

ALAGANKULAM

A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Chapter 1

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Alagankulam (literally meaning the tank of Alagan) a tiny village about 24 km. east of Ramanathapuram, lying on the northern bank of Vaigai river near the confluence of it with the Bay of Bengal, appears to have played a very important role as one of the ports on the eastern coast of Tamilnadu, during 2nd century B.C. to 2nd Century A.D. as attested by the archaeological finds.

Barring the archaeological artefacts there is no direct evidence with regard to this village either from literature or epigraphs. However, the Sangam literature and the account of Ptolemy mention a few places in this vicinity as important sea ports that played a significant role in the trade contacts between Tamilnadu and the Far East and the Far West. *Ahananuru*, one of the Sangam works refers to two places Unur and Marungurpattinam which appear to have been in the close proximity to the present Alagankulam according to the descriptions found in it.¹ *Maduraikkanchi* another work of the same age mentions one Nellinur which also seems to have been located around Alagankulam as seen from its description.² Mayilai Seeni Venkatasami locates this Marungur in between Tondi and Korkai.³

Marungurpattinam was divided into two parts namely Unur and Marungur. Marungur was the sea shore area while Unur was lying on the western part of it. It seems that these places were similar to those of

Maruvurppakkam and Pattinappakkam of Kavirippumpattinam. This Unur also seems to have been surrounded by fort wall as that of Pattinappakkam in Kavirippumpattinam. *Ahananuru* (227:18-20) gives an elaborate description of this Unur and Marungurpattinam as follows :

“கடிமதில் வரைப்பின் ஊணூர் உம்பர்
விழுநிதி துஞ்சம் வீறு பேறு திருநகர்
இருங்கழிப் படப்பை மருங்கூர்ப் பட்டினம்”

In another poem of *Ahananuru*, Unur is described as a place which was abundant with paddy.

“முழங்கு கடல் ஓதம் காலைச் சொட்கும்
பழம்பல் நெல்லின் ஊணூர் (அகம் : 220)

Nellin Unur is identified with Nellin Ur of *Maduraikkanchi* wherein the place is portrayed as a very busy port to which a number of ships used to bring articles from different countries. The waiting ships at this port have been compared with the group of mountains that are about to seize the flood (*Maduraikkanchi*, 75-88).

If the above identifications are taken into consideration one could unhesitatingly identify the present Alagankulam with the ancient Unur and Marungurpattinam as they were believed to have been situated between Tondi and Korkai on the eastern coast.⁴

It is understood from the local legend that this village was ruled by a king known as Alagendran. He built a beautiful palace and a strong fort surrounded by a deep moat in this village. Hence this village was called as Alagendramangalam which in course of time was

corrupted as Alagankulam. A late Tamil ballad called *Nalumandirakkummi* gives a vivid description about this village and the ruler.

In Alagankulam there is a small mound known as Kottaimedu covering an area of nearly 15 to 20 acres on the western side. This mound is divided into two parts by the Tar road leading to this village. On the northern part of this mound there is a High School. The southern part is virtually barren except having some thorny bushes. About 2 km. east of this Alagankulam, a village called Arrangarai is situated just on the mouth of the river Vaigai which is emptying its water with the Bay of Bengal.

In the month of September 1984, the village munsiff brought one Punch marked coin, a few semi-precious stone beads and some potsherds of foreign origin. On examination of them, the general author of this report had deputed the Curator of Rameswaram, Thiru Sampath to make an intensive exploration. During his exploration he was able to collect a considerable number of potsherds namely Rouletted sherds, Amphora pieces, and some shell bangle pieces. Immediately, this discovery of Roman potsherds was made known to the public through press media by the General author.⁶

Chapter II

CUTTINGS

In order to examine the archaeological potentialities of Alagankulam, actual excavation was started in the year 1986-87 by the Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology.⁷ In this season, only two trenches were laid bare and were named as AGM-1 and AGM-2. The first trench was excavated on the top most point of this mound, while the second one was on the eastern slope of it. Then in the second season i.e. in the year 1990-91 four trenches were cut known as AGM 3/A1, AGM 3/A2, AGM 3/B1 and AGM 4⁸.

AGM 1

AGM 1 was laid bare on the top most portion of the mound, north of Government High School. The measurement of this trench was 4×4 meters lying in north south orientation. The actual digging was carried out in the south eastern side of the trench in between the pegs I and II, covering an area of 2×2m. Digging was to be stopped at the depth of 5.10 m. due to the occurrence of mortar flooring.

