

Village Settlements in Middle Chaliyar Basin: Preliminary Reflections from the Fieldwork at Ugrapuram, Near Areakode, Malappuram, Kerala

T. Muhammedali

Associate Professor of History
Farook College, Kozhikode, Kerala, India
E-mail: mali@farookcollege.ac.in

&

Sabna.K

Doctoral Fellow, Department of History
Farook College, Kozhikode, Kerala, India
E-mail:shabnakarippur@gmail.com

Abstract

A riverine village in the erstwhile Ernad Taluk in Malabar, Ugrapuram has the potential to attract any keen observer. Still preserving an ambiance of a medieval village, Ugrpuram has offered archaeological remains of early historical and medieval period. The present paper emerges from the field explorations held in the village in connection with the study of the settlement and society of middle Chaliyar basin. In addition to bringing out some new data found out through fieldwork and archival research, the paper presents some preliminary reflections on the village society. The overall findings apparently indicate a cultural continuity from the Mesolithic to the medieval period in this village. Specialists in archaeology, history and anthropology may probably take up the questions and arrive at a credible conclusion in future.

Keywords: Ugrapuram, Chaliyar, Mesolithic, Megalithic, Kavu

Introduction

Ugrapuram is a small village on the southern side of the river Chaliyar lying just west to Areekode which is a town situated in the midland area on the riverbank in the erstwhile Ernad taluk of Malappuram district in Kerala. Physiographically, Kerala is divided into highlands, midlands and seacoast. Rivers of Kerala generally originate in the highlands, cut through the midland and empties in to the Arabian Sea through the littoral. The village consists of low lying areas near the river, hilly heights on the sides and dotted paddy fields in an undulating terrain. Situated in the coordinates of the latitude 11° 14' 17.59" N and the longitude 76° 01' 41.91" E, the village has a total area of 940 acres. This is one among the many desams that lies on either side of

the river in the midland where brahmins settled in large numbers in the medieval times. The village is situated in Ward I&II of the present Areakode panchayath. As per one document, this village is one of the five desoms of the Areekkode amsam. (DMA,1935) whereas another one shows Ugrapuram as part of the Irivetti amsam (DMU, 1901). The boundaries of the village are the river Chaliyar in the north, Mundambra desom in the south, Poonkudi streams in the west and Arinjeeri mount in the east.Chaliyar being a perennial river, the village would have benefitted from its proximity to the Calicut port,on the Malabar-Coast, during earlier times.

This paper is an attempt to present some preliminary ideas on the settlement and society of Ugrapuram village. The study makes use of the already published data on the area with fresh data procured through interviews and fieldwork, in addition to colonial documents and secondary literature. The study basically proceeds from examining the contemporary life in the village to the past nuances of village life. Fieldwork gives a clear picture of the caste/ community-wise distribution of settlements as well as the spread of early historic life in the village. Colonial documents, such as settlement registers of 1901 and 1935, help a lot in understanding the landscape, land-type and the land use of the village. Field names of the areas are vividly mentioned in these documents. These evidences,considered in the light of the existing literature on the village societies of the pre modern period, constitute the methodology of the present study.

Field Data from Ugrapuram

Being close to the river Chaliyar, which is perennial on both sides, having a lot of early historical sites and medieval villages, a study of Ugrapuram village acquire multiple dimensions from the point of view of settlement and society. Situated on the southern bank of the river Chaliyar, where we have other megalithicsepulchral complexes excavated about 30kms west to it at Feroke (Ayyappan, 1933) and Chattamparamba (Babington,1923),and on the northernbank we have Nellikka-paramba (Babington,1923) situated at a distance of 9kms again in the western direction from Ugrapuram. A lot of remains related to early historic period have been found out from the village;it is plausible that the presence of adynamic river valley settlement developed in the early historic period. Previous explorations in the area have reported the presence a lot of megalithic remains. Rock cut chambers are reported to have been found out from Perumparamba¹ and from the hill which lie beyond the upper boundary of the Perumparamba areas in the

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southern boundary of the Ugrapuram village². People in the area keep memories of a lot of locations wherefrom urn burials were unearthed during well-digging and house constructions³. Villagers also keep the memories of dolmens in the village. The fieldwork and explorations in the area has also brought out a lot of evidences for early historic remains in the village being concentrated mainly in the Perumparaba area. Early historic remains found out through the fieldwork include microliths, urn-burials, post-holes, etc. Post-holes are largely found in the lower edge of the Perumparamb area (see Appendix 1). The field work also brought out sherds of medieval refined pottery from Perumparamba. There are thus extensive evidences for early and medieval history in the village; a systematic excavation in the site may reveal a clearer picture of the state of early historic and medieval life in the village. Chart 1 shows the distribution of the megalithic remains in the village.

