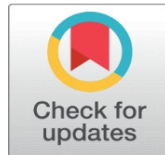


# INSCRIBED IN TIME: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF PALAYUR COPPER PLATES

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the historical significance of the Palayur Copper Plates in understanding the economic transactions of 17th century Kerala. The primary objective was to analyze the epigraphic data from the four copper plates discovered from Palayur church, dating back to 1606, 1677, 1681, and 1743. To achieve this, a detailed examination of the copper plates was conducted, focusing on land sale, market, and money-based economy. The results revealed that the Palayur Copper Plates provide valuable insights into the changing trends of economic transactions during this period. These findings highlight the significance of epigraphy in reconstructing historical records and understanding the economic dynamics of ancient Kerala.

**Keywords:** Epigraphy, Inscription, Royal Proclamation, Copper Plates)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Epigraphy, the study of inscriptions on durable materials, is a cornerstone of ancient history, particularly in India, which boasts a rich epigraphic heritage. These inscriptions, found on diverse media like seals, stone pillars, rocks, and especially copper plates, offer invaluable primary source material. Copper plate inscriptions (thamarashana), abundant in South India, primarily document land grants and royal genealogies, authenticated by royal seals.

Initially recorded on palm leaves, legal documents were later inscribed on more permanent surfaces like cave and temple walls, but most commonly on copper plates. The earliest verified examples date to the 4th century AD, during the Pallava dynasty. These copper plates typically follow a standardized structure: they begin by identifying the royal grantor and their lineage, followed by elaborate praise of their history, accomplishments, and character. They then detail the specifics of the land grant, including the circumstances, the recipient, and the consequences of violating its terms. While the hyperbolic language requires careful interpretation, these inscriptions have provided historians with a wealth of information.

In Kerala, rulers of the Malabar Coast used copper plates, known locally as "cheppeds" or "Sasanam" (royal grants), to bestow rights and privileges upon the Nasranis (St. Thomas Christians). Notable examples include the Iravikorthan Sasanam (1225 AD), the Tarisappalli Chepped (849 AD), and the Jewish Copper Plates (800 AD). Four such cheppeds have been discovered at the Palayur church in Thrissur.

Palayur, located in the Ponnani Taluk of British Malabar, is home to a historic Roman Syrian Church. According to tradition, (still a debatable topic) Palayur is one of the seven sites in South India where Apostle St. Thomas established the earliest Christian churches. The original name of Palayur, located in Chavakkad Taluk of Thrissur district, was 'Palur'. In the ancient Ramban Paattu (a traditional Christian ballad), the name appears as 'Palur'. One of the four copper plates preserved in the museum of the Palayur Church also bears the name 'Palur'. (1) Ancient texts by writers such as Ptolemy (AD 40), Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (AD 60), and Pliny the Elder (AD 77) mention Palur. It is believed that the place name 'Palura' found in Pliny's work refers to Palur.

On the second and third copper plates, of Palayur the name is written as "Palaiyur". It is believed that the transformation from "Palur" to "Palaiyur" occurred due to the strong influence of the Tamil language. Later, as Malayalam began to evolve and distinguish itself from Tamil, the Tamil letter 'lai' was simplified to 'la', leading "Palaiyur" to become "Palayur". On the fourth copper plate, the name appears as "Palayur" itself. (2)

There are several historical sources that attest to the significance of Palayur, including Jewish Malayalam folk songs, Jewish artifacts, St. Thomas Christian hymns, foreign notices, and village records. Palayur, referred to as Palur in some texts, is mentioned in Jewish Malayalam folk songs as one of the earliest Jewish settlements in Kerala. These songs, primarily prayers and blessings with strong Biblical undertones, were traditionally transmitted orally across generations and were only transcribed into notebooks beginning in the mid-19th century. Although the exact authorship and date of composition remain unknown, the frequent use of Tamil words and expressions suggests that some of these songs may have originated as early as the 16th century or earlier. Palayur is specifically referenced in at least four of these songs, including The Song of the Bird, also known as the Parrot Song.