Further digging was started on the north eastern side of the trench on the eastern part in between the pegs II and IV. Digging at this portion reached upto the depth of 3.85 m. Then in order to examine the flooring portion excavation was carried out in a part

of the flooring side. After having reached the depth to 4.95 m. the digging was made in the whole eastern part of the trench in between O to IV pegs. It went upto 5.25 m. Sensing the danger of landslide, digging was shifted to the western portion of the trench in between the pegs position of O' to IV'. At the depth of 6.35 m. natural soil occurred in this portion.

Nine layers were noticed in this trench, being the first layer was made up of grey loose clay mixed with sand extending upto 1.90 metre. From this depth the second layer forming slightly of hard clay in grey colour mixed with sand started extending to the depth of 3 metre. The third layer was of grey hard clay occurring to the depth of 4.10 metre while the fourth layer was made up of grey loose clay mixed with a few brick bats. It was found upto the depth of 4.45 metre, Afterwards, the formation of grey loose sand appeared as layer fifth reaching to the depth of 4.60 metre. The sixth layer consisting of yellow hard clay occurred till 5.10 metre. Slightly dusts in grey colour forming as layer seven was noticed upto the depth of 5.60 m. Then began the eighth layer made up of grey loose clay reaching to the depth of 6.05 metre. Ninth layer was formed of white loose sand extending to the depth of 6.25 metre.

At the depth of 5.25 metres a highly polished black ware known as N.B.P. ware was unearthed and the date of this ware is probably assignable to 400 B.C. This ware is supposed to have occurred even before the period of Mauryas and ended in C 100 B.C. It was in use at Taxila, Bihar, Hasthinapur, Atrangikhera and

Ahichatra and found as far south as Amaravati. Similar N.B.P. ware also noticed in Korkai excavation. Some scholars opine that the NBP ware is the associated ware of the Painted Grey ware and hence they date it to 600 B.C.

AGM 2

This trench was cut covering an area of 3×3.5 metre reaching to the depth of 3.40 metre between the pegs I-II and I' - II' on the northern side and to the depth of 3.60 metre on the southern side between the pegs 0-1 and 0' - 1'. The digging was possible to reach the natural soil at 4.85 m. in a small portion on the eastern side of the trench in between I' and II'. Due to the occurrence of a mud floor at the depth of 3.40 m. the excavation was not carried out in that portion. Similarly at the depth of 2.35 m. between the pegs of 0-1 and 0'-1' mortar flooring occurred below the level of charcoal deposits. Hence the digging could not be continued in that area also.

Totally this trench revealed six layers made of different texture. First layer is characterised with the grey loose soil mixed with sand, while the second layer was made of brownish loose soil associated with large number of brick bats and tile pieces. Third layer was of brown hard sand. Fourth layer was formed of yellow hard sand while the fifth layer was slightly differed by containing a few brick-bats. The sixth layer was made up of yellow loose sand.

At the depth of 1.00 m. a dump filled with brick bats, tile pieces and potsherds appeared between the

pegs of II and III. Occurrence of grooved tile pieces in large number was noticed from the level of 0.90 m. depth to 1.90 metre depth in the eastern part of the trench.

At the depth of 1.85 metre a pit was noticed at the eastern portion of the trench containing a large number of sawed conches, brick bats and grooved tile pieces.

Another interesting feature of this trench was the appearance of black band of carbon running on all sides indicating the occurrence of fire at the depth of 1.55 metre

Another pit was noticed at the depth of 2.40 metre. It contained shell pieces and a few Black and Red ware sherds in well preserved condition, retaining the original shining.

AGM 3 Block

In AGM 3 block, the trench AGM 3/A1 was laid out on the eastern side of AGM 1 measuring to the extent of 4×4 metre. It was dug upto the depth of 0.80 m. where a lime mortar floor was met extending in north-south orientation of the trench. Hence, the digging was stopped at this level to examine the flooring.

At the depth of 0.45 m. a dice or a weight with four sides made up of the rim portion of a Rouletted ware bearing symbols was found. Another important find is a small round copper coin of Arcadius I, a Roman King (395-408 AD). A

Rouletted pot sherd was also found with ancient Tamil Brahmi script which reads as "Sirita" at the depth of 0.50 m.

