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INDIA

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Preface

Indian Festivals

India is a highly populated large country with multiple linguistic and cultural diversities and different geographical areas. So the festivals of India, originated and developed under these circumstances also bear a wonderful richness in nature. But the writers of India from the remote past to the present had highlighted the enthusiasm and devotedness of all ethnical groups in involving festivities, generally connected with religious or agricultural activities. The Sanskrit term '*utsava*', generally designated to denote the festivals, also reveals the zenith of enjoying nature of the Indians. They work hard throughout the year with the great expectations of the annual festivals and spend all their earnings for such celebrations with unbounded happiness and pleasure. Next to religion and *folklore*, a significant origin is *agricultural*. Food is also such a vital resource that many festivals are associated with *harvest* time. Festivals that focus on cultural or ethnic topics also seek to inform community members of their traditions; the involvement of *elders* sharing stories and experience provides a means for unity among *families*.

Kalady in Ernakulam district of Kerala witnessed in the Sree Sankaracharya University a four day international meet on the Indian festivals in which scholars, teachers and students from the Indian continent and abroad participated and presented their experiences and views on a number of topics related to Indian festivals from Assam to Kerala. This is the

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Aspects of the Festival of Love in premodern Kerala according to the *Viṭanidrābhāṇa*, the *Śukasamdeśa* and the *Pradyumnābhyudaya*

Christophe Vielle

Festivals of (the God of) Love (*kāmotsava*) in ancient India, their connections with larger spring festivals (*vasantotsava*), and the survivals of the latter in modern Holi (*holākā*), are topics which have already been discussed at length by scholars¹. In Kerala, popular forms of *kāmotsava* still survive, especially through the *pūrotsavas* ("Pooram") conducted in several places of Northern Kerala (in Payyannur region, Kannur district)².

The present paper concentrates on certain aspects of Kāma festival and worship related to the courtesan milieu, as described in a *bhāṇa*³ and a *saṃdeśakāvya* both composed in central Kerala sometime in the first half of the 14th century, aspects reflecting most probably local real practices which, contrastively, are not found in the picture of the Festival given in a *nāṭaka* (on a mythological subject) penned by a pious South Kerala king at the very end of the 13th century.

It will at first focus on what appears to be the earliest preserved *bhāṇa* from Kerala: the *Viṭa* [*nidrā*] *bhāṇa* (abbr.

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VNBh)⁴, that I am in course of critically editing⁵. Its action takes place in the courtesan quarter of the prosperous city of Mahodayapuram (present day Kodungallur), then ruled by a king named Rāmavarman.

Already in the *nāndī* (pronounced by the *sūtradhara*) praising Kāma, there is a reference to the Festival of (the God of) Love.

*jayati sukr̥taiḥ prācyair vṛttair mithaḥkalahotsave
jhaṭiti dayite jātōtkampaṃ praṇāmaavidhāyini//
vicalitakucaḥ saraṅgākṣyā vilolitakuntalaḥ
śirasighamitaḥ pādāghātaḥ sanūpuranisvanah//⁶*

He [= God Kāma] is triumphant, by means of the/his old good practices, during the Festival of the couple quarrel, as soon as the lover pays homage to the One by whom the/his agitation arose; He by whom, for the deer-eyed girl, the breast is shaken and the hair dishevelled, and by whom there is connection at the level of the head, beating of the feet, sounding of the anklets.

In the compound *mithaḥkalaha-utsava*, *mithaḥ-kalaha* has to be understood, like the compound *mithoyodha* ("hand to hand fighting with one another"), as a "quarrel together", that is in the privacy of the couple. And this lover's quarrel is a mock or feigned one.

Such a "Festival of the love quarrel", *Praṇaya-kalahotsava* or simply *Kalahotsava*, is still observed in several South Indian temples, for instance in the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Tirumala (Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh). However, in the latter case, we are not dealing, like here, with a Festival of (the God of) Love. The myth referred to by these temple festivals is a (real, not feigned) amorous quarrel between Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī consecutive to a reported misunderstanding (linked with the Gajendramokṣa-episode, because the Lord forgot to inform his Consort when rushing to rescue his Devotee), as described in the *pañcarātra Śrīpraśna-saṃhitā* (47.2-36)⁷.

