Korkai – Pandya Pearl Port, Thamirabarani, Caldwell 1876, 1968-69 Excavation (785 BCE), 2021 Excavation, Terracotta Pipes & Offshore Survey 2022-23 | TNPSC Notes

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Korkai is a small village in Srivaikuntam taluk of Thoothukudi district, **about 3 km north of the Thamirabarani (Porunai) river**; in the Sangam age it was **the chief port of the Pandyas and the centre of the Gulf of Mannar pearl fishery**. Greek and Roman writers called it **Kolchi / Kolkhoi**. Because the sea has receded, the coast now lies about 6 km to the east. The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology excavated the site in **1968–69** and found a brick structure and potsherds inscribed in Tamil-Brahmi (Tamili); a charcoal sample was dated to **785 BCE** by the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Mumbai. Excavation resumed in **2021**, about 52 years later, and exposed **nine perforated terracotta pipes** stacked one above another; an **offshore exploration in 2022–23** surveyed the sea opposite Korkai. Korkai finds are displayed in the **Porunai Museum**, Tirunelveli.

தமிழில் படிக்க

These notes are written for TNPSC Group 1, 2/2A and 4 aspirants. Korkai belongs to **History, Culture, Heritage of Tamil Nadu** (Pandyas, Sangam ports, archaeological discoveries), **History of India** (Indo-Roman trade), **Geography** (Thamirabarani, Gulf of Mannar) and **Current Events** (excavation, offshore survey, Porunai Museum). For an overview of the Porunai basin sites see Porunai civilisation and Tamil Nadu excavation sites; this note covers Korkai in depth.

Korkai at a Glance

Aspect	Details
Location	Korkai village, Srivaikuntam taluk, Thoothukudi district.
River / sea	About 3 km north of the Thamirabarani; in ancient times the river skirted the town; the sea has receded and the coast is now about 6 km to the east.
Sangam-age role	Chief port of the Pandyas; centre of the Gulf of Mannar pearl fishery and chank (conch) industry.
Foreign names	Periplus – Kolchi (pearl fishery belonging to the Pandya king); Ptolemy – Kolkhoi.
Main excavations	Robert Caldwell (1876); Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (1968–69); again in 2021 (2020-21 season); offshore survey 2022–23.
Key dates	Charcoal dated to 785 BCE (TIFR, Mumbai); Tamil-Brahmi sherds – about 300 BCE to 200 CE.
Museum	Porunai Museum, Reddiarpatti, Tirunelveli (inaugurated 20 December 2025).

Literary Evidence – Why Korkai Was Famous

- **Sangam literature:** praises Korkai as the Pandya port and its pearls as the finest; pearls and conch were emblems of the Pandya country.
- **Silappathikaram:** the Pandya queen's anklet held **pearls**, Kannagi's held **rubies** – the story itself reflects the fame of Pandya pearls.
- **Periplus (1st century CE):** says the pearl fishery at Kolchi belonged to the Pandya king.
- **Ptolemy (2nd century CE):** names it Kolkhoi and calls the nearby sea the "Kolkhic Gulf" (today's Gulf of Mannar).
- **Later period:** historians hold that as the sea receded, Korkai's port role shifted to the Kayal area; in the 13th century Marco Polo described the port of "Cail" (Kayal).

History of Excavation – Timeline

Year	Who	Finds
1876	**Robert Caldwell** (missionary and linguist – author of "A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Languages")	Trial digging at Korkai; burial urns.
1968–69	Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology	At 75 cm below the surface, **a brick structure of nine courses in six rows**; below it three large terracotta rings placed one over another (probably soakage jars); **sherds inscribed in Tamil-Brahmi** (about 300 BCE – 200 CE); a charcoal sample dated to **785 BCE** (TIFR, Mumbai).
2021 (2020-21 season)	Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology – resumed after about 52 years	**Nine perforated terracotta pipes** stacked one above another at 30–35 cm depth (each 27 cm in diameter and height, 1 cm thick) – the Minister said they were probably used for distillation; remains of brick structures, potsherds and conch bangles.
2022–23	Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology + Indian Maritime University (IMU) + National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT)	Offshore survey opposite Korkai, off the Thamirabarani mouth – Phase 1: 2–9 September 2022; Phase 2: 23 January – 16 February 2023.

