

# On Kings Who Drove Back the Sea: Shipping, Seafaring and Naval Campaigns in the Early Cēra Kingdom

Roland FERENCZI\*

Oriental Collection, Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences  
Budapest, Hungary

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to answer the question whether the ancient Cēra kings sailed the seas and, if so, whether their technology was suitable for crossing the Indian Ocean, while it tries to summarize what we know about shipbuilding in ancient Southwest India. On the following pages, an attempt is made to introduce the most important passages of the Old Tamil Caṅkam literary sources in order to analyse their data in the light of Greek and Latin sources, and of Indian and Mediterranean inscriptions. It can be concluded that although inscriptions of Tamil traders can be found from Egypt to Thailand, and the Cēra kings built a maritime fleet for probably the first time in the history of ancient South India in order to punish their enemy, the *kaṭampu* tribe by sailing on the seas, their nautical contribution to the long-distance trade of the Arabian Sea as well as their engagement in coastal shipping can be classified as moderate and incidental in the antiquity.

## KEYWORDS

Cēra kings, South India, Caṅkam literature, Malabar Coast, Indian Ocean trade

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: ferenczi.roland@konyvtar.mta.hu

## INTRODUCTION

When Strabo travelled to Egypt (26–24 BC), he learned that, at the time when Caius Aelius Gallus was the *praefectus Aegypti*, 120 ships sailed yearly to India from Myos Hormos on the Red Sea.<sup>1</sup> In another passage, he also reported on huge maritime fleets travelling between Africa, India and the Red Sea ports.<sup>2</sup> Seeing the number of ships that arrive year on year to the shores of western India, which number certainly increased in the centuries after Strabo, it becomes necessary to examine how Old Tamil Caṅkam literature<sup>3</sup> depicts both the ships of foreigners and the ancient Tamils, and to what extent the Tamils participated in Indian Ocean trade.

## SHIPPING AND SEAFARING IN THE EARLY CĒRA KINGDOM<sup>4</sup>

Tamil history has been connected to the ocean from the beginning.<sup>5</sup> If we talk about the Cēra kingdom on the Malabar Coast, the statements of Malekandathil (2010: xii) are surely valid when he says that the ‘process of tapping the resources of the sea, a typical professional culture linked with fishing, salt-panning or a sea-borne trade, a food culture with rich ingredients of sea species, a religious culture where the sea becomes the central component of devotional practices and rituals, a social networking, where bonds established by collective sea-faring evolved over years, were made to become the basic features of the coastal societies of India [...]’. The ocean connected worlds and became a space for cultural and commercial interactions. Due to the geographical location of southern India where the maritime trade routes met, and due to its busy ports and the demand for the locally produced goods and the available Southeast Asian commodities, it soon became a strategic hub for the eastern trade of Rome, which position contributed to the economic development of the Tamil kingdoms (Fig 1).

We read in the *Akanāṇṇūru*,<sup>6</sup> an anthology of love (*akam*) poems from the 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, that gloriously crafted, *yavaṇar*-driven<sup>7</sup> (*tanta*) vessels came with gold (*poṇ*) and returned with pepper (*kaṛi*),<sup>8</sup> while the *Puranāṇṇūru*, an anthology of heroic (*puram*) poems from the 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, talks about the vessels of the *yavaṇar* bringing cool and fragrant ‘wine’ (*taṇ kamaḷ*

<sup>1</sup> Strabo, *Geogr.* II. 5. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Strabo, *Geogr.* XVII. 1. 13.

<sup>3</sup> The designation of ‘Caṅkam literature’ covers an old corpus, composed by the bards, who lived on the lands of the ancient Tamil kings, which contains thousands of love songs and heroic poems composed in the first half of the first millennium AD. For the chronology of the texts, I used Wilden 2014: 8.

<sup>4</sup> The southwestern Indian Cēra kingdom was one of the ancient Tamil kingdoms and also the first beneficiary of Indo-Roman trade relations. Their history dates back to the time of Aśoka Maurya’s (c. 268–232 BC) rule or even earlier. The territories under their control included the Malabar Coast and much of Koṅku Nāṭu.

<sup>5</sup> The rulers of ancient South Indian kingdoms have been mentioned in the edicts of Aśoka Maurya (Aśokan Rock Edict II of Mānsehrā, Rock Edict II of Gīrnār, Rock Edict II of Kālsī, Rock Edict II of Shāhbāzgarhi), which proves that their history can be traced back to at least the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, but Tamil tribes likely already ruled certain regions of South India before this.

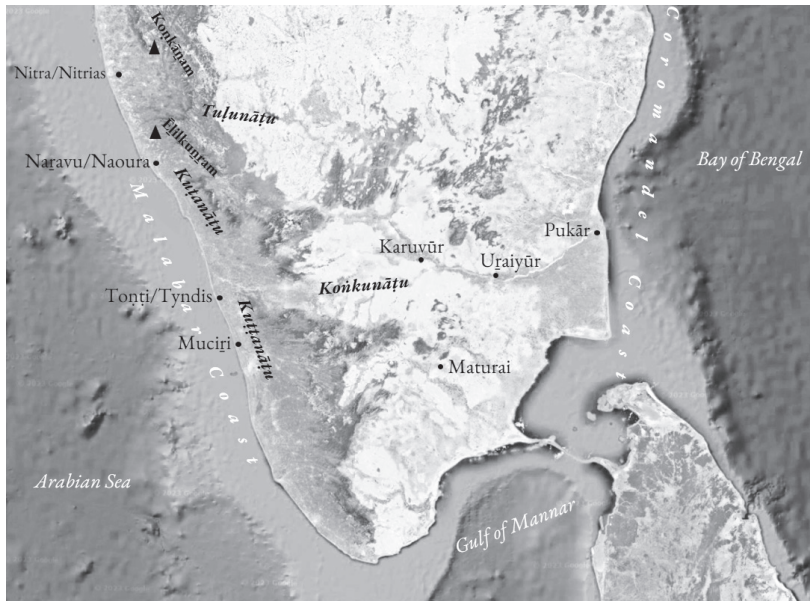
<sup>6</sup> The first part (1–120) of this work is cited from *Akanāṇṇūru* (2018), while the later poems from *Akanāṇṇūru* (1957).

<sup>7</sup> *yavaṇar*: ‘Greeks’ (< Gr. Ἴων ‘Ionian’). It is an umbrella-term which denotes non-Indian people living inside or outside the Indian peninsula. In the Caṅkam texts it seems that *yavaṇar* meant mostly the merchants of the Roman Empire, although there are cases when their identification is far from being settled.

<sup>8</sup> ‘... cēralar/cuḷḷiyam pēriyārru veṇ nurai kalaṅka/yavaṇar tanta viṇai māṇ naṅkalam/poṇṇoṭu vantu kaṛiyōṭu peyarum/vaḷam keḷu mucīri ārpṇ ēla vaḷai’ (*Akanāṇṇūru*, 149: 7–11).



*tēral*), which was consumed by the Tamil elite.<sup>9</sup> Western ships arriving in southern India were of great interest in the Tamil countries, and this may have been the inspiration for the *Alakankulam* graffito (Fig. 2), on which, according to Casson (1997, cited *apud* Mahadevan 2003: 156), a three-master Roman sailing ship can be seen from the Imperial Roman period (1–3 c. AD), portrayed by an ‘unknown Tamil artist’ (Mahadevan 2003: 155–156).



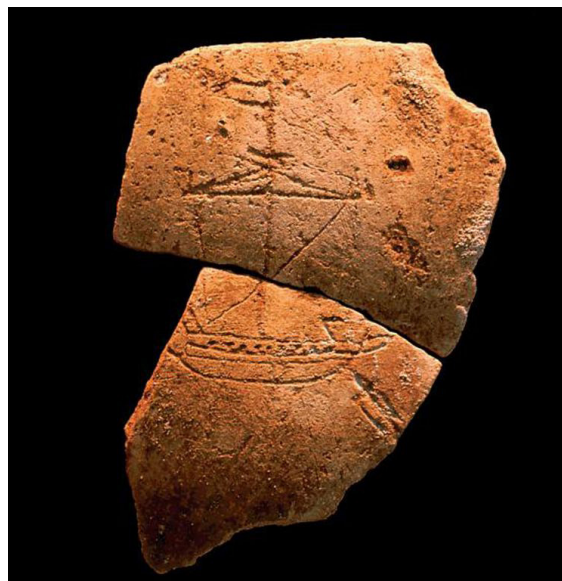
**Fig. 1** Map of important political and commercial centres of ancient South Indian history, 1<sup>st</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century AD  
[Made by the author; cartographic source: Google Maps]



**Fig. 2** A three-master Roman sailing ship on the *Alakankulam* (Tamil Nadu, India) graffito  
[Photo © [http://www.tholliyal.com/2020/07/blog-post\\_44.html](http://www.tholliyal.com/2020/07/blog-post_44.html)]

<sup>9</sup> ‘yavaṇar naṅkalam tanta taṅ kamaḷ tēral/pon cey puṇai kalatt’ ēnti nāḷum/oḷ toṭi makaḷir maṭuppa makiḷ cīrantu/ āṅku iṇitu oḷukumati ōṅku vāḷ māra’ (*Puṇanānūru*, 56: 18–21).