Moreover, this Praṇaya-kalahotsava is performed on the 9th day of the Brahmotsava in certain temples, or, for instance in the Tirumala temple, two months after the Brahmotsava, that is either in September-October or in November-December.

On the other hand, the Mithaḥ-kalahotsava in the VNBh is supposed to be performed in March-May, during the spring season, as confirmed by the second introductory stanza of the VNBh (pronounced from behind the curtain), which compares (by means of sexual double entendre) the *vasanta* season, i.e. spring, with the *viṭa*, viz. the Gallant, the main character of the play.

*manojñaiḥ sallāpaiḥ parabhr̥tavadhūnām vyavaharan
parāgaiś cūtānām nibiḍam annuliptaḥ surabhilaiḥ/
vilobhyadvandvānām kalahakaluṣānām ghaṭayitā
vitanvann ānandaṁ viṭa iva vasanto vijayate //2//⁸*

He is occupied with the charming chats of the female cuckoos (/of the women nourished by others = the courtesans); he is densely anointed with the flagrant pollens of the mango trees (/by the flagrant powders of the asses); he joins together the couples to be connected when displeased by quarrel; he brings happiness: like the Galant, the spring is triumphant.

Spring is commonly celebrated in *bhāṇas*, in the early classical ones such as the *Ubhayābhisārikā* ("The Mutual Elopement") of Vararuci, which has its setting in this season, or the *Padmaprabhṛtaka* ("The Lotus Gift") of Śūdraka, which opens with a description of spring⁹; as well as in the later ones, such as the *Śāradātīlaka* of Śaṅkarakavi¹⁰, the *Vasantatīlaka* of Varadācārya, and, from Kerala, the *Śṛṅgāramañjarī* of Ratikara or the *Vasantotsava* (unpublished manuscripts)¹¹.

However, spring does not necessarily mean Spring Festival or Festival of Love such as it is referred to in the beginning of the VNBh.

In the VNBh, the Gallant meets in the morning the courtesan Kaliṅgasenā who is bringing her daughter, still a teenage girl, to worship Kāma as a birthday auspicious rite.

*adya duhitur janmadīnam iti kusumodyāne manmathaṁ
devaṁ draṣṭum iti/*

"Today, for the birthday of [my] daughter, [we are going] to see God Manmatha (Kāma) in the flower garden." (she tells)

The Festival conducted for Kāma is also called Vasantotsava. For the youth, it is marked by sexual intercourse. In the flower garden when the image of Kāma is installed, courtesans and lovers gather to worship him and co-mingle in a kind of competition.

nanu viśvānugrāhiṇi mānmathahome suratasamṣṭāḥ/

Is it not during the oblation to Manmatha, favourable to the world/all, that sexual intercourse happens?

*nanu kusumodyāne vinivartitavasantotsave
ahamahamikayā sametāsu vicitraveṣarūpama-
noharāsu vāravilāsinīṣu yuvajaneṣu ca sakala-
yoṣinmakūṭaratnabhūtāyāś caturikāyāḥ samnikar-
ṣavartī yauvanonmiṣitaveṣakāntir āsthitaḥ/*

Is it not in the flower garden, when the Spring Festival is performed, when in competition come together the most charming ladies, attractive through their beautiful ornaments and forms, and the young men, that is dwelling the One who arranges the connection for the skilful (or lovely) girl (*caturikā*) who becomes (viz. is then made) the crest-jewel among all the women, He by whom the sex-appeal (litt. "desire for/from the appearance") is aroused among [this] youth?

From these passages, the following characteristics of the Festival can be pointed out:

- The fact that, at least in the quarter of the courtesans (which is at first concerned by the play), the worship of the image of God Kāma takes place in a special

garden of flowers devoted to him. One can imagine a kind of altar or platform for the idol, but no reference is made here to a real temple for the god.

- The bringing of young girls, before puberty, for propitiating the god. This is a common feature of several forms of Kāma festivals, first of all the Poorams of Northern Kerala¹². However, unlike the latter, it is not here an organized ritual procession for all the young girls, but the visit to the god of only one of them, led by her mother, on the occasion of her birthday.
- What seems to be a competition between a mixed group of sexually mature girls and boys for electing the most beautiful girl. Though comparable, this is very different from the types of exclusively male performances that make up the present-day Pūrakkali dance with songs, or the Maruttukkalī verbal contest and chanting competition.

