultural landscapes [14]. This ecological turn illuminated Kerala's environmental distinctiveness but often underplayed its transoceanic connections.

More recent perspectives challenge these insular readings by situating Kerala within Indian Ocean and global history frameworks. Argued that "the Indian Ocean formed an interactive arena of commerce and culture," where South Indian ports functioned as nodal points. [15], reinforced this by emphasizing Malabar's role in the monsoon system and long-distance maritime exchange. Comparative Southeast Asian studies echo this reframing, highlighting the shared trajectories of port-polities, ritual landscapes, and material cultures [17, 10]. The historiographic record thus illustrates both the richness and the limitations of past approaches. Early antiquarian and nationalist frameworks privileged typology and agrarianism; ecological readings illuminated adaptation but muted maritime entanglements. By contrast, Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian perspectives foreground Kerala as a dynamic participant in interconnected systems. This reframing not only expands the interpretive horizon of Kerala's archaeology but also situates it

within comparative debates on cultural flows and maritime exchange across Asia.

Key Findings and Arguments

The cumulative analysis underscores Kerala's archaeology as a field shaped by ecological adaptation, ritual monumentality, and maritime exchange, yet one that gains [3], meaning when situated within Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian horizons. Several key findings emerge from the evidence.

First, early settlement strategies reveal strong parallels with Southeast Asia's agricultural frontiers. Archaeobotanical remains of millet and rice in Kerala complement parallel findings in mainland and island Southeast Asia, suggesting convergent strategies of cultivation and landscape management [3,33]. These correspondences illustrate that Kerala's ecological niches were part of broader agro-cultural dynamics across Asia.

Second, the monumental traditions of Kerala resonate with shared ritual idioms across the Bay of Bengal. Dolmens, cists, and urn burials parallel jar burials in the Philippines and stone-circle complexes in Vietnam, demonstrating common symbolic strategies for negotiating death and memory [8,10]. These parallels highlight how ritual landscapes were not bounded by regional frontiers but formed part of transoceanic repertoires.

Third, coastal archaeology provides the clearest empirical evidence of Kerala's integration into long-distance trade. Excavations at Pattanam/Muziris have revealed amphorae, Roman coins, Indo-Pacific beads, and Chinese ceramics, confirming Kerala's central role in Indian Ocean circuits [31,25]. These finds align with comparative material from Arikamedu, Oc Eo, and Berenike, underscoring Kerala's function as a nodal site in maritime networks spanning the Mediterranean to Southeast Asia [17].

Fourth, the historiographic trajectory demonstrates the limits of regional and typological approaches. While colonial antiquarians emphasized classification [19], nationalist historians stressed agrarian and caste frameworks [1]. Later ecological studies highlighted adaptation (2005) but muted transoceanic entanglements. Recent Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian studies reposition Kerala as a dynamic participant in interconnected systems [15].

The evidence therefore substantiates three core arguments. First, Kerala's archaeological record demonstrates that local practices were embedded in wider Indian Ocean dynamics. Second, its monuments and ports illustrate shared cultural and economic repertoires that linked South India with Southeast Asia and China. Third, historiographic re-evaluations reveal the need for integrative frameworks that balance ecological, ritual, and maritime dimensions. By foregrounding these findings, the study reframes Kerala's archaeology as central rather than peripheral to the longue

durée of Indian Ocean history. The Malabar Coast emerges not simply as a regional landscape but as a critical node in transoceanic connectivity, where ecological niches, ritual traditions, and maritime exchanges converged to shape shared cultural trajectories across Asia.

Implications

The analysis of Kerala's archaeological horizons carries implications that extend beyond regional scholarship. For Southeast Asian archaeology, the parallels between megalithic traditions in Kerala and mortuary practices in Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia invite comparative research into shared ritual repertoires and their circulation across the Bay of Bengal. For Indian Ocean studies, the empirical record of Pattanam/Muziris demonstrates that South Indian ports were integral to maritime circuits linking the Mediterranean, West Asia, Southeast Asia, and China, underscoring the need for multi-nodal models of connectivity rather than linear diffusion. For comparative historiography, the layered interpretations of Kerala's past from antiquarian typologies to Indian Ocean frameworks illustrate how shifting academic lenses have shaped understandings of transoceanic linkages. Future research should therefore integrate ecological, ritual, and maritime dimensions in cross-regional analyses, foregrounding the Indian Ocean as a shared cultural arena rather than a boundary between continental traditions.

Conclusion

This study establishes three categorical arguments based on the archaeological and historiographic record of Kerala. First, Kerala's cultural horizons cannot be confined to regional frameworks. Early settlements, with archaeobotanical evidence of rice and millet, reflect strategies that parallel Southeast Asia's agricultural frontiers [3,33]. Megalithic monuments such as dolmens and urn burials correspond with mortuary traditions in Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, revealing shared ritual idioms across the Bay of Bengal [8,10]. These findings demonstrate that Kerala's record belongs to a transoceanic repertoire of subsistence and symbolic practices.

