Arikamedu – Indo-Roman Trading Port (Poduke), Mortimer Wheeler 1945, Arretine Ware, Amphorae, Bead Industry, Casal & Begley Excavations | TNPSC Notes

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Arikamedu is an ancient port site on the bank of the **Ariyankuppam river** (Virampattinam river), about 4 km south of Puducherry town. It is identified with **Poduke**, the port named in the 1st-century CE Greek trader's handbook **"Periplus of the Erythraean Sea"** and in Ptolemy's Geography. In **1945 Sir Mortimer Wheeler**, then Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), excavated it scientifically and found **Arretine ware** made at Arezzo in Italy, wine jars called **amphorae** and **rouletted ware**, and described it as an "**Indo-Roman trading station**". Later work by **J.-M. Casal** (1947–50) and **Vimala Begley** (1989–92) showed that the settlement began before Roman contact – around the 3rd–2nd century BCE – and that the site was in use as late as the Chola period. Arikamedu lies in the Union Territory of Puducherry, not in Tamil Nadu, yet it remains the best archaeological evidence of the overseas trade of the Sangam-age Tamil coast.

தமிழில் படிக்க

These notes are written for TNPSC Group 1, 2/2A and 4 aspirants and are meant to be complete on their own. Arikamedu belongs to **History, Culture, Heritage of Tamil Nadu** (Sangam-age trade, archaeological discoveries) and to **History of India** (Indo-Roman trade, megalithic and early historic South India). "Poduke = Arikamedu", "Wheeler – 1945" and "Arretine ware" are the pairs asked most often. For an overview of all Tamil Nadu excavation sites see Porunai civilisation and Tamil Nadu excavation sites; this note covers Arikamedu in depth.

Arikamedu at a Glance

Aspect	Details
Location	Ariyankuppam Commune, Puducherry (Union Territory); on the Puducherry–Cuddalore road, about 4 km south of the town.
River / coast	Ariyankuppam river (Virampattinam river) – a lagoon for most of the year, joining the Bay of Bengal; the river bend gave ships a sheltered anchorage.
Ancient name	Poduke (Podouke) – Periplus (1st century CE); Ptolemy's "Poduke emporion".
Period	From about the 3rd–2nd century BCE to the 7th–8th century CE (Begley); peak of Roman trade from the late 1st century BCE to the 1st–2nd centuries CE; reoccupied in the later Chola period.
Main excavations	Jouveau-Dubreuil (early 1940s); **Wheeler (1945)**; Casal (1947–50); Begley with K.V. Raman (1989–92).

Key finds	Arretine ware, amphorae, rouletted ware, a Roman lamp, glassware, an intaglio believed to show Augustus, glass and stone beads, a 45 m brick warehouse, dyeing vats, ring wells.
Present status	Protected site under the ASI; finds displayed at the Puducherry Museum, the Government Museum, Chennai and elsewhere.

Name and Literary Evidence

- **Periplus of the Erythraean Sea:** a 1st-century CE handbook by a Greek-speaking merchant trading via Egypt; on the east coast it lists three market towns in order – Kamara (Kaveripattinam), **Poduke** and Sopatma.
- **Ptolemy (2nd century CE):** calls it "Poduke emporion"; "emporion" means a trading port.
- **European records:** in the 18th century the French astronomer Le Gentil recorded villagers near Virampattinam digging out large old bricks.

History of Excavation – Timeline

Period	Who	What was done / found
18th century	French records (Le Gentil)	Old bricks, walls and tanks noted near Virampattinam.
Early 1940s	**G. Jouveau-Dubreuil** (French scholar), followed by small digs by French officials	Beads and gems collected; an engraved gem (intaglio) thought to show the Roman emperor Augustus; site linked with Poduke.
1945	**Sir R.E.M. (Mortimer) Wheeler** – Director General of the ASI (from 1944)	One of his first excavations in India; stratigraphic method; Arretine ware, amphorae, rouletted ware; a brick-and-lime warehouse over 45 m long; dyeing vats. Report: "Arikamedu: an Indo-Roman Trading-station on the East Coast of India", Ancient India No. 2 (1946).
1947–1950	**Jean-Marie Casal** (French archaeologist)	Showed that Wheeler's "only about 200 years" was too short; linked the site with the megalithic burials at nearby Suthukeny; occupation continued after 200 CE.
1980s	**Vimala Begley**	Restudy of the pottery; article "Arikamedu Reconsidered" (1983).
1989–1992	Vimala Begley and **K.V. Raman** – University of Pennsylvania with the University of Madras	Six seasons; start placed at about the 3rd–2nd century BCE – a local trade and bead-making centre before Roman contact; the southern sector early, the northern sector occupied into medieval times.