Korkai Offshore Exploration 2022–23

- **Launch:** flagged off in September 2022 at the V.O. Chidambaranar Port premises, Thoothukudi, by Thangam Thennarasu, then Minister for Industries, Tamil Official Language, Tamil Culture and Archaeology.
- **Aim:** to trace the origins of the maritime trade of the Sangam-age Pandya kingdom and the extent of ancient voyages.
- **Equipment:** multibeam echosounder, side-scan sonar and sub-bottom profiler.

- **Result:** sonar surveys and diver inspection identified an "anomalous feature"; sampling was proposed to find out whether it is man-made (Policy Note 2024-25).
- **Cost:** Rs 1.50 crore in all (Archaeology Department Policy Note 2024-25). A sonar survey off Alagankulam was proposed next.
- **Significance:** an effort to look for the State's ancient ports under the sea as well – the State's main marine-archaeology project after Poompuhar.

What the Finds Show

Evidence	Meaning
785 BCE date	Settlement at Korkai may go back to about the 8th century BCE – earlier than the Tamil-Brahmi sherds.
Tamil-Brahmi sherds	Literacy had spread among traders and ordinary people.
Brick structure, soakage rings, terracotta pipes	A planned settlement, drainage and industrial activity.
Conch bangles and shell objects	A chank-cutting and bangle industry based on the Gulf of Mannar. The policy note describes Korkai conch objects as about 2,800 years old.
Literature + archaeology	Ground proof of the "Pandya pearl port" described in Sangam poems and Greco-Roman texts.

Geography Link: Thamirabarani and the Gulf of Mannar

- **Thamirabarani (Porunai / Tan Porunai):** rises in the Pothigai hills of the Western Ghats, flows through Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts and joins the Gulf of Mannar; it rises and ends within Tamil Nadu.
- **Porunai basin sites:** Adichanallur (urn burials), Sivakalai (1155 BCE paddy), Korkai (port) – all in the same river basin; their finds are in the Porunai Museum.
- **Gulf of Mannar:** pearl oysters and chank; today the Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park (1986) and Biosphere Reserve (1989) – coral reefs, dugong.
- **Shoreline change:** river silt pushed the coast seaward (the sea "receded") – which is why ancient ports are now inland villages.

Porunai Museum – the Korkai Link

- 9 September 2021 – announced in the Assembly (to display finds of Sivakalai, Korkai and Adichanallur).
- 18 May 2023 – foundation stone (International Museum Day).
- 20 December 2025 – inaugurated at Reddiarpatti, Tirunelveli; open to the public from 23 December 2025.

Tamil Nadu Angle and Exam Angle

- **Tamil Nadu angle:** the Pandya maritime and pearl-fishing tradition still shapes the coastal life of Thoothukudi, the "Pearl City".
- **Prelims:** Korkai – Thoothukudi district; Thamirabarani; 785 BCE; 1968–69 excavation; Caldwell 1876; 2022 offshore survey.
- **Mains:** use Korkai as a key example for "Sangam ports", "significance of the Porunai civilisation" and "marine archaeology in Tamil Nadu".
- **Way forward:** sampling of the offshore feature, dating in reputed laboratories, publication of full excavation reports, a site museum.

Writing Mains Answers (Group 1 / Group 2)

Archaeological significance of Korkai, the Pandya port (about 150–200 words)

- **Introduction:** Thoothukudi, on the Thamirabarani; Sangam-age Pandya pearl port; Kolchi of the Periplus.
- **Excavations:** Caldwell 1876; State Department 1968–69 (brick structure, Tamil-Brahmi, 785 BCE); 2021 (terracotta pipes).
- **Offshore survey:** 2022–23 with IMU and NIOT; sonar; "anomalous feature".
- **Significance:** urban life, literacy, chank industry, overseas trade.
- **Conclusion:** where literature and archaeology meet; the Porunai Museum takes it to the people.