On the eastern side of this trench Block AGM 3/A2 was laid bare in order to assess the extension of the flooring that occurred in Block AGM 3/A1. The measurement of this trench also was 4×4 metre. It reached to the depth of 6.40 metres. Five layers were noticed in this trench.

An hearth was noticed near the eastern wall of this block in layer 3. In the same level two post holes were also found, in the north eastern and south eastern corner of this Block. The distance between the two post-holes was 4.50 mts. In the upper level of this layer where the hearth and post holes occurred, a heap of brick bats not in alignment was also noticed. It runs from the north eastern corner of the wall towards the western corner in a zig zag manner. In the whole trench the brick bats were seen in a scattered manner at this level. The occurrence of post holes and hearth indicate the existence of dwelling huts made up of wooden posts and thatched roofs. This was the first phase of the dwelling. At the beginning of this layer a huge amount of brick bats were noticed. The occurrence of brick bats and iron nails at this level lead one to think that the people used the burnt bricks and iron nails for the construction of their dwellings in later period. Hence it seems to be the second phase of the dwellings.

The lime mortar flooring noticed in Block AGM 3/A1 and AGM 3/B1 appears to be the third phase of the dwelling.

A square copper coin was found in layer 4. The coin may belong to Cheras or Pandyas of Sangam age. A gold ring which is spiral in form was found in layer 5. Three copper coins, a circular metallic weight and a copper ring were also unearthed in this block.

Another trench called Block AGM 3/B1 was cut on the Northern side of Block AGM 3/A1 in order to find out if the lime mortar floor extends towards north also. The area of this trench was also 4 x 4 metre. At the depth of 0.85 m. the same lime mortar floor was met. Hence the excavation was stopped at this level in this trench also.

There were traces of the existence of a mud wall in this level at the eastern side of this block.

AGM 4

This trench was marked about 20 metres north of AGM 1 measuring to 4 x 3 metres. It revealed six layers reaching natural soil at the depth of 6.40 metre.

Chapter III

POTTERY

Black and Red ware, Northern Black Polished ware, Rouletted ware and coarse red ware occurred in Period I. The shapes of Black and Red ware were bowls, basins, lids, dishes etc. The shapes of Northern Black Polished ware were mostly dishes. While the Rouletted ware shapes were almost dishes, the shapes of grey ware were vases, dishes and bowls. The shapes of coarse red ware were storage jars, vases, basins, bowls and dishes.

As said earlier the period II was characterised by the occurrence of Amphorae pieces, Rouletted sherds, grey ware with impressions, stamped pottery and a few inscribed sherds.

Amphorae pieces

Only the neck, handle and shoulder portions of the amphorae pieces were collected in this period. The usual shapes of Black and Red ware that occurred in Period I, continued to occur in period II also.

Rouletted wares

Nearly eight different types of rouletted patterns are found on the rouletted sherds collected from this site.

Rouletted patterns

Pattern 1 , is seen in an interesting potsherd which has brown glazing on the inner side and the black glazing on the external side. The rouletted pattern is the hi-pen marks in a row of eight lines one above the other.

Pattern 2 , is seen on black dish, where the rouletted pattern has concentric rings with dots.

Pattern 3 , is seen the black sherd. A row of wavy lines on within a wavy bands in between concentric rings with hi-pen marks is found.

Pattern 4 , is seen on a cream coloured ware which has the glazing in the inner side. The Rouletted patterns are concentric rings with slanting lines.

Pattern 5 , is seen on a black were with simple concentric lines one above the other.

Pattern 6 , is seen on a coloured ware in the inner side of which are three concentric lines with straight hi-pen marks.

Pattern 7 , has the concentric rings of wavy lines.

Pattern 8 , is seen on a fine glazing variety of Black sherd where the concentric circles of five numbers with rectangular dots one above the other are found.

Stamped potteries : Four stamped potteries were recovered from Alagankulam. The shapes of the potteries are only bowls. On the interior side of the bowl any one of the following figures such as the leaf, peacock, dove or parrot is found stamped in a row. These potteries are as important as the Rouletted and Arretine wares. Because these are also believed to have been manufactured under Hellenistic influence during the beginning of the post Christian era. Similar potteries had been noticed in Arikamedu excavation.