The Song of the Bird, also known as the Parrot Song, narrates the arrival of Jews in Kerala through symbolic imagery. A bird fleeing from a hunter represents the Jewish people escaping persecution. Notably, the only place explicitly mentioned in the song is Palur, interpreted as "the side of the Palur Sea" or "the seashore of Palur." According to the song, after arriving in Palur, the Jews flee once more to "a splendid green mansion under a diamond-studded umbrella," widely believed to refer to Chendamangalam. Another traditional verse, the Song of Evarayi, recounts the journey of a Jewish figure named Evarayi, who sets out from Jerusalem and travels to Malanad (present-day Kerala). His first point of arrival is again Palur—translated as "Palur Bay" or "Palur Shore"—where the travelers sell the goods they had brought with them.

Palur is also prominently featured in other songs, including the Mala Synagogue Song and the Song of Paliathachan. Across these folk traditions, Palur consistently emerges as the initial site of Jewish settlement in Kerala. These narratives describe subsequent migrations from Palur to other significant locations such as Chendamangalam and Kodungallur. Collectively, these songs highlight the cultural and historical importance of Palur in the Jewish migration and settlement in Kerala, suggesting its role as a key point of arrival and early habitation. (3)

An object of particular interest in this context is a pair of Torah finials dated 1565, bearing the Hebrew inscription "Synagogue of Palu." The term Palu is commonly identified with Palayur, and these finials are regarded as direct evidence for the existence of a Jewish synagogue there. (4) However, another possible identification for Palu is Paluttu (modern-day Pullut), a lesser-known Jewish settlement near Kodungallur about which very little is known. A second noteworthy item is an old Torah scroll preserved in the Paravur synagogue. While it is traditionally believed to have been brought from Cranganore, an intriguing claim by a Malabari Jew settled in Jerusalem suggests that the scroll may have actually originated in Palayur rather than Cranganore.

Christian traditions also attribute significant importance to Palayur as one of their earliest settlements in India. Several early testimonies support this claim. Notably, the MS Vatican Syriac 22—one of the oldest known Syriac manuscripts of Indian origin—provides valuable evidence. Written by a deacon named Zakharya bar Joseph bar Zakharya, the colophon of the manuscript records that it was copied in 1301 AD at Chingala (identified with ancient Shingly or Cranganore), specifically at a church dedicated to Mar Quriaqos (St. Cyriac). This reference is possibly the earliest documentary evidence for the existence of a church in Palayur, originally dedicated to St. Cyriac. (5)

A Syriac document from 1504, written as a letter by four Chaldean bishops ordained for India—Mar Jaballaha, Mar Denha, Mar Jacob, and Mar Thomas—to their Catholicos and Patriarch of the East, Mar Elijah, contains the following statement: “The countries of India are very numerous and powerful, and their distance is about six months’ journey. Each country has a special name by which it is known, and our country in which the Christians are found is called Malabar. It has about twenty towns, out of which three are renowned and powerful: Karangol, Pallur, and Kullam, with others that are near them.” Here, “Pallur” is identified with Palayur, which, alongside Karangol (modern Kodungallur) and Kullam (modern Kollam), was recognized as a prominent Christian center in early 16th-century Malabar.

On 25 August 1566, the Chaldean Patriarch Mar Abdisho IV Maron appointed Archdeacon George of Christ, of the Church of Angamaly, as the bishop of Palur and suffragan to Archbishop Mar Abraham (d. 1597) of the St. Thomas Christians. Subsequently, Mar Abraham wrote to Pope Gregory XIII on 2 January 1578, requesting papal confirmation of the Archdeacon’s appointment as bishop of Palur and as the designated Metropolitan of the St. Thomas Christians following his own death. A response from Pope Gregory XIII, dated 4 March 1580, confirmed George of Christ as bishop of Palur. The following day, on 5 March 1580, another papal letter was addressed to the clergy and laity of the St. Thomas Christians in Malabar, instructing them to be obedient to both Mar Abraham and George of Christ, bishop-elect of Palur. The consistent use of the title bishop of Palur in these correspondences suggests that Palur (Palayur) was intended to serve as an episcopal seat in the 16th century, signifying its ecclesiastical and strategic importance within the Christian landscape of Malabar. (6)

In 1603, Francis Roz S.J., the successor of Mar Abraham and the first Latin bishop appointed over the St. Thomas Christians, undertook a pastoral visit to the church at Palur. This visit marked an important moment in the Latin ecclesiastical engagement with the Malabar Church. A few years later, in 1606, the Portuguese missionary António de Gouvea documented the existence of the church at “Pallur” (identified with present-day Palayur) in his well-known work *Jornada do Arcebispo Dom Alexis de Menezes*. In 1607, Jesuit missionary James Fenicio S.J., in a letter, noted that he had obtained permission to establish four churches within the territory of the Zamorin, one of which was at Palur. Further emphasizing its historical significance, the Edapally Padiyola of 1632 describes the St. Thomas Christians as Malankara Mar Thoma Nasranis and defines their geographical spread from Kollam in the south to Palur in the north.