Second, the archaeological evidence of Kerala's ports substantiates its role as a nodal site in the longue durée of Indian Ocean commerce. Excavations at Pattanam/Muziris yielded amphorae, Roman coins, Indo-Pacific beads, and Chinese ceramics, directly confirming sustained connectivity from the Mediterranean to Southeast Asia and China [31, 25, 17]. These finds align Kerala with a chain of emporia, including Oc Eo and Berenike, that structured ancient maritime circuits. The empirical record therefore situates the Malabar Coast not as a marginal outlet but as a central

actor in transoceanic flows of commodities, technologies, and ideas. Third, historiographic traditions illustrate both the richness and the limitations of interpretations of Kerala’s past. Colonial catalogues emphasized typology [19,27], nationalist historians framed megaliths within agrarian-state narratives [1], and ecological approaches underscored adaptation [14]. More recent Indian Ocean perspectives reframe Kerala as integral to interconnected systems [15]. This historiographic layering confirms that Kerala’s

archaeology must be interpreted through integrative frameworks that balance ecology, ritual, and maritime connectivity. Taken together, these arguments reposition Kerala’s archaeology as central to the study of the Indian Ocean world. The Malabar Coast emerges as both a distinctive ecological niche and a critical hub where local practices and global flows converged. By demonstrating empirical parallels with Southeast Asia and material integration into transoceanic networks, this study shows that Kerala’s horizons are not peripheral but constitutive of shared cultural trajectories across Asia.

Table 1: Appendix – Excavated Megalithic Remains in Kerala.

Site	District	Taluk / Locality	Monument Type	Coordinates	Year (Excavation / Report)	Primary Source
Mangadu	Kollam	Kollam Taluk	Cairn circles; Urn burial	N08°55'13" E076°36'57"	1992 (report)	Satyamurthy 1992; Heritage 2021–22 Table 1
Valiyapadam	Kollam	Kunnathur Taluk	Megalithic burials	–	1989–90 (IAR)	IAR 1989–90 (Heritage 2021–22 Table 1)
Poredam	Kollam	Kottarakkara Taluk	Megalithic remains	–	1989–90 (IAR) / 1993 report	IAR 1989–90; Rajendran 1993 (Heritage 2021–22 Table 1)
Aripa	Kollam	Kottarakkara Taluk	Cist	N08°50'07" E077°01'35"	1990–91 (IAR) / 1995 report	IAR 1990–91; Rajendran & Badam 1995 (Heritage 2021–22 Table 1)
Karimpalur	Kollam	Pathanapuram Taluk	Urn burial	–	1991–92 (IAR)	IAR 1991–92 (Heritage 2021–22 Table 1)
Thazhuthala	Kollam	Kollam Taluk	Cist	–	2009 (news report)	<i>The Hindu</i> 2009 (Heritage 2021–22 Table 1)

Oliyani / Thakadi (Kunnonni)	Kottayam	Meenachil Taluk	Cist burials (2)	N09°38'42.5" E076°50'04.8"	2005 excavation	Rajendran 2005 (Jose 2020 – Meenachil study)
Kadanad (KND I–III: Mattathilpara, Injukave, Kurumannu)	Kottayam	Meenachil Taluk	Cists; transepted dolmenoid cist	–	2008 (ASI excavations)	Nambirajan & Kumaran 2011; Jose 2020
Enadimangalam	Pathanamthitta	Adoor Taluk	Two-chambered cist burial (with port-holes)	–	2019 excavation (published 2024)	Kerala University excavation; WJARR 2024

Table 2: Appendix – Ancient Ports of Kerala and Indian Ocean Networks.

