

Porunthal excavations prove existence of Indian scripts in 5th century BC: expert

Kavita Kishore



The Hindu Director of the excavation at Porunthal, K. Rajan elaborating on his findings on Thursday. Photo: T. Singaravelou

New results from the analysis of paddy grains found in the Porunthal graveyard archaeological site prove that writing systems in India were in existence in the 5th Century BC, predating the arrival of Asoka, according to history professor at the Pondicherry University and director of the excavation project at Porunthal K. Rajan.

Rice paddy samples that were contained in an engraved pot found inside one of the graves were found to be from 450 BC when analysed using Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) by the Beta Analytic Lab, USA, he said, addressing a private gathering organised by the Manarkeni journal.

Earlier, paddy sample from another grave was dated at 490 BC, but many scholars were unwilling to accept evidence obtained from only one sample. The analysis of the second sample proved that Tamil-Brahmi writing existed in the 5th century BC and was not invented in the 3rd century BC as was previously believed by scholars, he said. This was also the first time anyone had discovered Tamil-Brahmi script along with rice in any archaeological site. Scholars were still debating on the exact letters that were written and its meaning, he said.

Another significant discovery from the gravesite is that the paddy samples obtained in the graves in Porunthal were cultivated paddy of the Orissa Satvaika variety, he said.

The Porunthal site is located 12 km South West of Palani and was discovered to have archaeological value in 2006. In 2009-2010, Mr. Rajan and his team of 80 students started excavation at the site, which was divided into two sections – one area for habitation and one area with a graveyard. There were over 100 graves in the region, but with modernisation of the area, several graves have been destroyed and now only 30 graves are still intact, he said.

In the graves that were studied, it was found that while most of the containers found in the graves were made after the person's death, there was one container that showed signs of use. The team also found a pot with around 2 kilos of rice paddy, which had been sealed in airtight containers. These graves also contained a large number of beads, which were predominantly glass. The pottery in the grave was also engraved with Tamil-Brahmi script, he said. In two of the graves, the team found over 11,000 beads, which were made from glass or paste. The beads were originally made in the Vidarbha region, indicating a trade relationship between the two regions, he said.

The team had also unearthed a skeleton adorned with a necklace of beads in one of the graves, but they had not yet analysed the bones, he said. The excavation team also found pottery with a peacock design on it.

In his speech at the event, editor of the Manarkeni journal D. Ravikumar expressed distress at the destruction of various archaeological sites in the Porunthal region by quarries. History scholars T. Subramaniam, K. Vijayavenugopal and Raj Gouthaman spoke.

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