In 1657, Joseph of St. Mary Sebastiani, the Apostolic Commissary appointed by the Pope, undertook his first expedition to Malabar, which lasted from 5th February 1657 to 7th January 1658. During this mission, he visited the church at Palur and met with its vicar. Sebastiani referred to Palur as “primo luogo della Christianità della Serra”—the primary place of Christianity in Malabar. Later, in the 1787 document known as the First Angamaly Padiyola—a resolution signed by representatives of 84 St. Thomas Catholic Churches—Paluru (Palayur) is listed as the 79th church. (7)

Palayur appears as “Palur” in two early Malayalam Christian folk compositions—Ramban Pattu (also known as Thomma Parvam) and Margamkali Pattu. Ramban Pattu is believed to be a ballad originally composed in the first century by a disciple of the Apostle Thomas named Ramban (monk) Thomas, a member of the Maliakkal family in Niranam. The version known today is said to be an abridgement by his 48th-generation descendant, also named Ramban Thomas, from the same family. Comprising 448 lines, the ballad narrates the apostolic mission and martyrdom of St. Thomas in South India. According to the song, St. Thomas spent one year (or possibly one month) in Palayur, during which he baptized 1,050 (or 1,250) converts and erected a splendid Sleeva (cross) (lines 136–144). The ballad also records a second visit by the Apostle to Palayur (line 202), en route to his martyrdom in Mylapore. Margamkali Pattu, the traditional song accompanying Margamkali—a ritual round-dance originally performed by men among the St. Thomas Christians—also references Palayur as “Palur.” The song, in its modern form, consists of 14 padams (sections) and around 450 lines, recounting the life and evangelizing efforts of St. Thomas in Kerala. (8)

A report submitted by Persian bishops who visited Kerala in 1504 to their Patriarch serves as another evidence for the presence of Christian community in Palayur. Additionally, James Fenicio, a Jesuit missionary who stayed in the Zamorin’s dominions from 1600 to 1607, obtained permission to build four churches in the region. His letter which has been quoted in the “Indicarum Rerum” reads: “I devoted all the remaining available time to the election of these churches and to the Christian inhabitants of this village Palur. I used to give them instructions as I chanced to meet them.... I devoted more especially to it. The stone church which I began two years ago had risen to the height of the windows...”

One thing to be noted is that in the olden days Palayur was known as Palur and due to the Tamil influence, it began to change and the place was called as Palaiyur and later on as Palayur. (9)

## 2. INSCRIPTIONS AS A STUDY

Archaeological evidences particularly in the references of William Logan, C.A Innes, H Hosten, Albert Gille, a Belgian Jesuit and L.K Ananthakrishna Ayyar also supports the historical significance of Palayur. Apart from references the most authentic information about Palayur was provided by the Palayur Copper plate.

In 1924 the 4 cheppeds of Palayur church came to the limelight. It was Rev.Fr.H.Hosten of Darjeeling who was touring in the state in January and February 1924 visited the church at Palayur in British Malabar which is 16 miles distant from Thrissur. And through him the impressions of the 4 cheppeds belonging to that church were sent to Travancore Archaeological Series that was later included in the same publication. (10)

Four copper plates are preserved in the museum of Palayur Church. Among them, the first three are believed to have been written in the 17th century, and one in the 18th century. These copper plates, written in the Vattezhuthu script, remained undiscovered until the 20th century. In 1924, a priest named H. Hosten from Darjeeling visited the Palayur Church, and the copper plates caught his attention. He made copies of them and submitted them to the Travancore Archaeological Department. They later published them in the Travancore Archaeological Series. It is solely due to the curiosity and thirst for knowledge of that foreign priest that the Palayur copper plates became part of Kerala's ancient archival collection and came to the attention of the outside world.

The four cheppeds recovered from Palayur church belonged to KE 781, KE 852, KE 856 and KE 918 respectively, corresponding to AD 1606, 1677, 1681 and 1743. One important factor about the chepped is that the script used in them was 'vattezhuthu'. Most of the 'sasanams' and 'theeturams' of the period was also used the same script. But it didn't mean that it was the common language of the people.