The *Perumpāṇāruppatai*, a poetic composition serving as a ‘guide’ for bards, composed in the 2<sup>nd</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, talks about the ‘Greek’ (*yavaṇar*) ‘goose lamps’ (*ōtima viḷakku*) of the ships in the harbour of Nīrpeyaṛru, which most probably referred to the ornamental stern called *aplustre* (Gr. ἄφλαστον), the highest curved part of the poop, which often looked like a goose neck, and was also named after it (χηνίσκος). ‘Greek’ (*yavaṇar*) vessels with ‘rare price’ (*aruvilai naṅkalam*) appear in *patikam* II of the *Patirruppattu*,<sup>10</sup> although in that case we have to keep in mind that the usage of the Tamil word *kalam* has the same sense as the English word ‘vessel’, with an ambiguous meaning that could refer to either a ‘ship’ or a ‘hollow utensil’, or equally, in many cases, an ‘ornament’ (*Madras Tamil Lexicon* 2: 778). The Roman ships involved in South Indian trade weighed at least 75 tonnes, but most of them must have been freighters of 500 tonnes, because huge spaces were needed for the ship’s crew (ναυκλήριον), to whom food was also delivered (McLaughlin 2010: 36). In his notes McLaughlin (2010: 188, n. 107) adds that the thirty-three-metre-long Quseir shipwreck suggests a type of 300 tonnes which, according to the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (ch. 57), a logbook of the ‘Red Sea’ (middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> c. AD), was a smaller type during that period. There were certainly wooden cabins and compartments on the ships for the crew, who, using the power of the monsoon winds, arrived at and departed from India in the midst of extreme weather conditions (McLaughlin 2010: 37). Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*, VI. 26. 101) learned about archers on the deck of ships, while Philostratos (*Vita Apollonii* 3. 35) reports on detachments of armed men on the merchant ships in order to help the ships go through the regions that were threatened by pirates. The ships involved in the eastern trade of Rome had enlarged mainsails (Fig. 3) to make good use of the power of the



**Fig. 3** Roman merchant ship graffito from 50–60/70 AD found in Berenike (Red Sea Coast), Egypt  
[Photo by S. E. Sidebotham]

<sup>10</sup> *Patirruppattu* is a heroic (*puṛam*) anthology probably edited around the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, which contains royal panegyrics composed exclusively for the Cēra kings between the 1<sup>st</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.



monsoon winds (McLaughlin 2010: 39), on which perhaps Greco-Roman mythological images had been painted – if the Torlonia relief's depiction is real and if its artist did not just want to fill the space available. However, Lucian (*Ploion ē Eychai*, 5) also mentioned the ornaments of the ships including paintings and a painted topsail. Taking all this evidence into account, what we can say for certain is that large merchant ships were used in South Indian trade, with which a large number of 'Greek' (mostly Egyptian Greek and Syrian) merchants and armed guards arrived at the territories of South India every year. The size of the ships may have been a marvel to the Indians, and the arrival of the merchant fleet a monumental attraction for the Tamil population. According to Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*, VI. 26. 104, 106), the sea voyage from the Red Sea to the Cēra kingdom took 70 days; the merchant ships sailed out from the Red Sea ports around July and returned from India around December or the beginning of January, so that year by year, several thousand people stayed at least for a few months as the guests of South Indian rulers.

Thus we have learned about the ships of the Roman Empire, but we have not yet mentioned the Tamil ships themselves. Interestingly, the Old Tamil sources are rather laconic on this subject. The earliest anthologies usually refer to smaller types of vessels, such as *timil* (32 attestations), *punai* (32 attestations), *ampi* (13 attestations), and *tōṇi* (5 attestations). Among these, *timil* was a seagoing boat of fishermen, *punai* was a tied raft used on rivers, saline backwaters, and in coastal areas, *ampi* was either a boat or raft used both on rivers and at sea, while *tōṇi* was most probably a canoe (or an umbrella term for smaller watercrafts?)<sup>11</sup> used between the shores and the lagoons. The Tamil word *marakkalam*, which denotes larger ships, appears only in later texts,<sup>12</sup> however, the word *kalam* ('vessel') is used in the ancient Caṅkam poems, and it certainly meant 'seafaring wooden sailing-ship' in a number of attestations.<sup>13</sup> This term was used, as we have seen before, in the cases of the *yavaṇa* ships. Another word for seagoing sailing-ship, *nāṇvāy* is attested 11 times in the Caṅkam poems.<sup>14</sup> It is of Indo-European origin (prob. < Skt. *nau* or Pers. *nāv*), and it might refer either to Tamil ships which had an Indo-European name, non-Tamil (Indian or Persian) ships sailing from the northern coasts, or a ship-type which probably reflects 'northern' knowledge in both its name and technology. However, since both the Greek (*ναῦς*) and Latin (*navis*) words are also etymologically very close to *nāṇvāy*, it cannot be entirely excluded that these passages referred to 'Greek' ships. The third word which was used to denote larger ships in Caṅkam literature is *vaṅkam*, attested 8 times in the texts plus once in the oblique case (*vaṅkattu*).<sup>15</sup> The *Madras Tamil Lexicon* (6: 3452) gives a possible etymology of *vaṅkam* as Skt. *vahya* 'vehicle', which is more than doubtful. Gurukkal (2016: 197) is of the opinion that the ships called *vaṅkam* seem to be the vessels of Vaṅga (Bengal), probably the ones called *kolandiophōnta* in the *Periplus*

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Akanāṇṇūru*, 50: 11; 344: 5; *Narriṇai*, 111: 8 (*tōṇiyar*); *Puṇanāṇṇūru*, 343: 6 (*tōṇiyāṇ*); *Puṇanāṇṇūru*, 299: 3 (*tōṇiyiṇ*).

<sup>12</sup> *Tamiḻ Ilakkīyap Pērakarāti* 1909.

<sup>13</sup> It is not an easy task to distinguish the passages where *kalam* had been used as 'jewel/ornament', 'pot' from the ones that meant 'ships', as in most cases, they could mean both (Lehmann and Malten 2007: 140). Although *kalam* means most frequently 'jewel/ornament', the meaning as 'ship' is clearly attested in passages such as *Aiṅkuruṇūru*, 192: 2; *Kalittokai*, 132: 7; 134: 24; *Akanāṇṇūru*, 149: 9; *Puṇanāṇṇūru*, 26: 2; 343: 5; *Perumpāṇāruppaṭai*, 350; *Kuṇṇutokai*, 240: 6 (*kalattiṇ*); *Kalittokai*, 5: 6 (*kalan*); *Puṇanāṇṇūru*, 338: 11 (*kalan*); 386: 14 (*kalan*); *Paripāṭal*, 10: 54 (*kalattai*).

<sup>14</sup> *Akanāṇṇūru*, 110: 18; *Narriṇai*, 295: 6; *Paṭṭiṇappālai*, 174; *Paripāṭal*, 10: 39; *Puṇanāṇṇūru*, 13: 5; 66:1; 126: 15; *Perumpāṇāruppaṭai*, 321; *Maturaikkāñci*, 83; 321; 379.

<sup>15</sup> *Akanāṇṇūru*, 255: 1; *Kalittokai*, 92: 47; *Narriṇai*, 189: 5; 258: 9 (obl. *vaṅkattu*); *Paṭṭiruppattu* 52: 4; *Paripāṭal*, 20: 16; *Puṇanāṇṇūru*, 368: 9; 400: 20; *Maturaikkāñci*, 536.





*Maris Erythraei*. Since we do not know the etymology of the word, whether it is Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic, or Dravidian, this question has to be left open. Even if Gurukkal was right concerning the etymology, the mere fact that a ship's name is derived from the word 'Vaṅga' does not mean that it is used in the Bay of Bengal, just as the catamaran (< Tam. *kaṭṭu maram* 'tied wood') is not used exclusively by Tamils. The 189<sup>th</sup> poem of the *Narriṇai*, an anthology of love poems (*akam*) from the 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, could also support Gurukkal's opinion, in which we read about a *kaṅkai vaṅkam* 'ship of the Gaṅgā/Ganges' in line 5; the poet, however, rather used these words because of the poetic figure, while its historicity is highly questionable. In any case, it is clear from the sources that *vaṅkam* ships were actually sailing on the Coromandel Coast (e.g. *Maturaikkāñci*, 536),<sup>16</sup> but that does not mean that they were not in use elsewhere, as for example it is attested in the *Paṭirruppattu*, the Cēra anthology, which has a geographical horizon that covers mostly the Malabar Coast and Koṅkunāṭu. What we surely know from other attestations is that *vaṅkam* was a huge seagoing vessel in ancient South India with a sail (*itai*) and a mast (*kūmpu*). Other meanings of *vaṅkam* such as 'tin', 'cotton', 'eggplant', 'Bengal' and so forth (*Madras Tamil Lexicon* 6: 3452), occur only in later texts dated after the Caṅkam literature. The last word that sometimes denoted 'ship' is *maram*, the Tamil word for 'wood', although in those cases the poets might talk about sea-going rafts rather than sailing vessels.<sup>17</sup> Other words for rafts and canoes such as *pakri*, *ōṭam*, and *mitavai* are *hapax legomena* in the Caṅkam corpus.<sup>18</sup>

The question arises as to whether ancient Tamils actually sailed the high seas. If we mean that they sailed with their own ships and their own crew in the open waters of the Indian Ocean to South Arabia, Egypt, or Africa, in accordance with the views of Gurukkal (2016: 198–199) and De Romanis (2020: 115), the answer is probably 'No'. However, we have pieces of evidence in the Tamil sources which might suggest that some of the Tamil rulers were able seafarers. Cōḷaṅ Karikāl Peruvaḷattāṅ (probably around the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD), for example, was 'the descendent of strong men who ruled [by means of] the action of the wind, after [they] had driven ships of the vast dark ocean.'<sup>19</sup> Gurukkal (2016: 86) is right, that this does not necessarily mean knowledge of seasonal winds and of voyaging overseas. However, it might mean that some of the Tamil rulers were engaged in coastal shipping. Gurukkal discusses another passage of the *Puraṇāṇūru*, in which we read the following sentence: '... we are similar to [those] other vessels that do not go past that route, where the gold-bringing ships (*nāvāy*) of the western sea [which belongs to] Vāṇavaṇ with enraged army, were driven.'<sup>20</sup> In conclusion, again, Gurukkal (2016: 87) is right, because here what we see is the Cēra king, to whom the western sea (*kuṭa kaṭal*) belongs, where there are gold-bringing ships (probably not of the Cēras). However, this poet interestingly records a ban suffered by some ships that could not enter the waters under the sovereignty of the Cēra kings. Nevertheless, the following excerpt seemed to have escaped the attention of Gurukkal, who, although he mentioned it in a footnote (Gurukkal 2016: 55, n. 75), did not appreciate its significance:

<sup>16</sup> The *Maturaikkāñci* is a classical Tamil poetic composition on Maturai probably from the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see *Paṭirruppattu*, 76: 4; *Narriṇai*, 30: 8.