In addition to these some rare varieties of pot sherds that are also considered to have been influenced by west Asian Culture had also been collected from surface. One of these is the base of a bowl having a knob on the inner base. The other variety is also the base of the bowls bearing leaf motifs in between two concentric circles on the inner side.

Another most important find of AGM1 is a sherd bearing the incised figure of a horse rider. This technique is a new one so far as the potsherds of Tamilnadu are concerned

Inscribed sherds

Two inscribed pot sherds were unearthed in the trenches of AGM 1 and AGM 3 Block A1. The scripts are in Archaic Tamil characters and assignable

to 100 B.C. to 100 A.D. The reading of the inscribed potsherds are given below. Apart from these two, four inscribed potsherds were collected from the surface itself. The reading of them are also given below

| | Place | Reading | Material |
|----|--------------------------|------------------|---|
| 1. | AGM 1 4.10 mt. | pi ti u ra yu | Red Rouletted, shoulder, written upside down. |
| 2. | AGM 3BlockA1 0.50 mt. | ci ri ta | Red rouletted, shoulder portion, written before firing. |
| 3. | Surface | ca mu ta ha | Black rouletted, fine variety, written after firing. |
| 4. | Surface | [ka] ta ma a[la] | Grey ware, after firing. |
| 5. | Surface | sa ma | Grey ware, written after firing, fine variety. |
| 6. | Surface | ti ca ma n | Red rouletted, written after firing, fine variety. |

Graffiti

Graffiti marks are seen engraved especially on the potsherds of Black and Red ware. They are in the forms of leaf, trident, triangle, fish and parallelogram etc. Graffiti marks are seen on the coarse red ware also.

Chapter IV

COINS

Ten coins were recovered from the excavated trenches and two were collected from the surface. Roman coins of Valentine II (383-395 A.D.), Theodesius I (388-393 A.D.) and Arcadius I (395-408 A.D.) are noteworthy.

1) Valentine II

Obverse : Head of the king with legend "DN VALENTINIAN VS PF AVG".

Reverse : Constantinopolis, helmeted, standing head left, holding sceptre in left hand and holding victory in right hand; The legend reads CONCORDI AVGGG (the concord of the Augusti)⁹.

Material : Copper

Weight : 1.720 gms.

2) Theodesius I (383-393 A.D.)

Obverse : Script not decipherable. Bust of the king with diadem and Imperial cloak.

Reverse : A standing figure holding something in its right hand and carrying or holding a child by its left with legend SALUS REIPUBLICAE.

Material: Copper

Weight: 1.710 gms.

3) Arcadius I (395-408 A.D.)

Obverse: Head of the king with legend “(DNA)RCADIVS”.

Reverse: Corroded Victory advancing left holding trophy over shoulder in the right hand and dragging captive with left; Tyte SALUS REPUBLICAN.¹⁰

Material: Copper

Weight: 1.236 gms.

Apart from these coins, a square copper coin probably of Pandya's of Sangam age was also unearthed. Figure of an elephant and a gad and auspicious symbols like wheel, purnaghata etc. are seen on the obverse. The traces of the line for fish symbol appear to be found on the reverse. One small circular coin, a silver punch-marked coin and a copper punch marked coin with a tree in railing are other important findings. They are almost corroded.

Chapter V

ANTIQUITIES

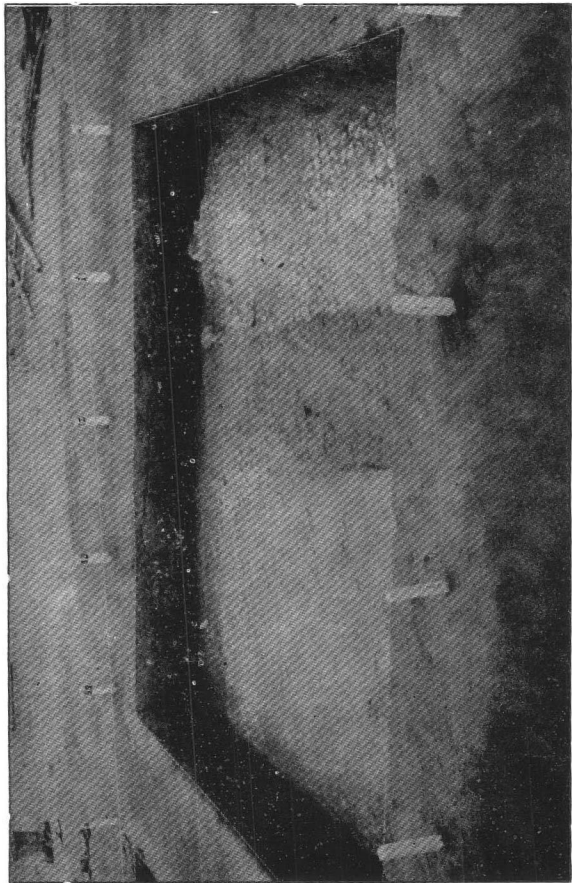
An object made of a potsherd is an outstanding find of this site. It is made up of a rim portion of the rouletted ware having four sides. Three sides bear the symbols while the fourth side is in plain. The first side is seen with a vertical line. The second side is marked with a symbol like tree in railing having a horizontal line on the left, while the third side is similar to the second with a slight variation having the horizontal line on the right. The fourth side is left plain. This leads one to believe that this might have been used as dice. If this identification is proved to be correct then the symbols found on the object are to be taken as numerals representing one, two and three on the three sides. The tree in railing symbol can be found on punch marked coins.