## 3. FIRST COPPER PLATE OF KE 781

It measures 9" in length. It was prepared in the month of 'Kumbham' of the KE 781. It was a deed of mortgage with possession. It states that from the Palayur church priest Parukkulangara Ittiachan and pravarthikkar (managers of the church), Koothancherri Iravi Narayanan bought 1055 'puthupanam' as loan. And as interest 'nerpathi' of this amount. Iravi Narayanan gave his land of Elamkulathu Vadakkeparambu at Iringapuram Desam and also the nearby 40 'nazhi' of cultivable land as pattam. The writer of the document and the witness to the transaction were Madakkavil Chathappa Menon and Korhanellu Namboodiri respectively. (11)

When we go through the details, we can see some historical facts within. One is that even in those days transactions of the church were undertaken with the consent of not only the vicar (priest) but also the pravarthikkar. Another point is that in the copper plate Chathappa Menon recorded the name of Parukkulangara Ittiachan as achanar which means from the beginning of 17th century itself the Syrian Christians called their priest as achan. One more factor is that in the document of the church the writer and witness were Chathappa Menon and Kothanellur Namboodiri and the debtor was Koothancherri Iravi Narayanan. Moreover, it may be the first reference of a native Christian priest called achan or vicar. Each one of them belonged to different castes which was clear from their names. It tells the fact that even under the Portuguese threat to isolate the Kerala Christians; the traditional communal harmony was well maintained in that period. (12)

## 4. SECOND COPPER PLATE OF KE 852

A historic document, dated to the Chingam month of KE 852, records a land transaction. Measuring 17" x 2", the document is written in the vattezhuthu script on both sides. It details the sale of a plot called Paliparamb in Achchalam, Palayur Desam, by Kaman-Kamar and his brothers to Sakku Kathanar, the ecclesiastical head of the Mar Kuriakko Sahada church at Palayur. (13)

## 5. THIRD COPPER PLATE OF KE 856

This document, prepared in the Midunam month of KE 856, measures 11.5" x 1.875" and features a neatly executed record in the Vattezhuthu script. The inscription is a mortgage deed with possession, stating that Suri-Itti borrowed 111 panam from the Palayur church authorities at an interest rate of 'nerpalisa'. As collateral, Suri-Itti pledged certain lands,

whose produce would be enjoyed by the church and applied towards the interest. The transaction was facilitated by Sakku Kathanar, the vicar of Palayur, in the presence of the church's pattakkaran and pravarthikkaran. (14)

## 6. FOURTH COPPER PLATE OF KE 918

This inscription is engraved on a single copper plate belonging to the Palayur church. The plate measures 1m and 4 3/4" in length and 2 1/2" in breadth. The writing is also in the vattezhuthu script. It registers the complete purchase of a free hold property, by the vicar of the Palayur church, from Raman Pangan and his brothers of Achchaliyam a hamlet of that village. The writer of the document and the witnesses to the transactions were Keralan Kandan of Kongadu, the residents of Talappalli and Chavakkad, the 'muthavar' (elders) Mamma and Kaimal of Kuttampalli. (15)

## 7. CONCLUSION

The Palayur Copper plates throw light into land sale, market and money-based economy. Two types of exchanges are referred in the records; first one is a deed of mortgage with possession and the second one is purchase of land against money. Money is the medium of exchange in both transactions. Similar land exchanges were present in the Hindu temples but the Palayur Copper plates are first such instance in the case of a church in Kerala. The copper plate that dated in KE 852 used a phrase "annu perum arthavum". The phrase "Annu Perum Artham" can be broken down into its constituent parts: "Annu" meaning "at that time", "Perum" meaning "worth" or "current", and "Artham" meaning "money". Together, the phrase signifies that the seller received a fair market value for the land, consistent with the prevailing rates at the time of the transaction. It shows that there was a fixed price for the land. All the transactions indicate the enormous property of land inherited by the Palayur church. Interest for the loan is referred in the document but its rate is not mentioned at all. In this context, it is assumed that the church played the role of a bank. The second Copper Plate of KE 852 proves that the local chieftains also recognized the financial role of the church. The land transactions mentioned in the record was made in the presence of the local chieftains. In short, these copper plates are useful to understand the changing trends in the economic transactions of the 17th century Kerala.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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