<sup>18</sup> See *Paṭṭiṇappālai*, 30; *Akaṇāṇūru*, 101: 12; *Paripāṭal*, 6: 35 (*mitavaiyar*).

<sup>19</sup> 'naḷi irum munnir nāvāy ṍṭṭi/vali toḷil āṇṭa uravōṇ maruka' (*Puraṇāṇūru* 66: 1–2). The interpretation of Gurukkal (2016: 86: '[l]iterally, it only means that the chieftain belongs to the line of great naval fighters capable of commanding the wind to blow when the ship is halted in the sea [...]') seems to be a bit far from the exact meaning of the words.

<sup>20</sup> 'ciṇam miku tāṇai vāṇavaṇ kuṭa kaṭal/polan taru nāvāy ṍṭṭiya avvaḷi pira kalam celkalāṇaiyēm ...' (*Puraṇāṇūru* 126: 14–16). Here *celkalāṇaiyēm* can be analysed as a negative peyareccam with a special sandhi in which the final 'a' retains (Subramoniam 1962: 452) + pronominal noun in denominative function (*aṇaiyēm*).



The lover (*kātalar*) is separated [because of his] manly duty/work, while the captain (*nīkān*) departs, having known the side with bright flames of the storied [light]houses (*mātam*), [towards] the vast port (*tuṛai*) with firm sand that towers [like] peaks, while the wind with the nature of moving fast (*vaṅkūl*) drives [his ship] without getting lazy (*acaiv*’ *iṇru*) either day or night, and the ship (*vaṅkam*), which is fearful as when the earth rises,<sup>21</sup> cuts through the open waters (*nīr iṭai*) of the huge sea with flesh-reeking waves.<sup>22</sup>

It possibly shows a real or fictitious story of a South Indian man who decides to leave his lover for a shorter or longer period of time for the sake of maritime trade or other business on the other shores of the sea. Of course, a port full of sand can be imagined anywhere on the map, but it is also possible, taking into account the long, day and night travel, that we are dealing with a brief schematic description of South Arabian or Red Sea ports.<sup>23</sup> We thus see the maritime trade from a closer perspective: the tiresome travel on the open seas, the Tamils who managed to get on the deck, and the actual lighthouses which suggest a surprisingly modern infrastructure at the early Tamil harbours.

In another poem of the *Narriṇai*, we see the many kinds of goods (*paṇṇiyam* < Skt. *panya*) ‘that had come, when the wind brought [them] from many different lands.’<sup>24</sup> Another poem talks about a shipwreck, when we see ‘a plank grabbed by many, since they fell, agitated because [their] wooden [ship] had been turned upside down in the sea.’<sup>25</sup> In the *Kalittokai*, an anthology of love poems (*akam*) probably from the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, we see again ‘those whose manly work had been destroyed by the wind seizing the ships on the extensive dark ocean.’<sup>26</sup> The *Akanāṇṇūru*’s 152<sup>nd</sup> poem also talks about the wealth-bringing (*taṇam* < Skt. *dhanam*) vessels (*kalam*) of the big harbour with seashore groves which were broken (*citaiya*).<sup>27</sup> In the later *Paripāṭal*, an anthology of poems with mixed metres probably composed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, we see again a ‘captain who knows the directions, who repairs [his] scattered ship (*vaṅkam*) with glue.’<sup>28</sup> In all these passages we can see maritime activities with their unfortunate mishaps on the South Indian shores, in which Tamils must have been involved (or they organized it themselves). If there had always been foreign merchants in these cases, the poets would probably have emphasized their outsider status as usual. Regarding the question of Tamil shipping, we could mention other passages that refer to strong coracles,<sup>29</sup> to the great quantity of goods showering down like the monsoon rain

<sup>21</sup> Eva Wilden’s comment is on that, what she kindly shared with me from her upcoming edition: ‘[p]erhaps this is a reference to a creation myth, such as Varāha taking the earth out of the water, and most likely this has to be read as a metaphor for size, which would make this an allusion to overseas trade.’

<sup>22</sup> ‘*Uḷaku kiḷarntaṇṇa urukeḷu vaṅkam/pulavuttiraiṇ peruṅkaṭal nīr iṭaiṇ pōḷa/iravum ellaiyum acaivīṇru āki/virai celal iyaṛkai vaṅkūl āṭṭak/kōṭ’ uyar tiṇi maṇal akaṇ tuṛai nīkān/mātam oḷ eri maruṅk’ aṛint’ oyya/āḷ vīṇaiṇ pirinta kātalar ...*’ (*Akanāṇṇūru*, 255: 1–7).

<sup>23</sup> It is also possible to read this passage as an implied simile behind the infinitive clause, as if the departure of the ship was compared to the parting of the lover without connecting the hero’s person to the departing ship. So the hero is not on the deck but as just the ship, his return carries hope for certain people in his village. This time thanks to Eva Wilden for discussing this with me and highlighting the possibility of seeing the simile behind the lines as well.

<sup>24</sup> Transl. by Eva Wilden. ‘*vēru pal nāṭṭiṇ kāl tara vanta/pala uru paṇṇiyam ...*’ (*Narriṇai*, 31: 8–9).

<sup>25</sup> Transl. by Eva Wilden. ‘*kaṭal maram kaviḷnt’-eṇa kalaṅki uṭaṇ vīḷpu/palar koḷ palakai ...*’ (*Narriṇai*, 30: 8–9).

<sup>26</sup> ‘*nīḷ irum munnīr vaḷi kalaṇ vauvaḷiṇ/āḷ vīṇaiṅk’ aḷintōr ...*’ (*Kalittokai* 5: 6–7).

<sup>27</sup> ‘*iranku nīrp parappiṇ kāṇalam peruntuṛai/taṇam taru naṅkalam citaiya ...*’ (*Akanāṇṇūru*, 152: 6–7).

<sup>28</sup> ‘*citaiyum kalattai payiṇāṇ tiruttum ticai aṛi nīkāṇum ...*’ (*Paripāṭal*, 10: 54–55).

<sup>29</sup> *Paṭṭiṇappālai*, 30.



that comes from the sea to the land and then flows from the land to the sea,<sup>30</sup> to the elephant-like swinging movement of ships in the harbour,<sup>31</sup> etc., but from these texts we are rarely able to reconstruct whether these poets were talking about coastal shipping or sea voyages, Tamil or non-Tamil merchants.

In South India, archaeologists have not yet found much to suggest Tamil shipping, whether by sea or by river. The most important of these findings was the wooden dugout canoe of Paṭṭaṇam with a wharf (Fig. 4), which was excavated in 2007 by the Kerala Council for Historical Research. It was certainly the same type of watercraft as the *monoxylus linter* of Pliny the Elder, or the *tōni* of the backwaters in the *Puranāṇūru* 343: 6.



**Fig. 4** Dugout canoe of Paṭṭaṇam (Kerala, India) with a wharf dated to 36 BC–24 AD [Photo courtesy of P. J. Cherian]

On the other hand, we can also point to the South Indian maritime trade by examining the evidence of Tamil trade outside South India. Thus we also find traces of South Indian traders in the Roman Empire. The ambassadors of the Tamil Pāṇṭiya kings, after, according to the tradition, an adventurous four-year journey, finally reached the borders of the Roman Empire by land. Strabo also became aware of the Pāṇṭiya embassy, as he mentions the king of Pandion, who sent various precious gifts to Augustus Caesar to honour him.<sup>32</sup> Florus mentions the arrival of Indian

<sup>30</sup> *Paṭṭiṇappālai*, 126–132.

<sup>31</sup> *Paṭṭiṇappālai*, 172–175.

