

## KERALA

# Oxford archaeologists unravel the past of Pattanam



A. Srivathsan

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Oxford University archaeologists collaborate with Kerala Council for Historical Research at the Pattanam site. Photo: Thulasi Kakkat

Oxford archaeologists working at Pattanam, located 25 km north of Kochi, have confirmed that it was an Indian port frequented by Romans and have put to rest doubts about the antiquity of the site.

If the excavations and surveys go as planned, the UK team might also have answers to questions such as why Pattanam was chosen to create a major trading facility and how the once flourishing city disappeared.

Pattanam has a long history of habitation dating back to 10 century BCE and its trade links with Rome peaked between 1st century BCE and 4th century CE. Some experts have identified Pattanam as part of the lost port town of Muziris described in ancient Tamil and Roman texts.

The Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR), which has been conducting excavations at Pattanam since 2007, signed a memorandum of understanding with the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford, in 2010. Now, a team headed by Chris Gosden and Wendy Morrison have commenced excavations along with experts from the KCHR. The UK experts plan to use airborne surveying techniques such as LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) to map and understand the surface characteristics of this settlement.

Prof Chris Gosden, who is the Chair of European Archaeology and an expert in landscape studies and Eurasian connections, told *The Hindu* that the focus of their work was to study the formation of the landscape and geomorphological features of the settlement, and, then, contextualise the excavations. They would use data gathered from fieldwork and aerial surveys.

Prof. Gosden's initial impression is that Pattanam probably witnessed fierce monsoon rains in the past and the landscape was considerably volatile. He is of the view that Pattanam was a part of river delta and the presence of sand bars and islands may have contributed to its growth as a trading post.

To a question on whether Pattanam was the lost port town of Muziris, he said that it is not a question of utmost importance to him. There is rich evidence to show considerable exchange between two important powers in the world (India and Rome) then. To study the relationship and the process is critical, he said.

Dr Wendy Morrison, who has done extensive work in Dorchester, a Roman archaeological site in UK, said that the Oxford team was happy to collaborate with the KCHR and the MoU between them would also enable an expedition from Pattanam to come to UK to excavate at Dorchester. Such exchange of expertise would enrich mutual understanding of archaeological traditions, added Dr P.J. Cherian, Director, KCHR.