RESEARCH PAPER

Archaeological Tourism from Adichanallur to Thoothukudi – A Study

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the heritage corridor between Adichanallur and Thoothukudi in the lower Thamirabarani River basin of Tamil Nadu as a primary framework for heritage-based economic development. By examining prehistoric burial sites, urban centers, and historic port complexes, this research demonstrates how integrating archaeology with sustainable tourism can promote economic growth while preserving cultural heritage. The Adichanallur–Thoothukudi corridor contains a continuous record of human occupation from the Iron Age (c. 1000 BCE–600 BCE) through the Early Historic Sangam period to modern maritime trade. Archaeological discoveries—including urn burials (*thazhi*), high-tin bronze objects, iron tools, and gold diadems at Adichanallur, along with the maritime heritage of Korkai and Kayalpatnam—highlight the region's historical role in Indian Ocean trade networks.

Using primary site surveys, historical literature, and current destination management models, this article evaluates the infrastructure requirements, conservation risks, and community engagement models needed to establish an eco-sensitive cultural circuit. The findings indicate that developing an integrated heritage corridor with in-situ museums, interpretive signage, and local guide networks can diversify the coastal tourism economy beyond beach resort tourism. Ultimately, this framework supports community-led conservation, preserves fragile megalithic monuments, and presents the lower Thamirabarani basin as a model for regional archaeological tourism in South Asia.

Keywords: Archaeological Tourism, Adichanallur, Thamirabarani Basin, Urn Burials (Thazhi), Heritage Corridor Development.

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Introduction

Archaeological tourism-or archaeotourism-combines public history, spatial conservation, and sustainable regional development. In South India, the lower Thamirabarani River valley in Tamil Nadu offers a rich continuous cultural landscape, stretching from inland Iron Age burial grounds to maritime trade ports along the Gulf of Mannar. At the center of this landscape is Adichanallur, an Iron Age urn burial site that provides insight into prehistoric metallurgy, socio-religious practices, and settlement organization in trans-coastal South India.

Moving east down the Thamirabarani River toward the coastal city of Thoothukudi (formerly Tuticorin), the landscape reveals interconnected archaeological sites. Key locations include:

- **Korkai:** The ancient Sangam-era port city celebrated in classical Tamil literature and Greco-Roman geography.
- **Kayalpatnam:** A medieval international trade hub.
- **Thoothukudi:** A coastal port town shaped by pearl fishery traditions and Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial maritime networks.

LOWER THAMIRABARANI HERITAGE CORRIDOR PIPELINE

[Adichanallur] ⟶ *[Srivaikuntam]* ⟶ *[Korkai]* ⟶ *[Kayalpatnam]* ⟶ *[Thoothukudi]*

(Iron Age / Megalithic) (Medieval Temple/Canal) (Sangam Port and Pearls) (Medieval Arab Trade) (Colonial Port and Hub)

Despite its archaeological significance, the Adichanallur-Thoothukudi corridor remains underutilized as an integrated cultural tourism route. Visitors often visit individual sites without understanding the historical connections linking prehistoric inland agriculturalists, coastal pearl divers, and trans-oceanic traders.

This paper examines the archaeological landscape from Adichanallur to Thoothukudi, evaluating its potential for sustainable heritage tourism. It covers the history of excavations, material culture, regional trade networks, spatial layout, and tourist infrastructure, concluding with a framework for regional heritage management.

Historical and Archaeological Foundation of the Lower Thamirabarani Basin

1. Geographical Context and Eco-Zones of the Lower Thamirabarani

The Thamirabarani River originates in the Agasthyamalai hills of the Western Ghats and flows east into the Gulf of Mannar. The lower basin, spanning modern Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts, forms a fertile delta framed by dry red-sand dunes (teri lands) and coastal salt flats. Classical Tamil Sangam literature categorizes this region across distinct eco-zones (thinai): Mullai (pastoral forest), Maratham (riverine agricultural plains), and Neithal (maritime coastal zones) The river provided reliable water, fertile alluvial soils, and a navigable trade pathway connecting inland mineral sources directly to maritime outlets along the coast.

