

## TAMRALIPTA/TAMLUK: A REVIEW

**Frederick M. Asher**

Tamralipta, probably more or less identical with modern Tamluk located on the eastern bank of the Rupnarayan River, about 20 kilometers north of its confluence with the Hooghly, is about the only major seaport in northeast India that receives repeated premodern references.<sup>1</sup> In the modern-day accounts of Tamralipta, however, hyperbole and certainty, together with a degree of local chauvinism, mark descriptions of the ancient port. “Probably” and “perhaps” need to replace more definitive verbs, and descriptions such as “its history glowing in Indian and foreign accounts [will make] Tamralipta in Bengal as a city to remember” need to be taken with caution as we read the scant terse references to the port city. In truth, what we get from textual sources is mostly snippets, almost casual references, as summarized by T. N. Ramachandran.<sup>2</sup> And while in some cases the name of the place mentioned is at best one that might be Tamralipta, references are clear and frequent enough to indicate that Tamralipta was a port city of some note from at least the second century CE until the Rupnarayan River silted up possibly by the eighth century.<sup>3</sup>

But what constitutes Tamralipta? There is no single site whose confines can be identified as there might be with a Buddhist monastery such as Paharpur or Vikramashila, where a clear perimeter is defined by monks’ cells. That is not surprising, of course, for an urban entity, where residential and commercial settlements are likely to be scattered. Rupendra Kumar Chattopadhyay effectively identifies excavated sites in the area around modern Tamluk that have yielded remains and are probably part of greater Tamralipta.<sup>4</sup>

Tamralipta’s Buddhist association is recorded by both Faxian, who spent two years there before sailing to Sri Lanka, and Yijing, who sailed eastward from the port to Srivijaya and comments that others sail from here to Sri Lanka. Both Chinese pilgrims, of course, note the Buddhist monasteries of Tamralipta, skewing our perception of the port. No doubt there was a strong Buddhist presence there, but we might imagine other Indian communities represented by the local population as well as foreign communities who served as intermediaries for trade. Puzzling to me, however, is the slim impact sailors from this Bengali port made on Southeast Asia. The impact from Bengal, if we take the material remains in Southeast Asia, seems to have been largely on Burma, where temples, for example at Bagan, reflect eastern Indian forms, most likely transmitted by overland travelers. The widespread use of Tamil script across South-east Asia, even Tamil language inscriptions and sculptures so close to Pallava and Chola styles that their provenance is a matter of reasonable debate demonstrate the much greater impact of Coromandel ports on South-east Asian trade. It may be that as the Rupnarayan River’s increasing silt impeded

trade, southern Indian kingdoms were able to assume a significantly greater role in the commercial engagement with kingdoms to the east of India.

Perhaps more helpful to understanding the history of Tamralipta than the scattered references to the place are the finds there, largely preserved in the Ashutosh Museum and the Archaeological Museum, Tamluk. At the outset, we need to understand that excavations and chance finds do not present a coherent picture of premodern Tamralipta. There is no coherent ancient site that has been revealed. In fact, the distribution of the finds suggest a rather large settled area comprising Tamralipta, not entirely surprising since the port was superbly connected by rivers to inland regions, which surely served as both producers and consumers of trade goods.

Probably the best known work from Tamralipta is the terracotta female figure, 21.7 cm high, in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (**Plate 32.1**). When E. H. Johnston published the figure, he proposed that it originated from Kaushambi and dates c. 200 BCE possibly a very little later.<sup>5</sup> Tentatively he suggested that it might represent Maya, the Buddha's mother. Apparently, Johnston was unaware that this very figure had been published some 60 years earlier by the person who collected the sculpture at Tamluk.<sup>6</sup> Bysack, who collected the piece, suggested that it was Buddhist and that "most probably it was a household image". He was reluctant to speculate on the date other than to say that it was not modern. The figure is probably the single most elegantly adorned of any terracotta discovered to date. The enormous headdress, abundant and unusually large jewelry, and hip-hugging girdle with diminutive figures suspended over her thighs distinguishes this female figure from any other that I know. Its date is surely some time during the second century BCE, for the figure shares much in common with stone imagery from Bharhut, where similarly we see remarkable detail carved onto a surface that, like this figure, preserves a two-dimensionality. Since many of the Bharhut female figures are labeled as yakshis, that may be a clue to the identity of this figurine but certainly not a definitive identification. Other figures preserved in the Tamluk Archaeological Museum share much in common with the Ashmolean female, for example one whose headdress is almost identical (**Plate 32.2**).