Key Finds – What They Show

Find	Description	Significance
Arretine ware (terra sigillata)	Glossy red tableware made at Arezzo, Italy, often with potters' stamps.	Its production period is well known, so it became a fixed reference for dating South Indian sites.

Amphorae	Tall two-handled jars for wine, olive oil and fish sauce (garum).	Direct imports from the Mediterranean; Yavana food habits.
Rouletted ware	Black or grey dishes with concentric bands made by a roller on the inner base.	Spread along India's east coast, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia – a marker of the sea-trade network.
Beads	Glass, semi-precious stone (carnelian, agate) and shell beads; unfinished beads and waste.	Indo-Pacific glass beads were made on site – Arikamedu was a major bead-making centre (Begley).
Dyeing vats	Walled courtyards with tanks and drains in the northern sector.	Wheeler thought fine cloth (muslin) was dyed here for export.
Brick warehouse	A brick-and-lime building about 45 m long in the southern sector.	Storage of cargo – port trade.
Others	Roman lamp, glassware, terracotta figurines, sherds with Tamil-Brahmi letters, later Chinese celadon ware and Chola coins.	Shows use of the site in the Chola period as well.

Wheeler's View and Later Revisions

- **Wheeler (1945–46):** an "Indo-Roman trading station" where Roman (Yavana) merchants stayed; flourished for about 200 years, from the age of Augustus (late 1st century BCE) to about the 1st–2nd century CE.
- **Casal (1947–50):** nearby megalithic burials show continuity of the local people; occupation went on after 200 CE.
- **Begley (1989–92):** local bead-making and a trading settlement existed before the Romans (about the 3rd–2nd century BCE); some amphorae belong to the late 2nd century BCE; occupation continued to the 7th–8th century CE.
- **Present understanding:** Arikamedu was not a "Roman colony" but **a port run by local Tamil merchants and craftsmen**, in which Yavana traders also took part. Mentioning this shift earns full marks.

Indo-Roman Trade – Background

- **Monsoon winds:** from the 1st century BCE ships used the south-west monsoon to sail directly from Egypt's Red Sea ports to the Indian coast.
- **Exports:** pepper, pearls, gems, fine cotton cloth, ivory; **imports:** wine, olive oil, gold and silver coins, glass, glossy pottery.
- **Sangam evidence:** references to wine and gold brought by the "Yavanar"; on the west coast, an Akananuru poem describes Yavana ships arriving at Muziris with gold and leaving with pepper.
- **Other Tamil Nadu sites:** Kodumanal (gem industry, Roman trade links), Alagankulam (Roman pottery), Poompuhar and Korkai.

Protection, Museum and Present Status

- Arikamedu is a **protected site of the Archaeological Survey of India**, about 34 acres in extent.
- At a 2004 conference of the Puducherry Government and the Government of Italy, cooperation in conservation and a proposal for UNESCO World Heritage listing were discussed; it is not a World Heritage Site so far.
- Finds are displayed in the Puducherry Museum, the Government Museum, Chennai and other museums.
- Marine-archaeology gap: the Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department's policy note (2024-25) says ports such as Korkai, Alagankulam, **Arikamedu** and Tondi are yet to receive full attention from marine archaeologists.

Tamil Nadu Angle and Exam Angle

- **Tamil Nadu angle:** though in Puducherry, Arikamedu was a port of the Sangam-age Tamil east coast – the key proof for the topic "maritime trade".
- **Prelims:** Poduke, Wheeler 1945, Arretine ware (Arezzo, Italy), amphorae (wine/oil), Ariyankuppam river – all asked directly.
- **Mains:** use Arikamedu as the main example in "archaeological evidence of Sangam-age foreign trade" or "Indo-Roman trade".

Writing Mains Answers (Group 1 / Group 2)

Arikamedu as evidence of Indo-Roman trade (about 150–200 words)

- **Introduction:** river port near Puducherry on the Ariyankuppam; the Poduke of the Periplus and Ptolemy.
- **Excavations:** Wheeler 1945; Casal 1947–50; Begley and Raman 1989–92.
- **Evidence:** Arretine ware, amphorae, rouletted ware, Roman lamp, glass; warehouse, dyeing vats.
- **Local industry:** bead-making, cloth dyeing.
- **Revision:** not a Roman colony – a local port that began before the Romans.
- **Conclusion:** archaeological proof of the Yavana trade described in Sangam poems; integrated conservation and a site museum are needed.