A decorated handle of probably a comb made of bone and a terracotta ring with hexagonal sides are the other important antiquities of this site.

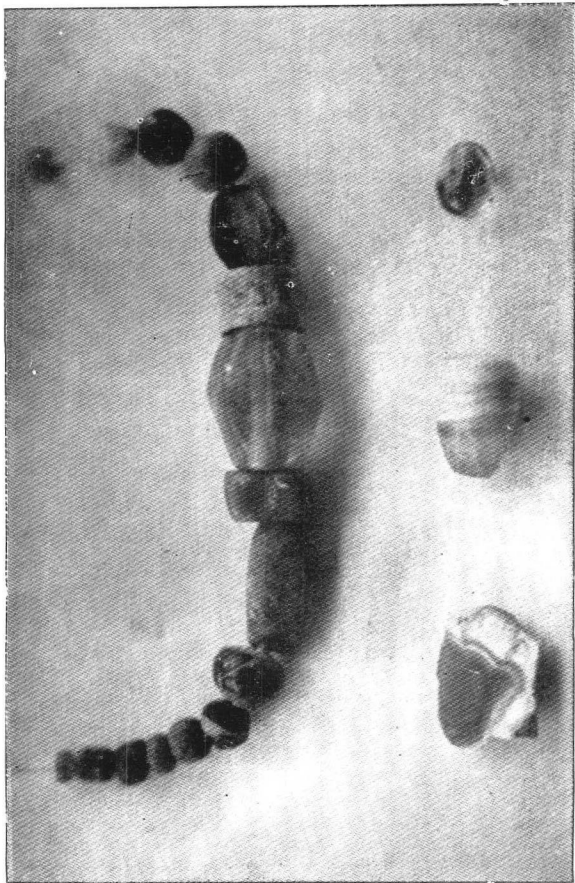
MINOR ANTIQUITIES

Beads

Semi-precious stone beads of Alagankulam are made of carnelian, amethyst, jasper, agate and crystal. The carnelian beads are predominant when compared to other beads. The pendants in different shapes of carnelian had also been collected. Steatite, paste beads and glass beads of different colours such as green and blue had also been unearthed in considerable quantity.



View of Lime mortar flooring in AGM 3 Block. (see page - 7)



Semi - precious stone beads, Alagankulam. (see page-16)



Inscribed pot-herd, Rouletted ware - Red. (see page - 8)

Chapter VI

CULTURAL SEQUENCES

Strictly speaking it is very difficult to narrate the cultural sequence of this site since almost all varieties of potsherds occurred here from the first layer to the bottom most layer. Fortunately a considerable quantity of charcoal was able to collect from AGM 1 and AGM 2. On the analysis of this sample some dates have been arrived. These dates are the sheet anchor as far as this site is concerned as we could not rely on the associate findings. Because most of the associate findings were collected either from surface or in dumps and pits. However with the help of the enumerations of the occurrence of pottery and the Radio Carbon dating the tentative cultural sequences have been given.

This site seems to have been in continuous occupation from atleast 400 B.C. to 500 A.D. The evcavation at this site has revealed two broad cultural periods *i.e.* Period I and II.