<sup>32</sup> Strabo, *Geogr.* XV. 1. 5.





ambassadors, as well as those whom he calls Seres. Because of the context given, it is conceivable<sup>33</sup> that they were ambassadors of the Cēra kings (although the same term is used to refer to the Chinese).<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the kings of the Cōlas also sent their envoys to Rome, so it is also possible that the tigers presented to Augustus in 11 AD were gifts from the Cōla kings who used the tiger as a dynastic symbol.<sup>35</sup> Having arrived in Rome, the South Indian ambassadors laid the foundations for trade cooperation, or strengthened the already existing relations.<sup>36</sup> The presence of Indian traders in Egypt is confirmed by a papyrus text found at Oxyrhynchus (P. Oxy. 413). According to Salomon (1991: 731–735), in the text called ‘Charition mime’ which could be dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD, and which imitates Euripides’ drama Iphigenia in Tauris, it is likely that Old Kannada words had been preserved in Greek transcription in the gibberish-like speeches of the Indian heroes (Hall 2012: 132–134). However, it is also possible that the Indian language in this text was Tuḷu, another Dravidian language of ancient Tuḷunāṭu (Rai 1985). In Kanāyis or Wādi Miāḷ, during an excavation at the temple of Seti I, an inscription was found which had been offered to Pan by an Indian merchant in gratitude for his fortunate journey, whose name, Sophōn Indos, according to Salomon (1991: 735), could have been the Hellenized form of Subhānu. In Berenice and around the ancient Red Sea ports numerous excavated findings suggest an Indian presence in the early centuries AD (Tomber 2008: 83–87), and we also have evidence of a South Arabian presence (Strauch 2012: 373). There are likewise Brāhmī inscriptions in Cave Hoq of Suqutrā made by Indians (Strauch 2012: 286–360). The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* in chapter 30 writes about Indian merchants at Suqutrā (Dioskuridēs), while the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter refers to sailors of Limyrikē (Malabar Coast), who accidentally moored there. This may be true as there are no traces of the presence of Tamils in the area. Although based on Tomber (2008: 155), Strauch (2012: 371) talks about ‘South Indian dominance’ in trade activities with Egypt, most evident in the archaeological finds and the goods transported; however, it does not necessarily follow that there was a maritime dominance controlled by South Indians. Nonetheless, at Myos Hormos in the Red Sea (now Quseir-al-Qadim), archaeologists have found fragments of amphorae inscribed with Tamil Brāhmī, on one of which the text *pāṇai ori* can be read, which means, according to Mahadevan, ‘pot [suspended in] a rope net’.<sup>37</sup> A reference to this custom can be found in *Kalittokai* (9: 2: *urit tāḷnta karakamum*). We see two personal names (Kaṇaṇ and Cātaṇ) on other ostraca that have been found at Myos Hormos, and another name (Korrapūmaṇ) that has been found on a potsherd in Berenice. Another Tamil Brāhmī inscription was found at Khor Rori, Oman, which, according to K. Rajan, is an excerpt from the name of an older, highly respected merchant (*ṇantai kīraṇ*). Beyond India, a Brāhmī inscription in Prākṛt, which included Tamil Brāhmī characters, was found in Thailand. The gold plates of Band Kluay from the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD bear a short inscription about a ship captain (*nāvika*) by the name of Brahaspati Sarma/Br̥haspati Śarma (*brahaspati nāvikasa sarmasa*).<sup>38</sup> It is interesting, because his name suggests a Brāhmaṇa origin (Śarma), which would not have

<sup>33</sup> Agreeing with McLaughlin (2010: 116)

<sup>34</sup> Florus, *Epitome*. II. 34. 62.

<sup>35</sup> Cassius Dio, *Historiae*, LIV.

<sup>36</sup> For more, see Jairazbhoy 1963: 110–113.

<sup>37</sup> Tamil Brahmi Script in Egypt. *The Hindu*. November 21, 2007. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tamil-brahmi-script-in-egypt/article1952611.ece> (downloaded: 28<sup>th</sup> August 2023)

<sup>38</sup> Thailand artefacts show links to S India. *Times of India*. August 24, 2010. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/thailand-artefacts-show-links-to-s-india/articleshow/6423797.cms> (downloaded: 28<sup>th</sup> August 2023)



allowed him to be involved in seafaring activities.<sup>39</sup> However, there are stories in which Brāhmaṇa sea-captains appear.<sup>40</sup> In Khlong Thom, Thailand, a rectangular touchstone (3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> c. AD) of a Tamil goldsmith called Perum Patan, whose name might have meant the ‘great goldsmith’ (< Tam. *ponpattan*),<sup>41</sup> was found, on which the following inscription can be read: *perumpatan kal*, ‘the [touch]stone [of] Perum Patan’ (Ray 2019: 242). Excavated fragments with Tamil Brāhmī inscriptions have also been unearthed in the excavations of Tissamahārāma, Sri Lanka, which further reveal the complexity of trade relations.

Turning to our main topic, the Cēras had a slightly different relationship with the ocean. Sesha Aiyar (1937: 142) states that although the ‘[s]hip-building industry does not appear to be mentioned in Śāṅgam works; but the people of the Cēra country were familiar with navigation of the high seas and from early times they had trade relations with foreign nations’. Even if we cannot substantiate Sesha Aiyar’s suggestions for the earliest (direct) sea trade relations, he is right when he talks about the navigation of the Cēras. The Caṅkam works are again quite laconic for some reason, but we have certain references that concern the seafaring of the Cēras. The author of this paper may add further elaboration in a future edition of this article in order to provide more context for some of the more enigmatic passages relating to sea tracks of the Cēra kings.

Neṭuñcēralātan (probably around the 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD) seems to be the first among the Cēras who was known for his seafaring activities. During his reign, he led several campaigns, camped and fought together with his army, and thus he earned the honourable royal title Imaiya-varampan, an epithet that means 1. ‘he whose limit (*varampu*) is the Imaiya/Himālaya’; 2. ‘he who is beloved (*ampan*) by the celestials (*imaiyavar*)’, cf. Pā. *devānāmpiya*, an epithet used by ancient kings e.g. Aśoka Maurya. This title brought the king closer to northern traditions. In *patikam* II of the *Patirruppattu*, we see Neṭuñcēralātan,

...[who] established [the rule of] his [royal-]staff (*kōl*), so that Tamiḷakam<sup>42</sup> with fences of the rumbling sea was shining, [who] made the *āriyar*<sup>43</sup> of famous tradition humble with [his] eminent glory, [who] shackled the worthless *yavaṇas* of harsh speech, poured oil on [their] heads, pinioned [their] hands behind [their] back, and took [their] good vessels of rare value together with [their] gems (*vayiram*) and gave [them all] to greatly valorous, old villages...<sup>44</sup>

In this probably later poem, which was perhaps composed once the whole text was written down, the words *aruvilai naṅkalam* connected to the ‘Greeks’ (*yavaṇar*) make different interpretations possible. In my translation, I agree with Zvelebil who translates it as ‘vessels’, though in this way the problem can be elegantly avoided, because the word ‘vessel’ is just as ambiguous as the Tamil word *kalam*. Nonetheless, Zvelebil translates it as ‘precious beautiful vessels’ and suggests *amphorae* with a question mark in brackets, which would indeed be a logical interpretation, but cannot

<sup>39</sup> *Māṇavadharmaśāstra* III. 158.

<sup>40</sup> For example, the father of the Tibetan *siddha* Padampa Sangye (Pha Dam pa sangs rgyas), who was probably born in South India, was a Brāhmaṇa sea-captain (Martin 2015: 339).

<sup>41</sup> The *Madras Tamil Lexicon* (4: 2461) even refers to the caste title of the goldsmiths as *pattar*.

<sup>42</sup> Tamiḷakam: the Tamil country (*Puṇanāpūru*, 168: 18; *Madras Tamil Lexicon* 3: 1757). It means perhaps those lands where Tamil was spoken, so it seems to be not a political, but a cultural region.

<sup>43</sup> *āriyar* < Skt. *ārya*. As an umbrella-term, *āriyar* denotes non-Tamil people of India.

<sup>44</sup> ‘*imil kaṭal vēlit tamiḷakam viḷaṅkat/taṅ kōl niṟiit takai cāl ciṟappoṭu/pēr icai marapiṇ āriyar vaṇakki/nayaṇ il val col yavaṇarp piṇittu/ney talaip peytu kai piṇ koḷii/arum vilai nal kalam vayiramōṭu koṇṭu/perum viṇal mūt’ ūrt tantu...*’ *Patirruppattu* II. 5–11.



be verified. Pierre Meile (1941: 118) offers ‘des bons bijoux de grand prix’, which is closer to the original text and excludes the possibility of interpreting the word *kalam* as a ‘seafaring’ vessel. Aruḷampalavaṇār (1960: 116) glosses *naṅkalam* as *aṇikalam* ‘jewel’, ‘ornament’, while McLaughlin (2010: 135) and De Romanis (1997: 143, n. 108) also understand *kalam* as ‘jewel’. We should keep in mind the slight possibility that here *kalam* meant ship, but I think Romila Thapar (2002: 233) went a little too far when she interpreted this story as a defeat of a ‘Yavana fleet’. However, Marr (1985 [1958]: 282) claims that the *yavaṇar* are not even mentioned in the old text but added by modern writers following the old commentary. In fact, Marr is right since neither the oldest manuscript that contains the *patikams* (UVSL = U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar Library, Ceṇṇai, 98a [10. r. 6]), nor the other paper manuscripts have *yavaṇar* attested, on the other hand, we read *vaṇcol [i]yavar* (‘base men with harsh words?’).<sup>45</sup> In UVSL 559 (p. 30) and UVSL 439 (p. 106), we see emendations of *yavar* to *yavaṇar* made by someone, perhaps U. Vē. Cāminātaiyar himself. The source of the emendation was undoubtedly the old commentator who reads and understands ‘*itaṇ patikatt*’ (*i*) *yavaṇar piṇitt*’ *eṇratu* ...’ [10. r. 2], while the cause of emendation was, as Eva Wilden pointed out during consultations with the author of this article,<sup>46</sup> the hypometrical nature itself of the transmitted text. I think it is possible to agree with the old commentator, whose confident identification is certainly supported by those passages of the *Cilappatikāram*, which mention ‘the ‘Greeks’ with harsh words/barbarous tongue’ (*vaṇcol yavaṇar*),<sup>47</sup> while putting an emphasis on the hypometrical obscurity of the line (which again supports the emendation) and on the fact that the word *yavaṇar* is de facto not attested in the *Patirruppattu* (which goes against the emendation). However, what we can certainly say about this passage is that firstly the *yavaṇar* had precious articles (rather jewels than ships) and harsh speech,<sup>48</sup> and secondly, that they were treated as prisoners. What we cannot deduce from the text is whether the Cēra king met the ‘Greeks’ on land or at sea. Of course, it is conceivable that the Greeks in question here are privateers, Indo-Greek merchants or soldiers, who helped other kings at sea and therefore were punished. They might have been traders from the Persian Gulf, Greeks from Dhenukākāṭaka (Chandra 1977: 103–104), or *yavaṇa* mariners employed by Naṇṇaṇ, the *kaṭampu* tribe, the Sātavāhanas, the Kuṣāṇs, or the Śakas. Might this be the same event that has been commemorated in the *Cilappatikāram*?<sup>49</sup> Even if this passage did not necessarily introduce the seafaring of the Cēras, it offers a good opportunity to refute in part the interpretive experiments that developed around it. However, we also have clearer evidence:

If someone asks ‘Who is your king?’, our king is Neṭuñcēralātaṇ who has the strength of [his] fierce rage, who chopped down the foot of the *kaṭampu*-tree,<sup>50</sup> after [he] went to the land of the resisting ones, [which land was] inside an island of the dark sea, may his chaplet live long!<sup>51</sup>

<sup>45</sup> The questionable word can be also read as [*ma*]yavar (< *mayam*?, see *Madras Tamil Lexicon* 6: 3073), but because of the sandhi, that would rather appear as *coṇmayavar*, however; *col* is clearly legible.

<sup>46</sup> Hereby, I thank Eva Wilden for her precious help in providing me an insight to the manuscripts which were not available to me, and in sharing her ideas about the question.

<sup>47</sup> *Cilappatikāram*, III. 28: 141, III. 29: *ūcalvari*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Pādatāḍitaka*, par. 310.

<sup>49</sup> *Cilappatikāram*, III. 28: 141–142.

<sup>50</sup> Here the *kaṭampu* refers to the totemistic tree of the *kaṭampu* tribe that has been destroyed. See *Patirruppattu*, 12: 3; 17: 5; 20: 4; 88: 6; *Patirruppattu*, *patikam* IV: 6.

<sup>51</sup> ‘*num kō yār eṇa viṇaviṇ em kō/iruḷ munnīrt turutti uḷ/muraṇiyōrt talaic ceṇru/kaṭampu mutal taṭinta kaṭum ciṇam muṇpiṇ/neṭuñcēralātaṇ vāḷka avaṇ kaṇṇi*’ (*Patirruppattu*, 20: 1–5).



Thus, we see direct evidence that Neṭuñcēralāṭaṇ sailed the ‘dark sea’ and attacked his enemies on an island (*turutti*), which island must have been somewhere among the Lakṣadvīp islands, or around the southern Konkan, where pirates are also referred to by Ptolemy and the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. We will return to this question later. Other texts in the Caṅkam literature, which we will discuss in detail in the second part of our study, also mention the Cēra kings who fought on the sea, defeated the *kaṭampu* tribe on an island, collected tributes beyond the sea, and piled them up in their treasuries. All these texts show that the Cēra kings de facto sailed the seas, but we have only evidence that they did so for military purposes, while their assumed sea-trade activities cannot be substantiated. However, as we have seen before, the Tamils had the knowledge to sail along the coast. I think it is not unfounded to assume that the Cēra kings utilized the *yavaṇas*’ knowledge in shipping and shipbuilding, and they therefore may have been able to build a powerful fleet to be used in naval battles. However, it is likewise possible that the vessels of the Cēras were used to transport warriors, and only when they landed did the fighting begin. Be that as it may, Mediterranean sailors and warriors appeared on the Malabar Coast, governed by the Cēras, perhaps every year for centuries and have certainly helped them in their maritime activities, although perhaps not for free. We can deduce that the very costly punitive campaign in the northern areas,<sup>52</sup> in which neither new territory nor new vassals were acquired, was to stabilize trade relations and Cēra interests on the Malabar Coast.

## CASE STUDY: IN THE WAKE OF THE PIRATES OF THE ANCIENT MALABAR COAST<sup>53</sup>

Profitable trade and naval fleets equipped with rich cargo have attracted pirates from the earliest times in both West and South Asia. Lootings by Red Sea pirates were mentioned by Diodorus following Agatarchides,<sup>54</sup> later by Strabo,<sup>55</sup> Pliny the Elder,<sup>56</sup> the author of *Periplus Maris Erythraei*,<sup>57</sup> and Philostratos.<sup>58</sup> They all complained about the sea robbers among the Arabic people, ‘villains’ who travel on their pirate ships and plunder the merchant ships from Egypt, enslaving shipwrecked people and those fleeing the ships. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* notes that this is why ‘they are constantly being taken prisoner by the governors and kings of Arabia,’ so the task of the rulers was to ensure lucrative trade rather than to cooperate with the pirate leaders. Following the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*’s guidance, the merchants did their best when they sailed on extra speed to the Katakekaumenē Island, leaving behind the Arabia that was ‘fearsome in

<sup>52</sup> *Cilappatikāram*, III. 25: 185.

<sup>53</sup> The author has previously published a paper in Hungarian on the topic, see Ferenczi 2016. The present case study is a revised and continued version of this earlier research.

<sup>54</sup> Diod. Sic., *Bibl. Hist.*, III. 43. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Strabo, *Geogr.* XVI. 4.18.

<sup>56</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, XXXIV. 175–176.

<sup>57</sup> *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 20.

<sup>58</sup> Philostratos, *Vita Apollonii*, III. 35.



every respect.<sup>59</sup> The next region where traders had to be careful with pirates was South India.<sup>60</sup> Pliny the Elder mentioned the neighbouring pirates of Nitrias (*vicinos piratas, qui optinent locum nomine Nitrias*) at Muziris, the first marketplace of India (*primum emporium Indiae*), as one of the reasons why the ships should avoid that port. Another reason was the difficulties of loading and discharging the cargoes from ships to boats since Muziris lay on a river, relatively far from the seashore (*praeterea longe a terra abest navium statio, lintribusque adferuntur onera et egeruntur*), and according to Pliny, Muziris around the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD did not abound in commodities (*neque est abundans mercibus*).<sup>61</sup> The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* seems to confirm Pliny as it warns of the presence of pirates north of Naoura and Tyndis of Limyrikē (Malabar Coast), at the Sēsekreienai-islands (perhaps today's Veṅgurlā Rocks), Isle of the Aigidioi (perhaps Aminidīv/Aminidivi Islands), Isle of the Kaineitōi (perhaps Oyster Rocks near Kārvār, Karnataka), and around Leukē Nēsos, the 'White Island' (perhaps Pigeon Island, Nētrāṇi Dvīpa).<sup>62</sup> Ptolemy recorded Ariakē, a coast of piratical people (Ἀνδρῶν Πειρατῶν) with the following places: Mandagora/Mandagara (Bāgmāṇḍlā-Bāṅkōṭ, Maharashtra), Byzantion (Vijaydurg, Maharashtra), Chersonēsos (around today's Kārvār, Karnataka), the mouth of the river Nanagounas (Tāptī river), Armagara, Nitra emporion, together with two inland towns with pirates: Olochoira (Uḍupi, Karnataka?) and Mousopallē.<sup>63</sup> Adding to these, the Tabula Peutingeriana also marks the presence of pirates ('PIRATES') with red capital letters around Malabar Coast and the southernmost tip of India. Thus we conclude that the pirates who threatened the Malabar Coast must have lived north of the Cēra kingdom, north of Naṛavu, in a place called Nitrias located in the Konkan archipelago and/or in an emporion called Nitra. I accept the location of Naṛavu around today's Eḷimala,<sup>64</sup> instead of Kaṇṇūr or Maṅgaḷūru, as far as the geographic description of Tamil literature suggests, equally the identification of Naoura of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* with Naṛavu of the Caṅkam poems. If so, the evidence from the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* suggests that the pirates could have been found north of Naoura of Limyrikē, resulting in the conclusion that Naoura is unlikely to be the same as Nitrias or Nitria, as it would be highly unusual for the Cēra kings to threaten themselves from another town. If we accept the identification of Leukē Nēsos, the 'White Island' with the heart-shaped island of the Konkan Coast, which bears the name Nētrāṇi

<sup>59</sup> *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 20. Citations were translated by Lionel Casson (1989).

<sup>60</sup> Even Fāxiān 法顯 (4–5. c. AD) talks about the dangerous pirates of South India (海中多有抄賊，遇輒無全), see Legge 1886: 112. In later centuries, the piracy on the South Indian coasts was still a danger for the merchants and travellers. Thus the Nestorian *Chronicle of Seert* (11<sup>th</sup> century) and Marco Polo (13<sup>th</sup> century) still complains about the piracy on the western shores of India, see Scher 1910: 324–326; *The Travels of Marco Polo*, 376–377; 380–381.

<sup>61</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, VI. 26. 104.

<sup>62</sup> To identify the locations I used Casson 1989: 297.

<sup>63</sup> Ptol., *Geogr.* VII. 1. 7; 84. To identify the locations I used Talbert 2000: 60–74.