There is a general tendency to identify all terracotta figures similar in style to these as Shunga, a designator that is not entirely helpful. The dynastic designator implies a royal role in the production of art; it assumes dynastic dominion in the area where the works was produced. And, most consequential, it assumes that the style is linked to the dynasty. We would be far better advised to use Common Era dates – or some other widely recognized and understood dates – for works of South Asian art.

The discussion of the identity of the Ashmolean terracotta raises the much larger issue of the identity and function of all the Tamralipta terracotta figurines as well as those from other parts of India, particularly the Ganges Valley. The majority of the terracotta figurines representing humans are female and generally called *yakshis* or *yakshinis*, an identification



**Plate 32.1:** Terracotta female figure, © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

that seems to me too casual. At Bharhut, for example, female figures bearing identifying labels are often described as this or that yakshi, but other female deities are identified as well, for example Sri Devata. So we cannot identify these figurines with certainty. Nor were they found in any concentrated location at any of the sites in or around Tamluk as if in a religious structure that might be identified as a temple. Nor can we conclude that they were fertility votive figurines since some of the terracottas depict males (**Plate 32.3**).<sup>7</sup> In short, what we don't know about the terracottas exceeds what we do know.

If Tamralipta was the great maritime port that literature implies, to what extent do the remains support that sense? A few ceramic vessels probably are Roman and were used to carry trade goods, likely wine or olive oil. At least two in the Tamluk Museum are described, probably accurately, as amphorae (**Plates 32.4 & 32.5**). And one terracotta head (**Plate 32.6**) strikes me as distinctly non-Indian and so likely an import. But curiously, there is no evidence of Chinese ceramic ware, although that may be because Tamralipta ceased to function as a port by the time Indians prized Chinese ceramics, about the twelfth century. And, of course, it is not at all clear that a main port area has yet been identified and excavated.

If Tamralipta had a thriving Buddhist community, as the Faxian and Yijing report, what is the material evidence for those monasteries? The Buddhist remains are very few. I can identify only two Buddhist sculptures. One is a small stone head (**Plate 32.7**) that might be datable to the sixth century and bears some resemblance to works from Andhra. A larger seated Buddha (**Plate 32.8**) and assigned by the Tamluk Museum to the 15<sup>th</sup> century but probably datable somewhat earlier was found somewhere in Howrah District, the museum does not

specify precisely where. The flaming *ushnisha* is a common feature of Tamil Buddha figures, for example, those from Nagapattinam.

**Plate 32.2:** Terracotta female figure, Tamluk Museum, courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.

**Plate 32.3:** Terracotta male figure, Tamluk Museum, courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.

**Plate 32.4:** Ceramic vessel, probably Roman, Tamluk Museum, courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.



**Plate 32.5:** Ceramic vessel, probably Roman, Tamluk Museum, courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.



**Plate 32.6:** Stone female head, possibly non-Indian, Tamluk Museum, courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.



**Plate 32.7:** Stone Buddha head, Tamluk Museum, courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.



**Plate 32.8:** Stone seated Buddha, Tamluk Museum, courtesy Archaeological Survey of India.

From the material evidence, we might draw two conclusions. The first is that the works from Tamruk and the surrounding area date largely before the second century of the Common era, despite the fact that records of two Chinese pilgrims show it to have been a functioning port at least through the seventh century. And that leads to the second conclusion, namely that a great deal more of ancient Tamralipta remains to be discovered. A first step toward further exploration might be determining the ancient path of the Rupnarayan River and determining where in antiquity it flowed into the Bay of Bengal. That might lead to identifying the ancient port itself.

### Notes and References:

1. Rupendra Kumar Chattopadhyay, *The Archaeology of Coastal Bengal*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 38-40, reminds us that the case for identifying Tamruk with ancient Tamralipta is by no means settled.
2. T.N. Ramachandran, "Tāmraliptī (Tamruk)," *ArtibusAsiae*, vol. 14, 3 (1951), pp. 226-239, especially pp. 226-229.
3. May be as early as the eighth century. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
4. Chattopadhyay, pp. 45-51.
5. E.H. Johnston, "A Terra-Cotta Figure at Oxford," *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, vol. X (1942), pp. 94-102.
6. Gaurdas Bysack, "Note on Some Buddhist Copper Coins, and a Terra-cotta figure," *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1888), pp. 113-114.
7. Prasanta Kumar Mandal, *Interpretation of Terracottas from Tamralipta*. Tamruk: Tamralipta Museum and Research Centre, 1987, provides useful charts of the distribution of figure types.

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