In Lakṣmīdāsa's *Śukasandēśa* (roughly contemporary with the VNBh), at the end of the second (message) part, a similar competitive peculiarity of the Festival is described:

*pum̐bhiḥ strīṇāṃ manasijamahe puṇjītānāṃ nikete
bhūyahpūspāpacayakalayā jāyamāne vivāde/
ālīhaste vinihitapaṇau bhūṣaṇair nūpurādyair
āvām eva tvaritam aviśāvantarudyānavīthim//2.81//¹³*

"When during the festival of love in our abode
With ladies and lovers assembled, a conflict arose
On reaping of flowers, we pledged with our friends our anklets
And quickly entered the bowels of the pleasure garden."

(Transl. K.P.A. Menon 1996, p. 312)

"On the occasion of a festival of cupid, when the ladies
had assembled at the residence with their partners,

there arose a discussion regarding the gathering of flowers. Both of us placing the anklets and other jewels as pledge in the hands of our friends quickly entered the recess of the garden."

(Transl. N.P. Unni 2016, p. 127)

With the help of Mānaveda's *Vilāsinī* Commentary (edited by Unni), it is possible to understand the scene more precisely.

The poet here reminds us how he, together with his beloved (courtesan), participate in the Festival of Love (*manasijasya kāmasya mahe pūjārūpe utsave*): when the group of (courtesan-)girls gathered with the group of boys (*pum̐bhiḥ saha puṇjītānāṃ rāśīkṛtānāṃ strīṇāṃ*) in the waiting place (*nikete mandire*: an appropriate place somewhere near the entrance of the garden of flowers) and when there arose a (sort of ritual?) conflictual discussion (*vivāda*) regarding the quantity of many flowers collected (by each couple for the God? or by each lover for his beloved? *bhūyasāṃ bahūnāṃ pūspāṇāṃ apacaye kalayā sāmāthyena hetunā vivāde* "kṣaṇeṇa prabhūta-pūspa-sampādena tvatto 'py aham eva samarthaḥ na tu tvam" *ityādi-rūpe jāyamāne*), they both, placing the pledge (*vinihataḥ nyastah paṇaḥ glahaḥ parājaya-deya-dravyam ity arthaḥ, tad yābhyām tadṛśau santau*; in this case the (floral) matter which had to be given for the victory) or the prize (due to the winner, viz. to the girl who received the most flowers: *yad vā paṇaḥ bhūyahpūspādātur deyam mūlyam... anena svacchanda-v <yava>hāra-yogyatvam āly-anugamana-nīśedhaś ca vyajyate*) in the hands of the girl friend (*ālī-haste sakhī-kare*; viz. the girl's "female friend"), they alone (*āvām eva*, as winners of the competition), with the (girl's) ornaments, such as her anklets etc., sounding (*bhūṣaṇair nūpurādyaiḥ... saśabdaiḥ*), promptly (*tvaritam satvaram, anena sambhoga-tvarā sūcitā*) went on (*aviśāva*) the inner pathway of the (flower/pleasure) garden (*antarudyāna-vīthim*).

So both in the VNBh and in Lakṣmīdāsa's *Śukasandēśa*,

at the issue of a competition involving a group of courtesan-girls and a group of boys, a girl is elected for going with her boyfriend to the pleasure garden of flowers and have sexual intercourse there with him, which, trivial though it may seem, is an appropriate manner to honour Kāma, the presiding deity of her community.

In order to identify the other characters of the Spring Festival of Love as performed in the courtesan milieu of medieval Kerala, the enquiry should be enlarged to the contemporary Maṇipravāḷam literature of the 13th-15th centuries (viz. from the *Vaiśikatantram* to the *Candrōtsavam*, with in-between the three *acci-caritam*s and the *Uṇṇunīli-sandēśam*)¹⁴, Damodara's *Śivavilāsa*, as well as to the later Sanskrit and Malayalam *bhāṇas* and *saṃdeśakāvya*s from Kerala.

