

# The Historical Background of Artefacts Excavated At Keeladi

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## **Abstract**

The Keeladi excavations in Tamil Nadu exposed the urban civilization that thrived between the 6th century BCE and 1st century CE. Sited on the banks of the Vaigai River, Keeladi has provided valuable evidence of early Tamil society through the discovery of artefacts such as gold ornaments, beads, terracotta figurines, gaming pieces, pottery, and iron tools. These findings indicate a literate, prosperous, and culturally rich community engaged in agriculture, craftsmanship, and long-distance trade. Scientific AMS radiocarbon dating confirms the antiquity of the settlement and suggests that urbanization and Tamil-Brahmi literacy emerged in Tamil Nadu earlier than previously believed. The artefacts also reflect the social life, economic prosperity, artistic skills, and recreational activities of the people. Overall, the Keeladi discoveries offer significant insights into the history, culture, and achievements of ancient Tamil civilization and reaffirm its important place in India's early historical development.

**Keywords:** Keeladi, Tamil Civilization, Archaeology, Urbanization, Tamil-Brahmi.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Vaigai river and its tributary Suruliyaru taking off from Suruli hills winds its way along Sinnamanur and Madurai and flows eastwards through a number of prosperous townships dating back to the middle ages like Tiruppuvanam, Rajagambhiram, Manamadurai, Partibanur, Paramakudi and ultimately joins the sea, after feeding the tanks of Rajasingamangalam and Ramanathapuram big tank, also supplied by it. The showers in the lines during the south - west monsoon and the heavier receipts during the north east help raise two wet crops, besides plantains, betel in the plains and cardamom on the hill slopes. The Vaigai valley head – reach was the highway for the spices grown in the Western Ghats to be taken Townships in the east. The work of Paripadal, one among the eight anthologies of sangam corpus vividly describes the greatness of the river as many as in eight long poems. The work of Maduraikanchi describes the grandeur of Madurai city. This paper attempts to bring out the historical background of Artefacts excavated at Keeladi.

### **Location of Keeladi**

The site *Keeladi* with the cultural deposit mound extending over a vast of more than 110 acres, amidst the coconut groves, is located geographically between 9 51.294°N northern latitude and 78 11.696°E eastern longitude. By road, it is 13 km East South of Madurai, a Temple city of Tamil Nadu. On the northern side of this potential mound runs the river Vaigai of 2 kms. On the East, exists the village Manular having its kanmaai (lake) on its northern eastern natural water source of the site. Similarly the village Agaram is located on the south eastern side of Keeladi archaeological mound. The western side of the site is engulfed by Kondagai village. All this natural location of adjoining places around this cultural mound

provides a natural epithet for the settlement contemporary to the early historical phase of Tamil history.

Previously in the year 2014-2015, 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 excavation was conducted for three seasons by the Excavation Branch - Bangalore, Archaeological Survey of India. The fourth and fifth season of excavations were taken up by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology during 2017 – 2018 and 2018 – 2019. In continuation of exposing the hidden treasures and antique of this site, the State Department of Archaeology has been conducting large scale excavation at this site. The Systematic archaeological excavations of the fifth seasons are still in progress

#### **Keeladi Excavation Team**

The Excavation team was headed by T.Udhayachandran, I.A.S., Principal Secretary and Commissioner, **Department** of Archaeology. Dr.D.Jagannathan, I.A.S., The Commissioner [ FAC], Department of Archaeology and another team was - Dr. R. Sivanantham, deputy director; Excavation Co-Director - Dr.J.Basker, Archaeological officer(i\c); Excavation Expert M.Seran;Archaeologists-J.Ranjith, M.Prabhakaran,T.Thangadurai, S. Nandakumar, K. Sakthivel, B.Asaithambi ; Surveyor - T.Thangavel, executive engineer, K.Olimalik,Asst.Executive Engineer; Chemist - P. Kaleeswaran Chemist; P.Senthilkumar, Assistant Chemist; On site Supporting - Institute of Epigraphy students (2017 – 2018 & 2019) M. Muthukaruppu, Office Assistant; P.Senthilkumar, Driver ; Technical Assistance - D.Prakash, Superintendent Administrative Supporting; Staff -V. Sivanandam, Assistant Director,(H.Q); R.Kavitha, Assistant Accounts Officer; D.Sridevi, Superintendent ; N.Nagrathinam, Superintendent ; B. Mythili, Superintendent; B.Nagesh, Assistant; G.Umavathy, Assistant ; Thiru S. Anbunambi, Cashier ; Drawings prepared - M.Ramesh, Research Assistant

#### **Keeladi 2600 Years Old Culture**

The six carbon samples collected by the Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamil Nadu, from the fourth season ( 2018 ) of excavations at Keeladi were sent to Beta Analytic Lab, Florida, USA for AMS dating and the reports have been received. The dates of all six samples fall between the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. The samples collected at the depth of 353 cm goes back to end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and another at the depth of 200 cm goes back to early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. As there is a considerable deposit below the dated layer and also above the layers, the Keeladi cultural deposit could be safely dated between 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and 1<sup>st</sup> century CE

After analyzing the AMS dates obtained from Keeladi excavations, prof.K.Rajan, a noted archaeologist, felt that the recent excavations at Keeladi present strong evidence as well as clear answer to some of the hitherto held hypotheses. It is generally believed that the early Historic phase of Tamil Nadu began with 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and the second urbanization did not occur in Tamil Nadu. In contrast to this, the occurrence of large scale brick structures and associated artefacts of high economic value unearthed at Keeladi suggest that the second urbanization too happened in Tamil Nadu around 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE as happened in Gangetic plains.

