

Explained | The significance of the findings in Keeladi

What are the different artefacts which have been unearthed from the excavations in Keeladi? How does it shed light on the Sangam age? Why did the transfer of Superintending Archaeologist Amarnath Ramakrishna create a controversy? Are there links to the Indus Valley civilisation?

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A cluster of 74 carnelian beads found underneath a offering pot at Keeladi-Kondagai burial site, near Madurai | Photo Credit: MOORTHY G

The story so far: Keeladi is a tiny hamlet in the Sivaganga district in south Tamil Nadu. It is about 12 km south-east to the temple city of Madurai and is located along the

Vaigai river. The excavations here from 2015 prove that an urban civilisation existed in Tamil Nadu in the Sangam age on the banks of the Vaigai river.

How is Keeladi linked to Sangam age?

The Sangam age is a period of history in ancient Tamil Nadu which was believed to be from the third century BCE to the third century CE. The name is derived from the renowned Sangam poets of Madurai from that time. Excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department (TNSDA) has pushed the Sangam age further back. In 2019, a TNSDA report dated the unearthed artefacts from Keeladi to a period between sixth century BCE and first century BCE. One of the six samples collected at a depth of 353 cm, sent for carbon dating in the U.S., dated back to 580 BCE. The findings in the TNSDA report placed Keeladi artefacts about 300 years earlier than the previously believed third century BCE. A recent ASI report by K. Amarnath Ramakrishna, the Superintendent Archaeologist who discovered Keeladi in 2015, has pushed the Sangam age to 800 BCE based on these archaeological findings.

Keeladi could also provide crucial evidence for understanding the missing links of the Iron Age (12th century BCE to sixth century BCE) to the Early Historic Period (sixth century BCE to fourth century BCE) and subsequent cultural developments.

What was the controversy surrounding Keeladi?

After reports of possible links with the Indus Valley Civilisation, the third round (2017) of diggings by the ASI saw a delayed start. Superintending Archaeologist Amarnath Ramakrishna was transferred to Assam, allegedly in a perceived attempt to play down the excavation findings. Keeladi almost faded from public memory as there was no “significant finding” in the third round. This led to criticism that the excavation had been deliberately restricted to 400 metres. Tamil Nadu politicians criticised the BJP-led Union Government of trying to suppress information about an ancient Tamil civilisation that had flourished on the banks of the Vaigai river. On the intervention of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, the ASI permitted the TNSDA to take up further excavation on its own. Since then, the TNSDA has been carrying out excavations to unearth more about the history of Tamil civilisation.

Are there links to Indus Valley?

The unearthed Keeladi artefacts have led academics to describe the site as part of the Vaigai Valley Civilisation. The findings have also invited comparisons with the Indus

Valley Civilisation while acknowledging the cultural gap of 1,000 years between the two places. Till now, the gap is filled with Iron Age material in south India, which serve as residual links. However, some of the symbols found in pot sherds of Keeladi bear a close resemblance to Indus Valley signs. A lot of digging and study has to be done to establish the links between these two civilisations.

TNSDA affirms that Keeladi has all the characteristics of an urban civilisation, with brick structures, luxury items and proof of internal and external trade. It comes across as an industrious and advanced civilisation and has given evidence of urban life and settlements in Tamil Nadu during the Early Historic Period. Keeladi has also added to the credibility of Sangam Literature.

What has been unearthed so far?

In the eight rounds of excavations, including the first three by the ASI, over 18,000 artefacts have been unearthed from the site and the unique artefacts will be on display at the museum to be opened soon.

Unearthing of heaps of pottery suggest the existence of a pottery making industry, mostly made of locally available raw materials. Over 120 potsherds containing Tamil Brahmi inscriptions have been found. Keeladi, along with other Tamil Nadu sites which have over a thousand inscribed potsherds, clearly suggest the long survival of the script. Spindle whorls, copper needles, terracotta seal, hanging stones of the yarn, terracotta spheres and earthen vessels to hold liquid suggest various stages of a weaving industry. There also existed a dyeing industry and a glass bead industry.

Gold ornaments, copper articles, semi-precious stones, shell bangles, ivory bangles and ivory combs reflect the artistic, culturally rich and prosperous lifestyle of the Keeladi people. Agate and carnelian beads suggest import through commercial networks while terracotta and ivory dice, gamesmen and evidence of hopscotch have been unearthed revealing their pastime hobbies.