

# Antiquity

VOL. XXI No. 81

MARCH 1947

## Editorial Notes

WE make no apology for directing the attention of our readers once more to the new periodical *Ancient India*, for the second number, which has recently reached us, contains the account of an excavation of such surpassing interest for archaeologists and historians that the news of it should be spread widely as soon as possible. In the summer of last year the Director General of Antiquities for India, Dr Mortimer Wheeler, undertook a short excavation (between April and June) at a site (called Arikamedu) some two miles south of Pondicherry, where the remains of walls projecting from the cliffs above a lagoon and some previously reported Roman finds promised well. The results have been quite sensational.



The walls proved to be those of two buildings, apparently warehouses, which had been occupied and used during the first two centuries of our era, and had undergone extensive alterations and remodelling in the course of that occupation: in one structure was a well, and in the other a tank which could have been used for the dyeing of muslins. Although no Roman coins were discovered, a great quantity of Roman imported ware and of native ware came to light on the lower levels, in addition to a number of Graeco-Roman *amphorae* and two fragments of Graeco-Roman glass. More fortunate still the pottery was of that red lustrous type commonly termed Arretine ware, and this serves to date the strata and the associated native pottery with a considerable degree of precision. Arretine ware is well known: it began to be fashionable after 50 B.C., rose to its height under the reign of Augustus, and the first fifteen years or so of Tiberius, and was then displaced in popular favour by the cheaper wares which some enterprising potters began to put out from new kilns in the south of Gaul. Thus, by a piece of singular good fortune, early south Indian ware receives a close and precise dating from the Western pottery—for the influx of Arretine ware can hardly have begun until the advent of Augustus and the 'Augustan Peace' had encouraged the resumption of trade with India on a large scale (say after 30 B.C.), and it is unlikely that importation would have gone on for more than a couple of decades after the ware had fallen out of fashion in the West. It is in fact reasonable and safe to assign the strata in which Arretine occurs to a period of 75 years lying between 25 B.C. and A.D. 50, with a slight margin at either end. This complete synchronistic linkage between Western and Indian pottery renders possible a precise chronological dating for Indian finds, and archaeologically speaking is perhaps the most important and promising result of Dr Wheeler's brilliantly conducted dig.



But there is another result of engrossing interest for the history of trade-relations between the East and the West, or at any rate between the Roman Empire and India. These finds throw a new and clear beam of light on those relations during the early

## ANTIQUITY

Empire, for while they support the literary evidence for the great volume of trade that went India-wards from the time of Augustus, they also suggest that direct trade had extended beyond Cape Comorin long before the first half of the first century was concluded. The author of the *Periplus* (a sort of sailing directions for India), who can be certainly dated between A.D. 40 and 70, does not appear to have got further than the towns of Muziris and Nelcynda on the Malabar Coast, though he has information from others who had rounded Cape Comorin. But it is difficult to believe that the large number of sherds found on the site do not represent direct traffic in Graeco-Roman bottoms; on that hypothesis some Western merchants were already bringing back muslins from the Pondicherry region by 50 or thereabouts. On the other hand the admirable distribution map of Coin-finds, which Dr Mortimer Wheeler has affixed to his account, presents the reader with clear evidence that the bulk of the traffic down to A.D. 50 was still with the Malabar Coast, where Muziris and Nelcynda lay. The overwhelming majority of the coins found are of Augustus and Tiberius, and the sites of the finds are nearly all in the Coimbatore district, the great beryl-producing region.



Thus the archaeological evidence points cumulatively to intense commerce during the first century of the Empire, thereby backing up the statement of Strabo that from one Red Sea port alone as many as 120 vessels might set sail in *any* one year. That commerce must have been mainly in luxury articles—precious and semi-precious stones, spices, drugs, and muslins—for which the West had to pay heavily in its own gold and silver. What also seems to emerge from a study of the maps is a gradual falling-off in the period after Nero, when the frugal-minded Vespasian was ruling, and retrenchment and economy were the order of the day, though the fact that his son Domitian built the great pepper-warehouses at Rome (*Horrea Piperataria*) should incline us to caution. Yet though trade may have diminished in bulk the traders lacked neither courage nor enterprise: they steadily extended their voyages Eastward until by the second quarter of the second century Roman merchants had actually touched a port in China.

But such a topic takes us far beyond this brilliant discovery of Dr Mortimer Wheeler. While we congratulate him we must also greedily ask for more, and hope that workers in kindred fields will add their efforts too. For example, will not the Director General turn his attention to the Malabar Coast, where carefully planned digging might produce a rich harvest, perhaps even the site of that *TEMPLUM AUGUSTI* that the Peutinger Map marks; perhaps more pottery and coins, to establish a firm chronology; perhaps tombstones and dedications that would tell us more about the nationality, speech and life of the traders who resided in the various *commercia* (to use Pliny's term). We may ask for more information from the French *École d'Extrême Orient*; discoveries of a Graeco-Roman lamp in Siam, and of Antonine coins in Cochin China have already been made, and we may expect still more finds that will disclose the Eastward expansion of Roman trade during the second century. Perhaps too some scholar will undertake an up-to-date classification and cataloguing of the Roman coins found in China, together with a Distribution Map, for that would reveal much. Lastly, East Africa may have something to contribute.

It would be ungracious to close this notice on a set of demands and expectations when so much has already been achieved. Let us end as we began with a salute to the discrimination, enterprise and good fortune of the Director General: Arikamedu will probably in the future be included in the short but honourable list of excavations which begin a new epoch in discovery. Were we Romans there would by now be standing an altar *VIRTVTI RECTORIS ET BONO EVENTVI*.