Eco-Zone (Thinai)	Primary Archaeological and Historical Features
Mullai / Kurinji	Iron ore sourcing, upland pastoralism, timber collection
Maratham	Adichanallur urn burial mound, intensive agricultural plains
Neithal	Korkai pearl banks, Kayalpatnam port, Thoothukudi salt flats

2. Antiquity and History of Excavations at Adichanallur

Adichanallur was first brought to international attention in 1876 when German ethnologist Dr. Fridolin Jagor excavated the extensive gravel mounds along the right bank of the Thamirabarani River, sending artifacts to the Ethnological Museum of Berlin. Between 1899 and 1905, Alexander Rea of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) conducted systematic excavations across the 114-acre site, discovering thousands of artifacts including urn burials, bronze vessels, gold diadems, and iron implements. Subsequent 2004–2005 excavations directed by T. Satyamurthy uncovered 178 burial urns within a 600-square-meter area, confirming the site's high burial density. Carbon-14 dating from Beta Analytic Testing Laboratory confirmed dates between 905 BCE and 696 BCE, placing Adichanallur within South Asia's early Iron Age timeline.

Period / Date	Key Archaeologist	Major Archaeological Findings
1876	Dr. Fridolin Jagor	Initial discovery and artifact recovery for Berlin Museum
1899–1905	Alexander Rea	Cataloged 9,000+ bronze, iron, and gold artifacts
2004–2005	Dr. T. Satyamurthy	Uncovered 178 intact burial urns in high density
2021–Present	Archaeological Survey of India	Development of In-Situ World-Class Open Museum

3. Material Culture and Burial Traditions: Thazhi and Artifact Assemblages

The primary burial practice at Adichanallur involved primary and secondary interments inside large terracotta urns (thazhi) placed in natural rock cut-outs or soil pits. These urns, ranging from 3 to 6 feet in height, often feature Black-and-Red Ware (BRW) lids and internal hooks. Grave offerings reveal a technologically advanced community:

- **Metallurgical Artifacts:** Wrought and quenched high-tin bronzes (23–25% tin content) indicate sophisticated pyro technological control.
- **Iron Implements:** Daggers, tridents (vel), hatchets, arrows, and spades point to organized agriculture and defense.
- **Personal Adornments:** Gold diadems with repoussé dot ornamentation demonstrate social stratification and specialized metalworking.

The Archaeological Landscape: Adichanallur to the Coast

1. Srivaikuntam: Riverine Engineering and Temple Urbanism

Located four kilometers east of Adichanallur, Srivaikuntam serves as an administrative and cultural link between inland prehistoric sites and coastal ports. The Srivaikuntam Anicut, constructed across the Thamirabarani River, demonstrates long-standing water management systems that fed agrarian networks supporting prehistoric and historic populations. The Kailasanathar and Kallapiran temples preserve medieval epigraphical records detailing regional economic networks, land grants, and temple administration under the Chola and Pandya dynasties.

2. Korkai: The Ancient Sangam Pandya Capital and Pearl Port

Downstream from Srivaikuntam lies Korkai, recognized in classical Sangam texts like the Ahananuru and Maduraikkanchi, as well as Ptolemy's Geography (as Kolkhoi) and the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Excavations conducted by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology in 1968 revealed charcoal layers, shell-cutting workshops, Tamil-Brahmi inscribed potsherds, and structural brick foundations dating to early historic periods. As the ancient capital and primary pearl-fishery port of the Early Pandyas, Korkai handled trade with Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian merchants before river siltation gradually moved the shoreline eastward.

3. Old Kayal and Kayalpatnam: Medieval Maritime Trade Hubs

As silt shifted the river mouth, maritime trade relocated to Old Kayal (Palayakayal) and later to Kayalpatnam. Venetian traveler Marco Polo visited 'Cael' in the late 13th century, describing it as a prosperous port city filled with ships from Arabia, China, and Western Asia. Medieval Islamic settlements at Kayalpatnam developed around maritime logistics, horse trade from the Persian Gulf, and pearl distribution networks. The local architecture—featuring carved wooden pillars, courtyards, and ancient mosques like the Kattupalli—reflects centuries of maritime Indian Ocean commerce.

4. Thoothukudi: Colonial Port Legacy and Modern Maritime Hub

Thoothukudi emerged as the primary deep-water port of the lower Thamirabarani region during the 16th century under Portuguese trade expansion, later passing to Dutch control in 1658 and British rule in 1825. Renowned for its pearl fisheries, salt pans, and shipping lanes, the port city expanded into a major industrial and maritime center. Colonial-era structures, including historic harbor buildings and salt pans, highlight how coastal commerce evolved from prehistoric pearl collection into modern industrial shipping.