Site / Port	District	Nature of Remains / Evidence	Key Finds (Excavations / Surface)	Period (approx.)	Sources / Reports
Muziris (Pattanam)	Ernakulam	Urban/port settlement; large-scale excavation since 2007	Roman amphorae, terra sigillata, beads, glass, iron objects, Chera coins, Indian Red Ware, botanical remains	1st c. BCE – 5th c. CE	Pattanam Excavations, KCHR (2007–); Cherian 2015; Tomber 2008
Barace / Bacare (identified with Kollam)	Kollam	Historical references (Periplus, Cosmas Indicopleustes)	Imported ceramics (Chinese porcelain, Islamic glazed ware), coins, glass beads	Early Historic – Medieval	Periplus of the Erythraean Sea; Archaeological Survey reports; Selvakumar 2010
Tyndis (near Ponnani)	Malappuram	Mentioned in Sangam texts and Greco-Roman sources	Surface finds: Rouletted Ware, amphora sherds; inland bead workshops	Early Historic (1st c. BCE – 3rd c. CE)	Wheeler et al. 1946; Gurukkal & Varier 1999
Beypore (Vaypura)	Kozhikode	Traditional shipbuilding centre, Indian Ocean hub	Medieval Arab dhow remains; boatbuilding tradition; ceramics in vicinity	Medieval – Modern	Pearson 2006; Prange 2018
Vizhinjam	Thiruvananthapuram	Natural harbour; excavations and surveys	Amphorae, ceramics, Mediterranean coins; early medieval port structures	1st c. BCE – Medieval	IAR 1990–91; Selvakumar 2010
Kollam (Quilon)	Kollam	Port town; medieval Chinese trade hub	Porcelain, celadon, glazed ware, Chinese coins, inscriptions	9th – 15th c. CE	Sen 2003; Selvakumar 2010; IISG 2012
Kottapuram (Chera fort)	Thrissur	Fortified riverine port (Periyar delta)	Chera coins, beads, medieval ceramics	Early Historic – Medieval	KCHR 2010
Valiyaparamba & Ezhimala (ancient naval base)	Kasaragod	Strategic maritime centre mentioned in Sangam literature	Surface finds; literary evidence of naval bases	Early Historic	Gurukkal & Varier 1999
Muziris (Pattanam)	Ernakulam	Urban/port settlement; large-scale excavation since 2007	Roman amphorae, terra sigillata, beads, glass, iron objects, Chera coins, Indian Red Ware, botanical remains	1st c. BCE – 5th c. CE	Pattanam Excavations, KCHR (2007–); Cherian 2015; Tomber 2008

Glossary Notes (Table 1)

Excavations across Kerala reveal the richness and diversity of its megalithic tradition. At Mangadu (Kollam), cairn circles and urn

burials yielded iron implements and ceramic vessels, pointing to both technological skill and symbolic ritual offerings (Satyamurthy 1992). Sites such as Valiyapadam and Poredam confirm the wide geographical spread of mortuary traditions in Kollam district during the late Iron Age, although finds here are less extensively documented (IAR 1989–90; Rajendran 1993). The cist at Aripa, excavated in 1990–91, contained skeletal remains, iron artifacts, and faunal traces, later interpreted as evidence of ritual feasting (Rajendran & Badam 1995). Similarly, Karimpalur produced urn burials that reinforce the recurring association between ceramic funerary assemblages and iron weaponry. A more recent discovery at Thazhuthala (2009) gained attention through media reports, underscoring the continuing discovery of surface-visible cists in the coastal belt. In the Meenachil basin (Kottayam), the 2005 excavations at Oliyani / Thakadi exposed cist burials containing iron objects and beads, while the ASI campaigns at Kadanad (2008) revealed dolmenoid cists with multiple interments, one notable for its transepted chamber design (Nambirajan & Kumaran 2011). These finds highlight architectural diversity and regional adaptations in mortuary practice (Jose 2020). Finally, the 2019 Kerala University excavation at Enadimangalam (Pathanamthitta) brought to light a rare double-chambered cist with port-holes. Grave goods included iron implements, beads, and ceramics, situating the site within a broader network of Iron Age exchange while also offering new insights into ritual symbolism and community identity in south Kerala (WJARR 2024). Together, these excavated sites not only establish the chronological and cultural breadth of Kerala's megalithic horizon but also demonstrate how systematic archaeology, from the IAR seasons of the late 20th century to recent university-led projects, has progressively refined our understanding of Iron Age social structures, mortuary variability, and inter-regional connections.

Glossary Notes (Table 2)

The archaeology of Kerala's ports reveals a continuous history of maritime connectivity across the Indian Ocean world. The Pattanam excavations (Muziris) have yielded unparalleled evidence of Indo-Mediterranean trade: fragments of Roman amphorae, terra sigillata, glass bowls, Indo-Pacific beads, and botanical traces of black pepper, all corroborating the Periplus account of spice exports [32,25]. Inland craft production, especially bead workshops, highlights Kerala's integration into Indian Ocean commodity circuits. At Vizhinjam, excavations recovered amphorae and ceramics that parallel the Muziris assemblage, suggesting multiple coastal nodes linked to Mediterranean trade. Tyndis, mentioned in Sangam poems and Greco-Roman texts, produced Rouletted Ware and amphora fragments, marking it as another Chera entrepôt (Wheeler et al.

1946). In the medieval period, Kollam (Quilon) emerged as a hub of Chinese trade, with porcelain, celadon, and glazed Islamic ware in abundance. Arab dhow-building traditions at Beypore further illustrate Kerala's enduring shipbuilding role in the Western Indian Ocean [15]. Kottapuram, at the Periyar delta, functioned as a fortified river-port, linking hinterland pepper-producing zones with maritime routes. Northern centres such as Ezhimala and Valiyaparamba are remembered in Sangam sources as naval bases, highlighting Kerala's military as well as mercantile roles in the oceanic sphere. Together, these finds underscore Kerala's position not as a peripheral coast but as a nodal hinge in the Indian Ocean world, where the archaeology of ports, ceramics, coins, and shipbuilding traditions substantiates textual accounts of sustained global connections from the Iron Age through the early modern era [35-43].

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