<sup>64</sup> Naṛavu was certainly located between Nitrias/Nitra and Tyndis/Tonṭi, in a circle that includes Kaṇṇūr and Maṅgaḷūru. If we consider the data extracted from the 85<sup>th</sup> poem of the *Paṭiṛruppattu*, and we expect mountains that visibly surround the town, then the region of Eḷimala (ancient Eḷil neṭuvarai/kunram) with its rocky slopes seems to be the best candidate for localization, since the distance between the Kaṇṇūr seashore and the nearest range of the Western Ghats is about seventy-eighty kilometres, while Maṅgaḷūru seems to be a bit far, and although it is located in a hilly area, 'tall mountains which are seen from the [entire] country' can be found again in ca. seventy-eighty kilometres distance. However, one must consider that the Western Ghats with an average altitude of 1200 metres can still be seen, even if not the whole, from ca. 124 kilometres [(http://www.ringbell.co.uk/info/hdist.htm (downloaded: 20<sup>th</sup> March 2022)], so the question again is how seriously we take the description of the Tamil poem.





or Nitrān, then we have successfully located our pirates on the Konkan Coast. However, this identification, as Casson (1989: 217) highlighted, is mostly based on the similarity of names and this has led Warmington and Schoff to come to this conclusion. Casson argues that the place called 'Nitraiai' was a port of trade in Ptolemy instead of an island. Indeed, neither Pliny nor Ptolemy mention this place as an island, so that one could think that Nitra emporion of Ptolemy is identical with the later Mangarouth of Kosmas Indikopleustes, today's Maṅgaḷūru, where the Netravati river flows. If this place was Nitrias/Nitra, then the pirates must have lived somewhere close to it, perhaps in the northern archipelago as the sources record.

What we learn from the Caṅkam sources is that the king Neṭuñcēralātaṇ was the first among the Cēras who led a naval campaign against northern tribes. He was the one

[...] who chopped down the foot of the *kaṭampu*-tree, after [he] went to the land of the resisting ones, [which land was] inside an island of the dark sea [...]<sup>65</sup>

Thus we see direct evidence that Neṭuñcēralātaṇ sailed the 'dark sea' and attacked his enemies on an island (*turutti*), which must have been somewhere among the Lakṣadvīp islands, or rather around the southern Konkan, where the pirates were mentioned by Pliny, Ptolemy, and the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*. The same episode can be found in the 17<sup>th</sup> poem of the *Patirruppattu*, in which Neṭuñcēralātaṇ 'liberated the great sea [that] possessed shiny spray [and] scattered precious offerings (*arum pali*) [once he] returned and arrived [together with his] warriors [carrying] the victorious wide *paṇai*-drum which was fashioned after chopping the *kaṭampu*-tree'.<sup>66</sup> We find the defeat of the *kaṭampu* tribe in other poems as well without the maritime context.<sup>67</sup> In the 127<sup>th</sup> poem of the *Akaṇāṇūru*, which mentions some of the heroic exploits of Cēralātaṇ, we read that he, 'having navigated (*ōṭṭi*) on the ocean, destroyed the *kaṭampu*', or 'having driven back (*ōṭṭi*) the ocean, destroyed the *kaṭampu*'. Once he defeated the *kaṭampu* tribe, he collected his tributes at the great mansion of Māntai/Marantai.<sup>68</sup> In the 41<sup>st</sup> poem of the *Patirruppattu*, we see the son of Neṭuñcēralātaṇ, Kaṭal Piṛakkōṭṭiya Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṇ ('Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṇ who drove back the sea'; probably around the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD), whose 'legs conquered the cool sea with sounding waves'.<sup>69</sup> Anyway, his royal epithet Kaṭal Piṛakkōṭṭiya was mentioned originally in *patikam* V by the poet called Paraṇar. Although we cannot really see the maritime activities of Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṇ in the Caṅkam poems, we read about it in the early mediaeval *Cilappatikāram*, in which we find this king as the one who 'overthrew the *kaṭampu* [tribe] with fences of the vast/dark water',<sup>70</sup> or the one with cruel war 'who overthrew the *kaṭampu* of the sea'.<sup>71</sup> In the 90<sup>th</sup> poem (line 20) Ilañcēral Irumporai (probably around the 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, Fig. 5), another Cēra king was mentioned as being one who 'threw a spear so that the ocean was destroyed' (*kaṭal ikuppa vēl iṭṭum*).

<sup>65</sup> 'iruḷ munnīrt turutti ul/muraṇiyōrt talaic ceṇru/kaṭampu mutal taṭinta ...' (*Patirruppattu*, 20: 2–4).

<sup>66</sup> 'tuḷaṅku picir uṭaiya māk kaṭal nikkik/kaṭamp' arutt' iyaṇriya valam-paṭu viyaṇ paṇai/āṭunar peyarntu vant' *arum pali tūuy*' (*Patirruppattu*, 17: 4–6).

<sup>67</sup> *Patirruppattu*, 11: 11–14; 12: 2;

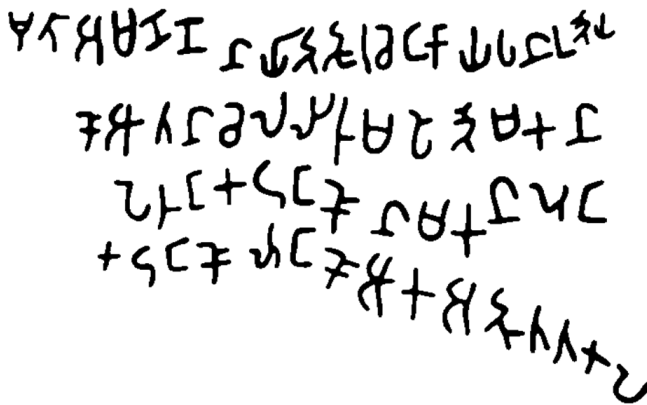
<sup>68</sup> *Akaṇāṇūru*, 127: 4–8.

<sup>69</sup> 'paṭum tiraip paṇik kaṭal uḷanta tālē' (*Patirruppattu*, 41: 27).

<sup>70</sup> 'mānir vēlik kaṭamp' erintu' (*Cilappatikāram*, III. 25. 1).

<sup>71</sup> 'kaṭal kaṭamp' erinta' (*Cilappatikāram*, III. 25. 187).





**Fig. 5** The transcription of the Pukaḷūr inscription 1 (near Karūr, Tamil Nadu, India) datable to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD based on paleography, which mentioned Cēra kings of the Irumpoṟai branch [Illustration by Mahadevan (2003: 405)]

The question may arise, who are the tribe whose totemistic tree was the *kaṭampu*-tree (*Neolamarckia cadamba*)? We might extract an answer to this question from the Caṅkam poems. In the 88<sup>th</sup> poem of the *Patirruppattu* we read that the Cēra kings ‘chopped off the entire foot of the *kaṭampu* which possesses *aṇaṅku*’ (*aṇaṅk’ uṭaik kaṭampiṇ muḷu mutal taṭintu*; line 6). In this poem the ancestors of the king also ‘destroyed Naṇṇaṇ of the *vākai*-tree with Sun[-like] flowers’ (*cuṭar vī vākai naṇṇaṇ tēyttu*; line 10). This king among the Cēra ancestors must have been Kaḷaṅkāykkāṇṇi Nārmuticcēral (probably around the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD) who ‘chopped down the protected foot of the *vākai*-tree<sup>72</sup> with fire-like flowers of Naṇṇaṇ with golden chariot and golden chaplet<sup>73</sup>. However, from *patikam* IV of the *Patirruppattu* we learn that Kaḷaṅkāykkāṇṇi Nārmuticcēral was the king ‘who destroyed the strength of Naṇṇaṇ in the war for the position at Peruvāyil with the *kaṭampu*-tree [which had] wheel-like flowers, who chopped the entire foot of his golden *vākai*-tree<sup>74</sup>. This act might have happened during the campaign against Pūlinātu, but as we shall see, the homeland of Naṇṇaṇ seems to be somewhere else, so in this *patikam* we seem to be witnessing consecutive, legendary acts of the king. In the 199<sup>th</sup> poem of the *Akanāṇūru* are the following lines:

I will not come even if I obtain wealth so great as if the country would have been given [to me], which was lost due to Kaḷaṅkāykkāṇṇi Nārmuticcēral with sharp sword which gave [him] triumphant victory, while Naṇṇaṇ with gold ornaments died on the battlefield in the battle at the great harbour (*peruntuṟai*) with the large golden *vākai*-tree, in the west [...] <sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> *vākai*: sirissa, Albizzia. *Madras Tamil Lexicon* 6: 3574.

<sup>73</sup> ‘*poṇam kaṇṇip polam tēr naṇṇaṇ/cuṭar vī vākaik kaṭi mutal taṭinta*’ (*Patirruppattu*, 40: 14–15).

<sup>74</sup> ‘*uruḷ pūm kaṭampiṇ peruvāyil naṇṇaṇai/nilaic ceruviṇ āṟṟalai aṟutt’ avan/poṇ paṭu vākai muḷu mutal taṭintu*.’ (*Patirruppattu*, IV. 7–9).

<sup>75</sup> ‘... *kuṭāat/irum poṇ vākaip peruntuṟaic ceruvil/polam pūṇ naṇṇaṇ porutu kaḷatt’ oḷiya/valam paṭu korṟam tanta vāy vā/kaḷaṅkāykkāṇṇi nārmuticcēral/iḷanta nāṭu tant’-aṇṇa/valam peritu perinum vāraḷeṇ yāṇē*’ (*Akanāṇūru*, 199: 18–24).