Maritime trade of ancient Tamil Nadu – archaeological evidence (about 200–250 words)

- East coast: Arikamedu (Poduke), Poompuhar (Kamara / Kaveripoompattinam), Korkai (pearls), Alagankulam.
- Inland centres: Kodumanal (gems), Keeladi (urban settlement), Vembakottai (beads, shell bangles).
- Literature: Pattinappalai and Silappathikaram – Yavanas, ships, customs.
- Way forward: marine archaeology, scientific dating, site museums.

Practice: Match the Following

Item	Match

Poduke	Arikamedu (Periplus, Ptolemy)
Mortimer Wheeler	1945 excavation; "Indo-Roman trading station"
Jean-Marie Casal	French excavation, 1947–50
Vimala Begley	1989–92 excavation; start pushed back to the 3rd–2nd century BCE
Arretine ware	Arezzo, Italy
Amphora	Wine / olive-oil jar

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Arikamedu is in **Puducherry** – not in Cuddalore or Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu.
- Poduke = Arikamedu; Kamara = Kaveripoompattinam; Muziris = west coast (Keralam) – do not mix them up.
- Wheeler's excavation was in **1945**, not 1947 (1947–50 was Casal).
- Arretine ware was made in Italy; rouletted ware is a different type found widely in India.
- Arikamedu is not part of the Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department's yearly programme; it is an ASI-protected site.

Key Terms – Tamil / English (for the bilingual paper)

Tamil	English
வணிக நிலையம்	Trading station / emporium
அடுக்கியல்	Stratigraphy
ஆம்போரா சாடி	Amphora
உருள்வரி மட்பாண்டம்	Rouletted ware
பொறிப்புக் கல்	Intaglio (engraved gem)
சாயத் தொட்டி	Dyeing vat
உறைகிணறு	Ring well
காயல்	Lagoon / backwater

Quick Revision Table

Period / year	Event
c. 3rd–2nd century BCE	Settlement begins at Arikamedu (Begley)
Late 1st century BCE – 1st–2nd century CE	Peak of Roman trade
1st century CE	Periplus – Poduke
2nd century CE	Ptolemy – Poduke emporion

Early 1940s	Jouveau-Dubreuil's collection
1944	Wheeler becomes Director General of the ASI
1945	Wheeler's excavation
1946	Wheeler's report in Ancient India No. 2
1947–50	Casal's excavation
1989–92	Begley–Raman excavation

TNPSC Key Points (PYQ-style facts)

- Arikamedu – Puducherry; Ariyankuppam river; ancient name Poduke.
- Excavated by Mortimer Wheeler, 1945; "Indo-Roman trading station".
- Arretine ware – Arezzo, Italy; amphorae – wine/oil jars.
- Bead-making and cloth-dyeing vats – local industries.
- Other excavators: Casal (1947–50), Vimala Begley (1989–92).
- East-coast ports of the Periplus: Kamara, Poduke, Sopatma.

Related notes: Porunai civilisation and TN excavation sites, Kodumanal, Keeladi, Sangam literature.

Frequently Asked Questions

Where is Arikamedu?

In the Union Territory of Puducherry, about 4 km south of Puducherry town, on the bank of the Ariyankuppam (Virampattinam) river. It is not within Tamil Nadu.

What was the ancient name of Arikamedu?

Poduke. The name appears in the 1st-century CE "Periplus of the Erythraean Sea" and in Ptolemy's Geography.

Who excavated Arikamedu in 1945?

Sir Mortimer Wheeler, then Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India. He called it an "Indo-Roman trading station"; his report appeared in Ancient India in 1946.

What is Arretine ware?

Glossy red tableware (terra sigillata) made at Arezzo in Italy. Because its production period is well known, it helped date South Indian sites such as Arikamedu.

Was Arikamedu a Roman colony?

No. Wheeler thought so, but the excavations of Casal (1947–50) and Begley (1989–92) showed local bead-making and trade before Roman contact (about the 3rd–2nd century BCE). It was a local Tamil port in which Yavana merchants also took part.