Practice: Match the Following

Item	Match
Korkai	Pandya pearl port
Robert Caldwell	Trial excavation, 1876
TIFR, Mumbai	Charcoal – 785 BCE
Kolchi	Korkai in the Periplus
NIOT, IMU	Partners of the 2022–23 offshore survey
Nine terracotta pipes	2021 excavation

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Korkai is in **Thoothukudi** district – not Tirunelveli (only the museum is in Tirunelveli).
- Korkai = Pandya port; Poompuhar (Kaveripoompattinam) = Chola port; Muziris = Chera port.
- 785 BCE = Korkai (charcoal); 1155 BCE = Sivakalai (paddy); 2172 BCE = Mayiladumparai – do not mix them up.
- First State excavation 1968–69; resumed in 2021 – a gap of about 52 years.
- Korkai is no longer on the coast – the sea has receded about 6 km.

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

Tamil	English
முத்துக் குளிப்பு	Pearl fishery
சங்கு வளையல்	Conch-shell bangle
ஈமத்தாழி	Burial urn
உறிஞ்சு உறை	Soakage jar / ring
கடலடி ஆய்வு	Offshore / underwater exploration
முகத்துவாரம்	River mouth / estuary
கரிமக் காலக்கணிப்பு	Radiocarbon dating
தமிழி	Tamil-Brahmi script

Quick Revision Table

Year / period	Event
785 BCE	Date of Korkai charcoal (TIFR)
c. 300 BCE – 200 CE	Tamil-Brahmi sherds
1st century CE	Periplus – pearl fishery at Kolchi
13th century	Marco Polo – Kayal ("Cail")
1876	Caldwell's excavation
1968–69	State Archaeology Department excavation
2021	Excavation resumed; nine terracotta pipes
2–9 Sep 2022	Offshore survey Phase 1
23 Jan – 16 Feb 2023	Offshore survey Phase 2
20 Dec 2025	Porunai Museum inaugurated

TNPSC Key Points (PYQ-style facts)

- Korkai – Srivaikuntam taluk, Thoothukudi; about 3 km north of the Thamirabarani.
- Sangam-age Pandya port; Gulf of Mannar pearl fishery.
- 1968–69 excavation: brick structure, Tamil-Brahmi sherds; charcoal 785 BCE.
- 2021: nine perforated terracotta pipes.
- 2022–23: offshore survey – IMU, NIOT; multibeam echosounder, sonar.
- Korkai finds – Porunai Museum, Tirunelveli.

Related notes: Porunai civilisation and TN excavation sites, Adichanallur, Sivakalai, Sangam literature.

Frequently Asked Questions

Where is Korkai?

In Srivaikuntam taluk of Thoothukudi district, about 3 km north of the Thamirabarani river. As the sea has receded, the coast now lies about 6 km to the east.

What was Korkai famous for?

It was the chief port of the Sangam-age Pandyas and the centre of the Gulf of Mannar pearl fishery. The Periplus calls it Kolchi and says the pearl fishery there belonged to the Pandya king.

Where does the 785 BCE date of Korkai come from?

A charcoal sample from the 1968–69 State Archaeology Department excavation was radiocarbon-dated to 785 BCE by the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Mumbai.

What was found in the 2021 Korkai excavation?

In this excavation, about 52 years after the last one, nine perforated terracotta pipes (27 cm in diameter and height) stacked one above another were found at 30–35 cm depth; the Government said they were probably used for distillation. Remains of brick structures and conch bangles were also found.

When and with whom was the Korkai offshore survey carried out?

The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology carried it out with the Indian Maritime University (IMU) and the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT) in two phases (2–9 September 2022; 23 January – 16 February 2023). Sonar and divers identified an anomalous feature on the sea floor.

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Practice questions

1. In which district is Korkai?

A. Thoothukudi
B. Tirunelveli
C. Ramanathapuram
D. Kanniyakumari

2. Korkai lies near which river?

A. Vaigai
B. Thamirabarani
C. Vaippar
D. Kaveri

3. Korkai was the port of which Sangam dynasty?

A. Cholas
B. Cheras
C. Pandyas
D. Pallavas

4. Korkai was chiefly famous for what?

A. Silk weaving
B. Pepper export
C. Iron smelting
D. Pearl fishery

5. By what name does the Periplus refer to Korkai?

A. Kolchi
B. Kamara
C. Poduke
D. Nelkynda

6. What date was obtained for charcoal from the 1968–69 Korkai excavation?

A. 2172 BCE
B. 785 BCE
C. 1155 BCE
D. 580 BCE

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7. Which institution dated the Korkai charcoal?

