

3. No idols, no arms: the Pattanam mystery

Prelims Syllabus: Governance

Mains Syllabus: GS-I Art & Culture



Why in News?

- Pattanam is a village in central Kerala. It is said to be the only multicultural archaeological site on the southwestern coast of the Indian subcontinent.
- Pattanam is a part of Muziris which is called the ‘first emporium’ of the Indian Ocean.
- The Greco-Roman classical age came into direct contact with an ancient South Indian civilization in Muziris.

Excavations in Pattanam:

- The excavations in the region have unearthed less than 1% of the site.
- More than 45 lakh sherds (or ceramic fragments) have been unearthed from the region. These comprise around 1.4 lakh items belonging to regions of the Mediterranean, the River Nile, the Red Sea, the eastern and western Indian Oceans, and the South China Sea.
- The seal of a sphinx was also found, which belongs to the ancient Greek city of Thebes.
- Based on technological, metallurgical, literary, and artistic advances, it is found that there were rigorous cultural and commercial exchanges in Pattanam.
- It is thus inferred that Pattanam was a thriving urban centre that existed from the 5th century B.C. till the 5th century A.D. Moreover, a peak phase was experienced from 100 B.C. to A.D. 300.

- Notably, there is no evidence of the existence of institutionalized religion in ancient Pattanam. Moreover, there are no findings of the graded inequality of the caste system that has described contemporary Kerala and most of India.
- It should be noted that Pattanam lacks sophisticated weaponry. This is in stark contrast to other contemporary sites like Berenike in Egypt and Khor Rori in Oman.
- The fragmentary skeleton remains at graves highlight the “secondary” nature of burial. The dead were first cremated and then osseous remains were ceremoniously buried.
- Furthermore, people of different backgrounds were buried in the same way. Thus suggesting the prevalence of a secular ethos.
- The genotype and ancestry analyses of samples show the link to South Asian, West Asian, and Mediterranean lineages.
- No artefact indicates any religious customs.
- Material evidence highlights that the society lived in harmony with nature, much like the several indigenous societies.
- However, much of the site remains to be unearthed.