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Practice questions

1. In which State/UT is Arikamedu located?

A. Puducherry
B. Tamil Nadu
C. Keralam
D. Andhra Pradesh

2. Arikamedu lies on the bank of which river?

A. Pennaiyar
B. Ariyankuppam river
C. Vaippar
D. Palar

3. The "Poduke" of the Periplus is identified with which site?

A. Poompuhar
B. Korkai
C. Arikamedu
D. Alagankulam

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4. Who excavated Arikamedu in 1945?

A. Robert Bruce Foote
B. Alexander Rea
C. John Marshall
D. Mortimer Wheeler

5. Arretine ware was made in which country?

A. Italy
B. Egypt
C. Greece
D. China

6. Amphorae were mainly used to carry what?

A. Pepper
B. Wine and olive oil
C. Pearls
D. Cotton cloth

7. How did Wheeler describe Arikamedu?

A. Jain monastery
B. Chola capital
C. Indo-Roman trading station
D. Megalithic burial site

8. Which French archaeologist excavated Arikamedu in 1947–50?

A. Jouveau-Dubreuil
B. Babington
C. Le Gentil
D. Jean-Marie Casal

9. Who led the 1989–92 excavations at Arikamedu?

A. Vimala Begley
B. K. Rajan
C. Amarnath Ramakrishna
D. S.R. Rao

10. According to Begley, when did settlement at Arikamedu begin?

A. 6th century BCE
B. About 3rd–2nd century BCE
C. 3rd century CE
D. 9th century CE

11. Which is NOT one of the east-coast market towns listed in the Periplus?

A. Kamara
B. Poduke
C. Muziris
D. Sopatma

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12. The brick building about 45 m long found by Wheeler at Arikamedu is regarded as a what?

A. Temple
B. Fort wall
C. Palace
D. Warehouse

13. Wheeler thought the walled tanks in the northern sector were used for what?

A. Dyeing cloth
B. Iron smelting
C. Salt making
D. Fish farming

14. Arikamedu was a major centre of which local industry?

A. Copper mining
B. Bead-making
C. Gold mining
D. Ship-building

15. In which journal was Wheeler's Arikamedu report published?

A. Indian Antiquary
B. Epigraphia Indica
C. Ancient India
D. Man in India

16. In which year did Mortimer Wheeler become Director General of the ASI?

A. 1921
B. 1935
C. 1944
D. 1950

17. By what name does Ptolemy refer to Arikamedu?

A. Poduke emporion
B. Khaberis
C. Kolkhoi
D. Nelkynda

18. What do Chinese celadon and Chola coins at Arikamedu show?

A. Site abandoned in BCE times
B. The site was also used in the later Chola period
C. It was a Chinese colony
D. Romans defeated the Cholas

19. Consider: (1) Arikamedu is an ASI-protected site. (2) It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Which is correct?

A. Both
B. 2 only
C. 1 only
D. Neither

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20. Which statement on Arikamedu and Indo-Roman trade is correct?

A. Romans set up a permanent colony

B. It was a west-coast port

C. Trade began in the 10th century CE

D. A local trading port existed before the Romans

Answers with explanations

1. A) Puducherry – Arikamedu is in the Union Territory of Puducherry.

2. B) Ariyankuppam river – The Ariyankuppam (Virampattinam) river.

3. C) Arikamedu – Poduke = Arikamedu.

4. D) Mortimer Wheeler – Mortimer Wheeler, Director General of the ASI.

5. A) Italy – At Arezzo in Italy.

6. B) Wine and olive oil – Wine and olive oil from the Mediterranean.

7. C) Indo-Roman trading station – "Indo-Roman trading-station" – Ancient India, 1946.

8. D) Jean-Marie Casal – Jean-Marie Casal, 1947–50.

9. A) Vimala Begley – Vimala Begley, with K.V. Raman.

10. B) About 3rd–2nd century BCE – Before Roman contact, about the 3rd–2nd century BCE.

11. C) Muziris – Muziris was a west-coast port.

12. D) Warehouse – A port warehouse.

13. A) Dyeing cloth – Dyeing cloth for export.

14. B) Bead-making – Glass and stone beads were made here.

15. C) Ancient India – Ancient India No. 2 (1946).

16. C) 1944 – 1944; he dug Arikamedu the next year.

17. A) Poduke emporion – Poduke emporion – a trading port.

18. B) The site was also used in the later Chola period – The site was reoccupied in medieval times.

19. C) 1 only – Listing was proposed; it is not a World Heritage Site.

20. D) A local trading port existed before the Romans – The main conclusion of Begley's work.

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