A. Beta Analytic, USA
B. PRL, Ahmedabad
C. TIFR, Mumbai
D. Birbal Sahni Institute, Lucknow

8. Who carried out a trial excavation at Korkai in 1876?

A. Alexander Rea
B. Mortimer Wheeler
C. G.U. Pope
D. Robert Caldwell

9. What was found stacked one above another in the 2021 Korkai excavation?

A. Nine perforated terracotta pipes
B. Gold coins
C. Iron swords
D. Copper plates

10. The 2021 Korkai excavation came after a gap of about how many years?

A. About 22
B. About 52
C. About 37
D. About 75

11. Which institutions partnered the TN Archaeology Department in the Korkai offshore survey?

A. ISRO, DRDO
B. NIO, ASI
C. IMU, NIOT
D. IIT Madras, CMFRI

12. When was Phase 1 of the Korkai offshore survey held?

A. February 2021
B. September 2025
C. June 2024
D. September 2022

13. Which instrument was NOT used in the Korkai offshore survey?

A. Seismograph
B. Side-scan sonar
C. Sub-bottom profiler
D. Multibeam echosounder

14. In which museum are Korkai finds displayed?

A. Keeladi Museum
B. Porunai Museum
C. Thanjavur Art Gallery
D. Poompuhar underwater museum

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15. When was the Porunai Museum inaugurated?

A. 9 September 2021
B. 18 May 2023
C. 20 December 2025
D. 5 March 2023

16. To which period are the Tamil-Brahmi sherds of 1968–69 assigned?

A. 1000–800 BCE
B. 1100–1300 CE
C. 600–900 CE
D. About 300 BCE – 200 CE

17. What did Ptolemy call the present Gulf of Mannar?

A. Kolkhic Gulf
B. Gangetic Gulf
C. Argaric Gulf
D. Persian Gulf

18. Why is Korkai no longer on the coast?

A. Earthquake
B. The sea receded (silting)
C. A dam was built
D. The 2004 tsunami

19. Which Pandya-country port did Marco Polo describe in the 13th century?

A. Muziris
B. Tondi
C. Kayal
D. Nagapattinam

20. Match 785 BCE / 1155 BCE / 2172 BCE – which order is correct?

A. Mayiladumparai / Korkai / Sivakalai
B. Sivakalai / Korkai / Keeladi
C. Keeladi / Adichanallur / Korkai
D. Korkai / Sivakalai / Mayiladumparai

Answers with explanations

1. A) Thoothukudi – Srivaikuntam taluk, Thoothukudi district.

2. B) Thamirabarani – About 3 km north of the Thamirabarani.

3. C) Pandyas – The chief port of the Pandyas.

4. D) Pearl fishery – The Gulf of Mannar pearl fishery.

5. A) Kolchi – Kolchi – the pearl fishery of the Pandya king.

6. B) 785 BCE – 785 BCE – TIFR, Mumbai.

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7. C) TIFR, Mumbai – Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai.

8. D) Robert Caldwell – Caldwell, author of the Comparative Grammar.

9. A) Nine perforated terracotta pipes – Nine terracotta pipes, possibly for distillation.

10. B) About 52 – About 52 years after 1968–69.

11. C) IMU, NIOT – Indian Maritime University and National Institute of Ocean Technology.

12. D) September 2022 – 2–9 September 2022.

13. A) Seismograph – The first three were used.

14. B) Porunai Museum – Porunai Museum, Tirunelveli.

15. C) 20 December 2025 – 20 December 2025, Reddiarpatti.

16. D) About 300 BCE – 200 CE – About 300 BCE – 200 CE.

17. A) Kolkhic Gulf – "Kolkhic Gulf", after Korkai.

18. B) The sea receded (silting) – The coast moved about 6 km east.

19. C) Kayal – "Cail" = Kayal.

20. D) Korkai / Sivakalai / Mayiladumparai – Korkai charcoal, Sivakalai paddy, Mayiladumparai Iron Age layer.

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