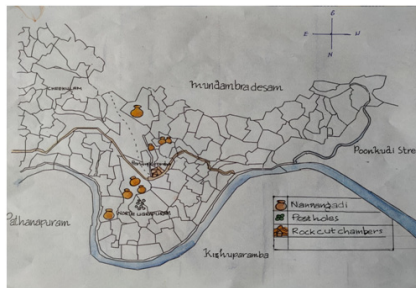


Chart 1. Representations of Megalithic remains in Ugrapuram village.

Source: Field work by the Authors

Before we move further, it is good to have current picture of the households and its distributions in the village. This would also be useful to presume which people and jatis lived in the village in pre-modern times. The current distribution of the settlements in the village tempts us to have an impression of the village being a Brahmin village in the medieval period, where the life and activities of the people was controlled through the institution of the temple, i.e., the Ugramoorthy temple. The place name Ugrapuram itself is said to have evolved from the name of the temple. Illoms, the residences of the Nambutiris, are found to have arranged close on the river alluvial. There are 6 illoms within a distance of one Kilometre. As per the settlement register of 1901, most of the land in the village was under the Janmam right of these Nambitiri Brahmins. All the ferries situated on this side of the river, seemed to have been controlled by these illoms.

On the northern fringes and north-western slopes of the village we see the settlement of Nair families who lived in the nalukettu type of tharavadu. Currently, there are four prominent families of Nairs in these areas, the legacy of whose rich past is well preserved by keeping parts of their medieval pathayapurams in their remodelled new modern homes ⁴. Close to them we see the abodes of the washer-people caste, peruvannans. There are many such families living near by the perincheeri illam and pullurmanna illom. Apart from them, there are clusters of different craft families at different points of the village. Chart 2 shows the distribution of settlements in the Ugrapuram Desam.



Chart 2: Distribution of Households in Ugrapuram Village
Source: field work by authors

Chart 2 shows the details of the current settlements located through fieldwork. As is shown, the Ugrpuram village consists of kaniyans (astrologers), nambutiris (priests), kollans (smiths), kumbharans (potters), chaliyans (weavers), asaris (carpenters), thiyys, pisharodies (temple servants), nairs and adiyars (such as cheruma and pulaya) living in small clusters. There are some Muslim households who keep the memories of their embracing of Islam in the beginning of the twentieth century CE. Following the model of segmented residences in pre-modern Malabar (Eric Miller, 1954), the current pattern of residences in the village is presumed to have some semblance of the past, the village shows some clustering of residences in the pre-modern period too.

The presence of temples and *kavus* further attest the variables of *jatis* and service-groups settled in the village. The village possesses a number of *kavus* along with three temples. Each *illom* has an attached *kavu* with it which is exclusively maintained by the Nambutiri households. Nairs as well as other *jati* groups have *kavus* of their own, protected and promoted by them. Lower castes maintain their deities in simple and crude forms in cult spots in the vicinity of their residences. All places of worships, other than the temples, propitiate traditional

deities. A distinctive trait of the *kavus* in this village is that they have not been generally assimilated by any outside traditions. Still, the worship forms in some *kavus* are seemed to be highly primitive with its distinctive deities (see AppendixII(b)). The fact that very few *kavus* have been transformed into temples in the village probably allows us to compare between the current practices and the primitive religious traditions. Ethno-archaeological studies of *kavus* might probably bring out some “living pre-histories” (Kosambi: 1956) from the village. Chart 3 shows the current distribution of the places of worship.