Period I

It is characterised by the occurrence of the following ceramics:

1. Black and Red ware
2. N.B.P. ware
3. Rouletted ware

Chapter VII

CONCLUSION

The excavation at Alagankulam revealed beyond doubt that this place might have been an important port city as Kaviripoompattinam and Korkai on the east coast and could have played vital role in the improvement of commerce of Tamilnadu. It appears that it was equally a very busy centre as Arikamedu in the southern part of Tamilnadu.

To attest this fact we got a large number of Rouletted and what could be termed as Alagankulam potteries which might have been manufactured either for the use of foreign settlers at Alagankulam or for exporting to the far eastern countries such as Java, Sumatra and Malaysia. The occurrence of Roman coins also corroborate that there was a strong cultural and commercial relation between Tamils and Western countries. The fine variety of N.B.P. sherds that had been unearthed from this site strongly stress the fact that a cordial relationship was prevalent between Tamils and the people of Gangetic region.

Considering the occurrence of a large number of pink colour sherds one is led to think that the commerial contacts with the Hellenistic world had also some influences on the material culture of the Tamils.

Chapter VI

CULTURAL SEQUENCES

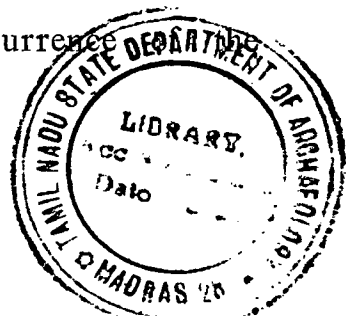
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Excavated Sites in Tamilnadu

Chengalpattu M.G.R. District

| | | | |
|-----|-----------------|---|-----|
| 1. | Vadamadurai | — | ASI |
| 2. | Attirampakkam | — | ASI |
| 3. | Gudiyam | — | ASI |
| 4. | Krishnapuram | — | ASI |
| 5. | Perumbeir | — | ASI |
| 6. | Sanur | — | ASI |
| 7. | Kunnathur | — | ASI |
| 8. | Pallavaram | — | ASI |
| 9. | Amirthamangalam | — | ASI |
| 10. | Pallavamedu | — | STA |
| 11. | Kanchipuram | — | MSU |
| 12. | Vasavasamudram | — | STA |

South Arcot District

| | | | |
|-----|----------------|---|-----|
| 13. | Kudikadu | — | MSU |
| 14. | Sengamedu | — | ASI |
| 15. | Gaurimedu | — | ASI |
| 16. | Muthirapalayam | — | ASI |
| 17. | Suttukeni | — | ASI |
| 18. | Nathamedu | — | ASI |
| 19. | Tiruvakkarai | — | MSU |
| 20. | Thiruvamathur | — | MSU |

Thirunelveli Kattabomman District

| | | | |
|-----|------------------|---|-----|
| 21. | Adichanallur | — | ASI |
| 22. | Ukkirankottai | — | ASI |
| 23. | Panchalankuruchi | — | STA |

Excavated Sites in Tamilnadu

Chengalpattu M.G.R. District

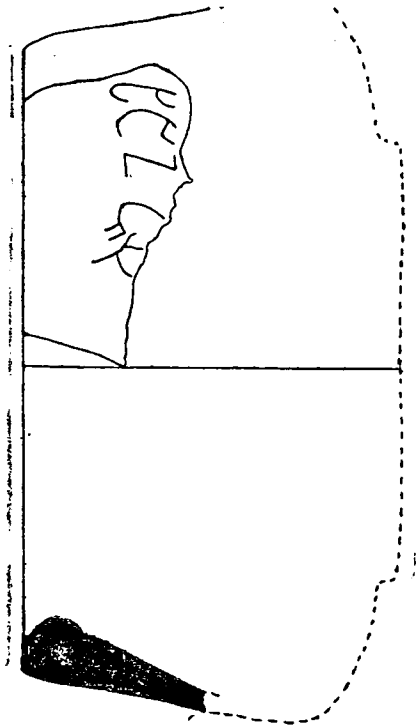
| | | |
|--------------------|----|-----|
| 1. Vadamadurai | — | ASI |
| 2. Attirampakkam | — | ASI |
| 3. Gudiyam | — | ASI |
| 4. Krishnapuram | — | ASI |
| 5. Perumbeir | — | ASI |
| 6. Sanur | — | ASI |
| 7. Kunnathur | — | ASI |
| 8. Pallavaram | — | ASI |
| 9. Amirthamangalam | — | ASI |
| 10. Pallavamedu | -- | STA |
| 11. Kanchipuram | — | MSU |
| 12. Vasavasamudram | — | STA |