LikeWise, the date of 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE is considered as the date of Tamil ( Tamil-Brahmi ) based on radiometric dates recovered from Kodumanal, AlaganKulam and Porunthal excavations. But, the recent scientific dates obtained for Keeladi findings pushback the dates to another century i.e.6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

The dates for the samples collected from Lower Palaeolithic phase of Attirampakkam go back to 15 lakh years and Middle Palaeolithic phase to 3,85,000 years ago. These dates are obtained through Cosmogenic Nuclide Burial Dating methods. In The same way,

the Microlithic tools belongs to the following Microlithic\ Mesolithic phase were encountered in Tirunelveli area and also in Vaigai and Gundar river Valleys. The Neolithic culture were mostly discovered in Northwestern part of TamilNadu , particularly in Dharmapuri , Krishnagiri, Tiruvannamalai and Vellore districts. The next cultural phase of Iron Age has been dated to 2000 BCE based on the samples recovered from the megalithic monuments of Mangadu and Thelunganur villages of Salem region . The carbon samples collected from Adichchanallur urn burials go back to 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE Thus , the recent excavations and the scientific dates clearly suggest that the people were living in TamilNadu continuously for the past 15 lakhs years nd the Keeladi excavation clearly ascertained that they attained the literacy or learnt the art of writing ( Tamil – Brahmi ) as early as 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE during early Historic period .

#### **Life Style of Ancient People at Keeladi**

To understand the life style of the sangam age society, an approach of reconstructing the history of the land based on the primary sources like epigraphy, numismatics, foreigners notices, literary works and artefacts become very important.

The antiquities of Keeladi excavation really reflect the facts of the ancients life style of the society in fact, agriculture seems to be its prime occupation being supplemented by iron industr , carpentry , pottery making and weaving

#### **Precious Ornaments**

The occurrence of seven gold ornaments, copper articles , beads of gems, more than 4000 beads of semiprecious stones, glass beads , shell bangles, ivory bangle pieces , comb and terracotta objects indicate the cultural richness and economic prosperity

#### **Gamesmen and Pastimes**

The occurrence of artefacts such as dice , hop scotches and gamesmen , really reflects the pastime activities of the ancient people. Majority of the gamesmen recoverd from excavations are of terracotta . In this context , Keeladi yielded 600 hop scotches . Even now the same game is prevalent in Madurai and other regions knows as pandi or Nondivilayattu. Dices were also recovered from the site. The occurrence of single and double holed terracotta discs represents that either they were used as wheel of the toy cart or twist disc game pices . A part from these , 80 chesmen of similar shape but in different size were collected from the excavation . So , the existence of these game objects posturizes the games and pastime activities of not only of the children ,but also of the elders of the ancient society .

#### **Commerce**

The Lenthly coastal stretch of the state really becomes the causative and favourable factors for the Trans – oceanic contacts of the Tamils with other parts of the world . Moreover the favourable atmosphere of anchoring the laden ships near the coastal towns also become supporative reason of busy trade activities of the coastal towns .

During the age of sangama , the popular as a port towns carry out trade with other minor ports of thew Tamil country . At the confluence of Tamil country. At the confluence of Palar , Cauvery , Vaigai and Tamiraparani rivers of the east coast emerged with great port cities such as Vasavasamudram , Poompuhar , Alangankulam and Korkai respectively . Similarly on the western coast at the estuary of river periyar existed the Muziri – pattanam . Due to existence of many port town on the eastern and western coasts of the erstwhile Tamil country might have promoted the commercial activities of the ancient tamils with the occident and oriental world particularly with south – East Asian countries , Sri Lanka , Egypt , Rome , Greece and China . The commodities like pearl ,

gemstone , textile , steel , pepper and perfumes were exported to other countries from TamilNadu Similarly , gold , wines and horses were imported from the west .

### **Terracotta Images**

Terracotta is the pioneering art specimens of mankind. This art made up clay and burnt clay emerged first than that of stone , wood, ivory and metal . This craft doesn't require much of technology of specialized tools for shaping the contours . Just the fingers are enough for its creation. Pre – historic man shaped the stone tools with his hands. Later, to stamp his feelings in the form of rock – art used the same . Thereafter , they attempted the art of image making just with the fingers. In due course , they learnt the technique of killing the clay images to the required temperature through experiences . In this regard, considerable numbers of terracotta images were recovered from various excavated sites of TamilNadu . They generally represent various forms of human and animal beings , besides gamesmen and children toy objects of the terracotta objects objects recovered from Keeladi excavation , 13 are of human images , 3 of animals, more than 650 represent gamesmen and 35 are of ear ornaments . Other than terracotta objects, the site also yielded jewellery pieces of gold and copper . Objects of iron were also recovered. But it is to be noted that this site didn't yield any objects meant for worship so far .

## **2. CONCLUSION**

In order to reaffirm the antiquity of tamils in the world arena , the Tamil Nadu state Archaeology Department has placed the artefacts recovered from the Keeladi excavation for regressive scientific analysis and for AMS Accelerator Mass Spectrometry dating . The results received from the reputed laboratories are placed before the team of experts for their academic scrutiny . The comments and suggestions of the experts are consolidated and the same is being placed before the public for their understanding and appreciation .

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