Thus we know that Naṇṇaṇ fought and died in the battle at the great harbour or Perunturai, if we interpret it as the name of a town, against Nārmuticcēral, so that his or the harbour's golden *vākai*-tree was destroyed. We also know from this poem that Naṇṇaṇ's place must have been in the west, north of the Cēra lands. According to this poem the defeat of Naṇṇaṇ was equal to the loss of his country. The compound *perunturai* means either the 'big harbour' or the 'big ghat', so we cannot be sure whether this refers to the river port or the sea port of Naṇṇaṇ.

Now we come to a longer passage of the 152<sup>nd</sup> poem of the *Akanāṇūru*, which gives further geographical and historical context to Naṇṇaṇ's exploits:

[...] in the slopes of Pāḷi in the tall/long Ēḷil mountain of Naṇṇaṇ with pearl necklace, the chief of Pāram with joy of charity/abundant toddy, who liberally gives/flings elephant bulls [due his] famous liberalism, the chief victorious spear who overcame Piṇṭaṇ while breaking [his] opposition on the battlefield, [Piṇṭaṇ] who very much swarmed around showing copious enmity like a colony of small white shrimps that attacks while the good vessels which give the wealth (*taṇam*) of great harbour (*perunturai*) with seashore groves at the extension of the sounding water, had been sundered/dispersed, [port of] Tittaṇ Vēḷiyaṇ with famous wrathful army that nurtured the *akavunar* bards [who possess] fine staff [...] <sup>76</sup>

This passage has particular importance for us because we read about Naṇṇaṇ as the lord of the slopes of Pāḷi in the tall/long Ēḷil mountain which is certainly identical with today's Elimala of northern Kerala, north of Kaṇṇūr. He was also the chief of Pāram, a former capital of the chief called Miṇṇili, a friend of Naṇṇaṇ who died at the Pāḷippaṇantalai battle by the side of Naṇṇaṇ (Subrahmanian 1990: 679). Naṇṇaṇ also defeated Piṇṭaṇ at Kaḷumalam, a little-known chief (Subrahmanian 1990: 484). The third name in this passage must only be a part of the comparison, since Tittaṇ Vēḷiyaṇ was a Cōḷa king (Subrahmanian 1990: 430–431) who did not have territories and interests near the north-western shores of Malabar, so the 'great harbour' here (Pukār?) is probably not the same as the 'great harbour' of Naṇṇaṇ in the 199<sup>th</sup> poem of the *Akanāṇūru*. After all, most important for us is the 391<sup>st</sup> poem of the *Narriṇai* in which we read about 'Ēḷil Hill of the good country of Naṇṇaṇ at the gold-yielding Koṇkāṇam [mountains]' (*poṇ paṭu koṇkāṇam naṇṇaṇ nal nāṭi' ēḷil kuṇṇam*; lines 6–7). Although Koṇkāṇam is a *hapax legomenon*, the geographic position given by the poet confirms its location north of the Cēras, and Koṇkāṇam is most probably the Sahyādri mountain range on the Konkan Coast. In the 73<sup>rd</sup> poem (lines 2–4) of the *Kuruntokai*, an anthology of love poems (*akam*) from the 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, we read that the tribe called *kōcar* once marched against Naṇṇaṇ's land and felled his mango tree. Here, we must make a short note on Naṇṇaṇ, who was either the founder or a later chief of his dynasty, and whose name became a symbol of pedicide because, according to the legend, he murdered a young girl who had the impudence to eat a fruit that had fallen down from his totemistic mango tree. This was the *casus belli* for the *kōcar* who attacked and defeated Naṇṇaṇ together with his mango tree.<sup>77</sup> Naṇṇaṇ mentioned above must therefore refer to his dynasty. As we have read in all the references to Naṇṇaṇ in the Caṅkam poems, it is almost impossible to decide who was who in these stories. However, it can be

<sup>76</sup> 'nuṇ kōl akavunarp puranta pēricaic/ciṇam keḷu tāṇait tittaṇ vēḷiyaṇ/iraṅku nīrp parappiṇ kāṇalam perunturai/taṇam taru naṅkalam citaiyat tākkum/cīru vēḷḷiraviṇ kuppai aṇṇa/uru pakai tarūm moym mūcu piṇṭaṇ/muṇṇai muraṇ uṭaiyak kaṭanta vēṇvēl/icaṇ nal ikaik kaḷīru vīcu vaṇ makilp/pārattut talaivaṇ āra naṇṇaṇ/ēḷil neṭuvaraip pāḷic cilampi' (*Akanāṇūru*, 152: 4–13).

<sup>77</sup> For these legendary events, see *Kuruntokai*, 292; 73. and *Puraṇāṇūru*, 151.



said that the lineage of Nannan was once the chief of a land called Punṇāṭu,<sup>78</sup> of Viyalūr and Pāli, Ēlilkunram, Pāram, Koṅkānam, and Pūlināṭu. Later in the *Malaipaṭukaṭām*, the name Nannan is given to a chief seated in Toṇṭaimaṇṭalam (Subrahmanian 1990: 484–485). Looking back, in the 90<sup>th</sup> poem of the *Akanāṇṭūru*, the *kōcar* tribe are associated with the sea:

[...] the market-place (*niyamam*) of the fierce-eyed *kōcar*, [their] faces [lined] with scars inflicted by iron, fertile, since it has the noise of the great sea, east of Cellūr of the god with rare power [...] <sup>79</sup>

With close reading of the 15<sup>th</sup> poem of the *Akanāṇṭūru*, I believe that we can identify with confidence the region that was ruled by the dynasty of Nannan and the *kōcar* tribe.

[...] like the Tuḷu land, with forests of peacocks with drum-eyed tail feathers, becoming full of the jackfruit cultivated on [tree] tops as round green unripe fruit by the upright *kōcar* with big ornaments, rejoicing in the truth [...] <sup>80</sup>

We can conclude that the regions north of the Malabar Coast, Tuḷunāṭu, the Ēlilkunram or the Ēlil neṭunvarai together with the Koṅkānam/Sahyādri mountain range on the Konkan Coast, and Pūlināṭu were, in ancient times, the dominion of Nannan and/or the *kōcar* tribe. We have seen that Nannan was probably the overlord of Kaṭampin Peruvāyil, in which town the *kaṭampu*-tree was the protected totemistic tree. We know that the Cēras from the time of Neṭuñcēralāṭan to Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṇ made great effort in order to defeat their *kaṭampu* related enemies who lived on the islands of the Arabian Sea, north of the Cēra homeland, and that is why the *Cilappatikāram*, the earliest Tamil epic written around the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, mentions this event among others during the campaigns in the ‘northerly directions’ (*vaṭaticai maruṅkiṇ*).<sup>81</sup> We know that Nannan was famous for his gold ornaments and chariots, and we see another ruler, Nannan Utiyan, probably a descendant of Nannan, who had well-protected golden treasures in his town, where we read about ‘the gold which was put [down] by the very ancient chiefs (*vēlir*) for the sake of protection, at Pāli with a difficult defence, [town of] Nannan Utiyan.’<sup>82</sup> We see that the *kaṭampu* tribe must have lived in the coastal areas of the Konkan Coast near the lands that were governed by Tuḷu-speaking tribes, the *kōcar*, and Nannan. One might think that the tribal roots of the Kadamba dynasty of Banavāsi and Palāśikā (c. 345–610 AD) can be seen in the early appearance of the *kaṭampu* tribe, whose later homeland is partly identical with the region we defined, and whose naval fleet of Goa was famous in the early Middle Ages.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Was it the same as the rich-in-beryl Pounnata of Ptolemy (Πουννάτα ἐν ἡ Βήρυλλος) between the Pseudostomos/Periyār river and the Baris/Pampā river? In that case, it appears in the some mistakenly mapped ‘category’ as Karuvūr which can be found not on the Malabar Coast but in northwestern Koṅku Nāṭu. Or should we understand *punṇāṭu* as ‘lowland’ (*pul nāṭu* as a synonym of *pul pulam*)? Cf. *Akanāṇṭūru*, 396: 2. Marr (1985 [1958]: 287) anyway takes it as a proper name and considers it possible to locate at modern Mysore.

<sup>79</sup> Transl. by Eva Wilden. ‘*arum tiṛal kaṭavuḷ cellūrk kuṇāṭu/perum kaṭal muḷakkir*’ āki yāṇar/irump’ iṭam paṭutta vaṭu uṭai mukattar/kaṭum kaṇ kōcar niyamam ...’ (*Akanāṇṭūru*, 90: 9–12).

<sup>80</sup> Transl. by Eva Wilden. ‘*mey mali perum pūṇ cemmāl kōcar/kommaiyam pacum kāyk kuṭumi viḷainta/pākāl āṅkaip paraik kaṇ pīlit/tōkaik kāvin tuḷu nāṭ’ aṇṇa*’ (*Akanāṇṭūru*, 15: 2–5).

<sup>81</sup> *Cilappatikāram*, III. 25.1; 185–187.

<sup>82</sup> ‘*nannan utiyan aruṅkaṭip pālīt toṇ mutir vēlir ōmpīṇar vaitta poṇṇiṇum ...*’ (*Akanāṇṭūru* 258: 1–3).

<sup>83</sup> Marr 1958 [1985]: 287; Moraes 1995: 281; Konow and Thomas 1915–1916: 309.