Location	Primary Period	Key Features	Trade / Economic Role
Adichanallur	Iron Age (900 BCE)	Urn burials, gold diadems, bronzes	Upland metal and agricultural production
Srivaikuntam	Medieval Pandya	Riverine Anicut, Chola/Pandya temples	Agrarian water management
Korkai	Early Historic	Pearl workshops, Tamil-Brahmi sherds	Classical Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trade

Kayalpatnam	Medieval Era	Arab trade hubs, Kattupalli mosque	Horse trade, West Asian maritime routes
Thoothukudi	Colonial / Modern	Deep-water port, salt pans	Global shipping networks

Archaeological Tourism Potential and Spatial Circuit Design

1. Concept of the Thamirabarani Heritage Corridor

The Thamirabarani Heritage Corridor integrates single archaeological sites into a connected 35-kilometer destination route. Rather than treating Adichanallur as an isolated monument, this corridor presents the region as an interconnected economic system: agricultural production and metalworking at Adichanallur, river distribution through Srivaikuntam, ancient maritime trade at Korkai, medieval commerce at Kayalpatnam, and industrial maritime shipping at Thoothukudi.

Stop	Destination	Core Experiential and Educational Focus
Stop 1	Adichanallur	On-site in-situ museum, megalithic urn burial trenches
Stop 2	Srivaikuntam	River engineering, anicut tours, medieval epigraphy
Stop 3	Korkai	Sangam-era excavation mound, ancient pearl diving history
Stop 4	Kayalpatnam	Maritime Islamic architecture, historic streetscapes
Stop 5	Thoothukudi	Maritime museum, colonial harbor tours, active salt pans

2. Infrastructure Requirements and Site Management

Establishing a world-class archaeological corridor requires improvements in infrastructure and visitor logistics:

- **Interpretive Centers and On-Site Museums:** The Ministry of Finance and ASI initialized an on-site, in-situ museum at Adichanallur, displaying uncovered burial urns in their original stratigraphy under protective glass enclosures.
- **Transportation Networks:** Enhanced road connectivity along State Highway 40, dedicated tourist shuttle buses, and multilingual directional signage.
- **Visitor Amenities:** Solar-powered interpretation kiosks, shaded walkways, clean drinking water units, and eco-friendly facilities to protect sensitive archaeological layers.

3. Community-Based Tourism and Sustainable Livelihoods

Sustainable archaeological tourism depends on local community involvement. Training residents from Adichanallur, Korkai, and Kayalpatnam as certified heritage guides, artisans, and hospitality providers creates direct economic incentives for site preservation. Crafting authentic replicas of ancient Black-and-Red Ware ceramics and local culinary experiences provides additional income for resident households.

Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

1. Site Degradation and Environmental Threats

Unregulated foot traffic, illegal gravel extraction, and urban encroachment pose ongoing risks to the unexcavated mounds of Adichanallur and Korkai. Industrial runoff and salt-marsh expansion near Thoothukudi also present environmental challenges to coastal heritage structures.

Mitigation Strategy: Implement protective buffer zones using geographic information systems (GIS) mapping under AMASR Act guidelines, limit daily visitor capacity, and install elevated boardwalks over sensitive burial areas.

2. Lack of Awareness and Scientific Communication

Academic excavation reports often remain confined to research journals, leaving visitors without accessible contexts regarding the site's historical significance.

Mitigation Strategy: Develop digital interpretation tools, including augmented reality (AR) smartphone apps that reconstruct ancient urn burials, trade vessels, and pearl-diving operations directly on-site.

Identified Risk	Proposed Mitigation Action
Soil and Burial Erosion	Elevated wooden boardwalks, strict daily visitor caps
Urban Encroachment	GIS buffer zone enforcement under AMASR Act rules
Complex Academic Data	Interactive AR apps, visual signage, local guide training
Seasonal Visitor Flux	Diversified packages linking heritage with eco-tourism

Conclusion

The archaeological corridor from Adichanallur to Thoothukudi provides an exceptional narrative of human cultural development across the lower Thamirabarani River basin. The region preserves an unbroken record of technological and social history—from Iron Age urn burials (thazhi) and sophisticated metallurgy to Sangam pearl fisheries and international maritime trade networks.

Developing this 35-kilometer route into an integrated heritage corridor offers a sustainable model for regional tourism. By combining state-of-the-art on-site museums, digital interpretation tools, protective buffer zones, and community-led initiatives, Tamil Nadu can safeguard these vulnerable prehistoric sites while generating economic opportunities for regional communities. Ultimately, this corridor links inland archaeological landscapes with coastal maritime history, highlighting South India's historic role in Indian Ocean trade networks.

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