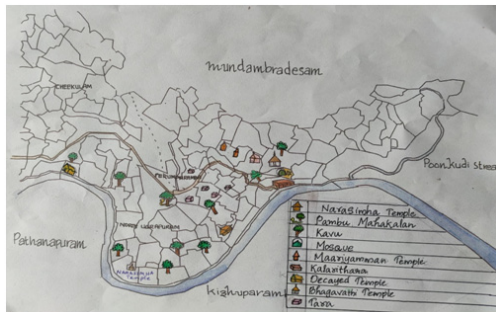


Chart 3: Distribution of Places of Worship in Ugrapuram Village
Source: Field work by the authors

Discussion

Having had a good picture of the spread of early historic/megalithic remains in the village, the nature and distribution of a semi-clustered settlement, the volume and features of the places of worship in the village, some hypothetical questions could be raised. A village that still keeps an overall medieval pattern of the settlement in the present, Ugrapuram stands as a strong case for consideration. As, the microliths in South India are often suggested to be continued through the Neolithic period (Ceri Shipton et.al, 2012) and microliths are associated with many megalithic sites in Kerala, the presence of microliths in the village indicates continuation of hunting gathering culture along with the Neolithic-ceramic culture. The association of microliths with the megalithic urn burial in Ugrapuram probably indicates the continuity of the Mesolithic traditions till the megalithic culture. The large scale sepulchral remains found in the village in the areas of perumparamba along with the postholes in large numbers on hard laterite surface led us to presume that a thriving life of people must have been there during the early historic period.

The large scale presence of *Kavus* and traditional cult spots in the village, which even braved the so called appropriation of non- Aryan

deities and cult spots by temple traditions emerged in the third century CE in peninsular India (Rajan, 2013), indicates preservation of the age old traditions rooted in belief in “life after death, hero worship and ancestral cult” (Gurukkal and Varrier, 1990) till now. Further, the facts borne out by the field work in the village and data available in the settlement registers of the village help us to assume that during the late medieval period, the village has become one that is dominated by the Brahmins, through material and ritual powers resulting in the formation of a typical pre-modern village in Ugrapuram where almost all service castes and institutions are present. A detailed enquiry in this regard would extend potential additions to the existing knowledge on pre-modern village societies in South India (Varier, 1994). Another dimension is the village’s involvement in trade. We see a number of Kadavus (jetties or river crossovers) which are still under the control of Brahmin illoms. Possibly, these must have been points of exchange of commodities reached from the surrounding villages where at least pepper has been grown in large extent to transport it via the river to the port of Calicut. On the whole, Ugrapuram village apparently offers immense possibilities for archaeological, historical and anthropological research.

Appendix I

Newly Founded Archaeological Remains from Ugrapuram Village



Nannangadi(Urn Burial) No 1



Nannangadi(Urn Burial) No.2

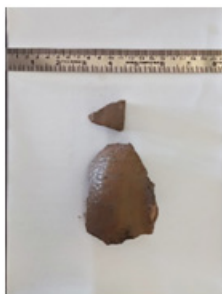


Microlith unearthed from soil around the Urns No.1&2



Small pot(Black and Red) from the Urn 2

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Sherds of Medieval pottery(Perumparamba)



Post holes (Perumparamba)

Source: Field Explorations by the authors. Authors express thanks to Dr. C.A. Anaz and Dr. U Shumais from the Department of History, Farook College for being part of the exploration.

Appendix II(a)

Table 1 : Description of Land Types in Ugrapuramdesam

Year	Wet		Garden		Occupied dry		Unoccupied dry		Unassessed		Inam		Puramboke		Total	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
	ACR.	CENT	ACR.	CENT	ACR.	CENT	ACR.	CENT	ACR.	CENT	ACR.	CENT	ACR.	CENT	ACR.	CENT
1901	110	49	243	40	99	64	399	56	2	59	6	0	71	97	939	65
1935	158	68	315	22	143	22	290	53	2	02	--	--	86	61	990	38

Source: Descriptive Memoir of Ugrapuram Desam No.125 of the Ernad Taluk (1901); Descriptive Memoir of Arikkod Amsam No.125 of the Ernad Taluk of Malabar District (1935)

Appendix II(b)

List of traditional deities propitiated in various *kavus* of Ugrapuram

Gurumuthappan

Kali

MundianBhadrakali

Karinkali

Karinkutty

Kalabhairavan

Poonkutty

AadamanKarinkutty

Vettilakkodumkali

Mudunkonkutty

Mariyamman

Kuttichathan

Gulikan

Notes

1. Interview with Santhakumari (53), School teacher at Perumparamba, Ugrapuram on 18th April 2020; Kottapurath Janardhanan Nair (71) Retired Tehsildar at Ugrapuram on 28th March 2020.
2. Interview with Chelly (85) a resident near the site at perumparamba, Ugrapuram on 19th April 2020
3. Interview with Kanichadi Balan Nair (62) at Perumparamba, Ugrapuram on 8th March 2020
4. Authors have visited pathayappura personally on 9.5.2020

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