Finally we have to consider the possible reasons behind the naval attacks of the Cēras against the *kaṭampu* tribe living north of their kingdom. As far as we see from the ancient sources, the Cēra rulers had no territorial interest in the northern archipelago, which was distant from their kingdom, where, despite their victory, the Cēras did not consolidate their power. Considering the fact that the expenditures of this naval campaign must have cost more than it could have benefited, I interpret the Cēras' naval attack as a retaliation for some maritime activity of the *kaṭampus*, possibly out of revenge, which could have been aimed at destructive victory and the collection of tributes. Due to the strategic position of the Cēra kingdom, Muziris and Tyndis were initially the main markets of Roman trade with South India, and this provided significant revenue to the Cēra rulers. Therefore, we regard the northern attacks of these kings as an attempt to restore the loss of prestige caused by piracy and the security of the sea routes. With regards to the Cēra fleet, everything we have described in our study on Tamil shipping is of great importance, since with their knowledge of navigation and the technical knowledge of the *yavaṇas* stationed or settled in South India, they could easily set up a fleet that could attack their enemies on the sea. I agree with Subrahmanian (1980: 252) and De Romanis (1997: 104) that the *yavaṇa* bodyguards in the Tamil courts<sup>84</sup> may have been recruited by the Tamil kings from the armed soldiers traveling on merchant ships, who had originally travelled to India to provide protection against pirates. We also see that the ports were illuminated at night and the ships shining with the lanterns, possibly as a precaution against pirates and robbers.<sup>85</sup> Although the Caṅkam literature makes no specific mention of pirates, the reason for this can also be seen in the fact that ancient Tamil literature was heroic poetry commissioned by the royal court, a concept which no doubt precludes any mention of robbers ransacking the royal treasury. Nor can we be sure that these pirates were in fact piratical people and not the privateers of another ruler. The latter interpretation would seem to make more sense, given the prominence of predatory warfare in these times.

The Cēra rulers were not only sponsors of poetry, but also beneficiaries of Indo-Mediterranean trade relations, so they tried to preserve the stability and security of these contacts not only through their prestigious gifts and embassies, but also by means of their soldiers. However, the mooring conditions around Muziris and the labyrinthine world of the lagoons and backwaters in Kuṭṭanātu favoured the pirates who, with their local knowledge, could easily hide or escape with the loot. If we really talk about piracy instead of the employment of privateers, it could only have real benefits if the products could be sold, but one can assume that the pirates had the opportunity to sell the loot mostly beyond the borders of the Tamil kings, in the land of Tuḷu Nātu, in Nannan's country and beyond. The network of northern markets, adequate economic power, and consumer demand were a given in these centuries, as we know that the Sātavāhana kings occupied the Nānāghaṭ mountain pass in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, which opened the way for them to the Konkan Coast. During the reign of Gautamīputra Śātakarṇi in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, the interests of the Sātavāhana dynasty extended to a large part of the western coast of India. From the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the Sātavāhana, the Kuṣāṇa, and the Śāka dynasties shared the coasts of West India north of South India; these dynasties became active participants in the Indian Ocean trade system through their ports and their regular sea voyages, and thus they may have had some influence on the southern Konkan. Returning to the question of the sale of loot, another alternative could be the active cooperation with pirate towns such as Mousopallē and Olokhoira mentioned

<sup>84</sup> See for example: *Mullaippāṭṭu*, 45–49, 59–63, 63–66.

<sup>85</sup> *Perumpāṇārruppaṭai*, 316–317; Gurukkal 2010: 234.





by Ptolemy, somewhere in the present-day state of Maharashtra, which perhaps provided them commercial connections with *dakṣiṇāpatha* ('southern route') and with *uttarāpatha* ('northern route').

Recognizing the thriving trade relations, the smaller rulers and militant tribes of the areas north of the Cēras could possibly have envied the rich cargo, attacking the *yavana* (Greek, Roman, Persian, Arabic, etc.) fleets that came to India year after year, in order to share in the profits. Although the links between the *kaṭampu* tribe of the Old Tamil literature and the later Kadamba dynasty cannot yet be sufficiently proven, the identities of their settlements and their totemistic trees may point to a specific relationship. The *kaṭampus* who lived in the archipelago west of the Konkan coast seem to be consistent with the pirates whom Pliny, Ptolemy, and *Periplus Maris Erythraei* mentioned, and whose location can be pinpointed north of Naoura/Naravu, around Nitra/Nitrias, inland and in the archipelago near and north of today's Maṅgaḷūru, Karnataka, a region governed by either Naṇṇaṇ, the *kōcar*, or the possibly independent, possibly feudatory *kaṭampu* tribe.

As we see in the *Perumpāṇārruppaṭai*, the Tamil kings guarded the inland trade routes with archers to protect the merchants who transported the products of the mountains or seas through the lush forests.<sup>86</sup> Speaking about the Tamil kingdoms in general, we find several references in the Caṅkam texts that refer to forest robbers who raid cattle and eat its meat,<sup>87</sup> or to wayside robbers who threaten the travellers on the trade routes or at the crossroads.<sup>88</sup> According to K. Rajan (2014: 223), in the first stage of the memorials, Iron Age graves (*patukkai*) were raised for the people who were killed by warlike tribes (*maṇavar*, *kāṇavar*) by charging arrows, of which *patukkai* was most probably a stone heap (*kaṇkuvai*), or a cairn. Most probably the literary topos that records the dead travellers killed by robbers or martial warriors refers to this very ancient chapter of history.

The *Paṭiṛruppattu* remains silent about robbers, reflecting the idea that the Cēra king was a successful protector of his country. Once it mentions (*Paṭiṛruppattu*, 15: 11–13) the 'villages (*arampu*) [in the destroyed lands of the enemies] where the agricultural tracts perished together with the grassy-leafy lands where rascals (*pullāl*), [who carry their] flesh-reeking bows as [their] ploughs, roam [among] the old houses destroyed by the vines of the reddened *kāntaḷ*'. Talking about the protection of trade, we read an interesting passage in poem 13<sup>th</sup> (lines 23–24), in which the king appears as being the one who 'nourished the relatives (*pāram*) of those, who had given protection to the clans since the grain merchants [were] not [able to] provide protection to the families in the world'. As we see at the end of the same poem (line 28), thanks to the Cēra king, 'the country, which is [now] protected by you, has become flourishing' (*pūttanru ... nī kātta nāṭē*). However, it is not just in this poem, but the *Paṭiṛruppattu* abounds in passages which refer to the protective role of the Cēra king as one of the main motifs of the anthology. Talking about the centuries when the Cēras ruled during the height of Indo-Roman trade, it can be said that the expanding wars and the lucrative trade have attracted unscrupulous opportunists who tried to get rich from robbery. Even if the king and his loyal army was a powerful protector of his universe, it was necessary to guard the harbours and the markets and build fortifications around the important settlements due to the presence of envious kings, chiefs, and robbers. In the Caṅkam corpus,

<sup>86</sup> *Perumpāṇārruppaṭai*, 66–82. De Romanis 2020: 123.

<sup>87</sup> For examples, see *Akaṇāṇūru*, 97; 129; 265; 309.

<sup>88</sup> For examples, see *Kalittokai*, 6; *Akaṇāṇūru*, 1; 35; 63; 257, etc.



we see Naṛavu of ‘unceasing fertility and of unchangeable yield’ as an important centre of the early Cēras, where ‘warriors (*maṛavar*) shiver in the cold wind of the coming sea, after the waves with foamy sprays together with the clouds became bewildered, [warriors] who possess bows whose laziness of the strings had been removed’,<sup>89</sup> which perhaps shows that Naṛavu was fortified with troops of warriors. Taking a look at Toṇṭi, the 18<sup>th</sup> poem of the *Narriṇai* talks about the gate (*katavu*) of Toṇṭi with seashore-groves, on which Poraiyaṇ had impressed Mūvaṇ (Subrahmanian 1990: 706), his enemy’s sharp, thorn-like teeth.<sup>90</sup> This poem is important for us because it highlights the closeness of the sea, and if we decide to translate *katavu* as ‘gate’, then probably the poem refers to a fortified mansion of the Cēra king in Toṇṭi. The Cēra king anyway appears as a ‘fighter’ (*porunaṇ*) here, who has an army with anger difficult to calm and victorious spears. When we read about Muciṛi, we see that that it was a ‘good and big town with difficult paths mingled with weapons [around] the fortification where birds of prey (*paruntu*) dwell and sleep/sigh (*uyirttu*) on the central walls.’<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, as we read about Vañci/Karuvūr, the inland capital of the Cēras, we see the town with ‘outer walls’ (*puṛa matil*) surrounded by the water of Porunai.<sup>92</sup> All these passages reflect the necessity to fortify the towns connected to trading activities, and why else would the Cēras fortify a town and build walls around it if not against those who seek to disturb its tranquillity, attack and sack it?

## NOTE

This paper is a revised subchapter of my doctoral dissertation ‘History behind the praising words of the learned: An annotated translation of the Patirruppattu and the political geography of the early Cēra kingdom’, which was defended on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2022.

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<sup>89</sup> ‘...(m)arāa viḷaiyuḷ arāa yāṇart/toṭai maṭi kaḷainta cilai uṭai maṛavar/ponṅu picirp puṇari maṅkuloṭu mayāṅki/ varum kaṭal ūtaiyiṇ paṇikkum ...’ (*Patirruppattu*, 60: 8–11).

<sup>90</sup> *Narriṇai*, 18: 2–5.

<sup>91</sup> ‘*parunt*’ *uyirtt*’/iṭai matil cēkkum puricaip/paṭai mayāṅk’ āriṭai neṭu nal ūrē’ (*Puṛanāṇūru*, 343: 15–17).

<sup>92</sup> ‘*pul* ilai vañcip puṛa matil alaikkum/kalleṇ porunai āṅkaṇ’ (*Puṛanāṇūru*, 387: 33–34).



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