South Arcot District

| | | |
|--------------------|---|-----|
| 13. Kudikadu | — | MSU |
| 14. Sengamedu | — | ASI |
| 15. Gaurimedu | — | ASI |
| 16. Muthirapalayam | — | ASI |
| 17. Suttukeni | — | ASI |
| 18. Nathamedu | — | ASI |
| 19. Tiruvakkarai | — | MSU |
| 20. Thiruvamathur | — | MSU |

Thirunelveli Kattabomman District

| | | |
|----------------------|---|-----|
| 21. Adichanallur | — | ASI |
| 22. Ukkirankottai | — | ASI |
| 23. Panchalankuruchi | — | STA |



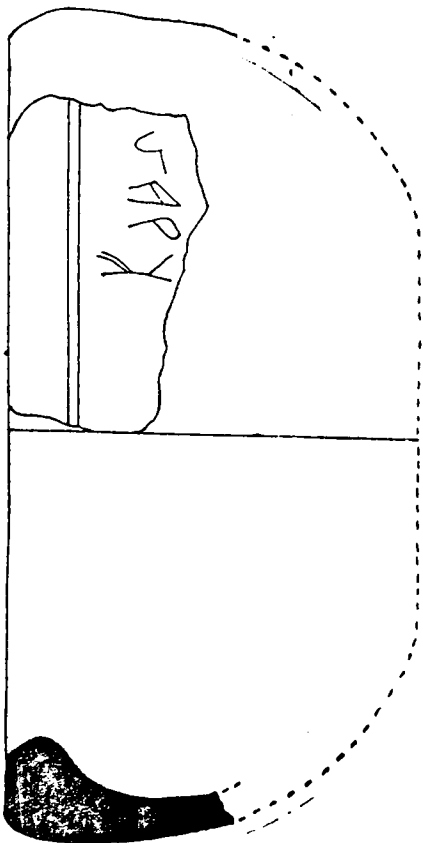
Inscribed pot-shoulder-Script is written upside down. Rouletted ware - Red colour



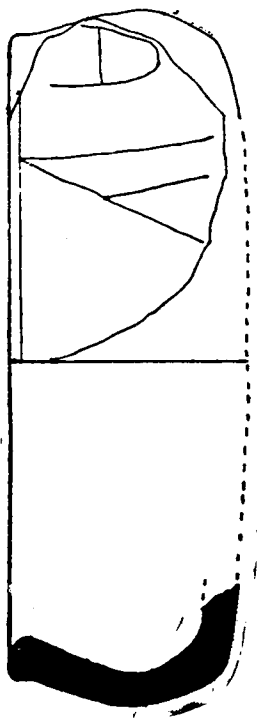
Inscribed pot-herd - Rouletted Grey ware



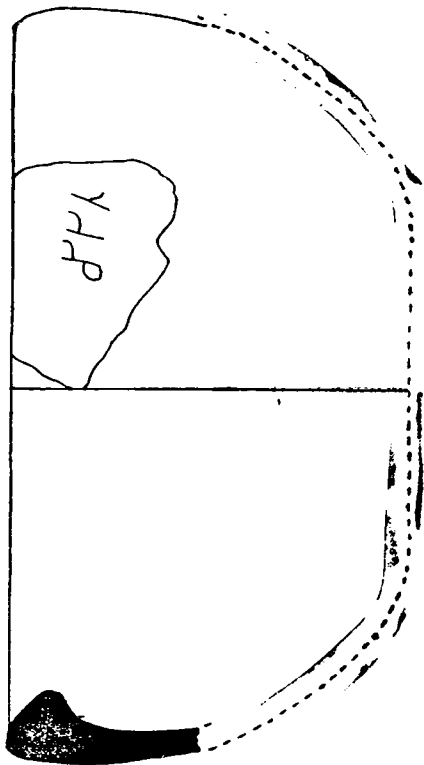
Inscribed pot-herd - Rouletted ware - Black colour



Inscribed pot-shoulder - Rouletted ware - (Red in colour)



Inscribed pot - sherd, Grey ware.



Inscribed pot-shoulder, Rouletted ware, Red colour.



Coin of VALENTINIAN II, Copper, (383 - 395 A.D.)