The question remains if these sexually marked aspects of the Festival of Kāma were restricted to the highly educated and eroticized urban courtesan culture of that time, or expanded over the whole traditional Nayar society, which, as it is well known, was matrilineal and characterized, for the women, by sexual freedom and polyandry¹⁵. For, although nowadays there is no parallel in the popular forms of the Festival of Love surviving in the Poorams of Northern Kerala, it is not impossible that such libertine practices were in existence in former time. Herman Gundert in his Malayalam-English dictionary, issued in 1872, defines *pūraṃ*, *pūravēla* and *pūrakkaḷi* as "the Saturnalia of Malabar", so possibly alluding to licentious aspects of the festival which have now disappeared.

Already in medieval Kerala, ca 1300 AD, "moral" forces, defending a strict *dharma* to be followed by brahmins and kings, were active at the Court of the *dharma-taru-mūla-kanda* (one of his *birudas*) Kūpaka king Ravivarman Kulaśekhara (ca 1266-1317)¹⁶, condemning, for instance, in the *Jaiminīya-saṃhitā* of the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* (an epic work supposed to have been composed under that king)¹⁷, the adharmic visit

to courtesans (through the retelling of the Pativratopākhyāna, *adh.* 38-39)¹⁸. The exemplary king himself is described by his Court poet Kavibhūṣaṇa, in the Śrīraṅgam temple inscription (EI 4.18 ed.-transl. Kielhorn/*SII* 24.281), as being (unlike Kṛṣṇa to whom he is compared) "solely devoted to his own wife" (*svadāraikapaṇa*, st. 12) and (whereas all his enemies are afraid of him) only "ever afraid to look at others' wives even" (*paradārān api draṣṭuṃ bibheṣi tvam hi sarvadā*, st. 16); similarly in his eulogy by the poet Samudrabandha (the verses in praise of Ravivarman serving as examples for illustrating the author's commentary on the *Alaṃkārasarvasva*), he is portrayed as "blind to others' wives" but nonetheless "dear to the women of the ladies' apartments" (*paradārāmām andho yadunṛpa śuddhāntayoṣitām subhāgaḥ*, ed. TSS 40, p. 45).

Interestingly, king Ravivarman has authored a *nāṭaka* type of drama entitled *Pradyumnābhyaudaya*¹⁹, which was composed for the sake of being enacted at a procession festival (*yātrā-utsava*) in the Śrī-Padmanābha temple in Thiruvananthapuram (Viṣṇu-Padmanābha being the personal deity of Ravivarman) and which narrates the heroic deed of Pradyumna the son of Kṛṣṇa. Pradyumna is in the same time well known as being the rebirth of Kāma, which allows a rich double entendre in the play. However, here it is a "martial" Kāma (and behind him the noble figure of Pradyumna) who is associated with spring in a stanza of the Prologue reminiscent of VNBh st. 1 and 2 :

cūte cūte parabhytaravaiḥ kalpyate kāhalaśrīḥ
saṃnahyante vijayakarīṇaś candanādreḥ samīrāḥ/
āvīr gandham dadhati taravo 'py astrajālaṃ samantād
udyuṅkte tanmadhusahacaro jētum urvīm manobhūḥ //6//

"In every mango tree, the splendour of the battle-drum is fashioned by the cries of cuckoos;

the victory bestowing breezes of Candana mountain are armoured and ready for battle;

the trees as well on all sides bear a powerful perfume which is a bundle of weapons;

and so Manobhū [Kāma], companion of Madhu [Spring], strives to conquer the earth.”

(Transl. Chr.R. Austin 2019, p. 80)

In this case *cūta* means only a mango tree and *parabhṛta* a cuckoo. The puns are rather on the Pradyumna-Kāma identity. Thus, as pointed out by Austin, the stage manager thereafter says: “How can that Mādhava, the father of Kāma (*kāmasya janako... mādhaveḥ*), be described by us?” (st. 8), meaning both “Spring, the generator of desire” and “Kṛṣṇa, the father of Kāma [deva, i.e. Pradyumna]”, as it is explained by the same character just after (*mādhavanāmasāmyāt*).

In the beginning of the fourth act, we hear that the heroine Prabhāvatī, when in the outer garden during the Festival of the God of Love (*madanamahotsava*), has seen (which is a “Great Festival” in itself) Kāma in person (*pratyaṅśamadenasya darśanamahotsavenaiva sa madanotsavaḥ saṁvṛtāḥ*, [chāyā] p. 51 fn. 49), i.e. the hero Pradyumna, and since then is suffering from the pangs of love, longing for a “Great Festival of seeing the Lord again” (*tasya mahābhāḡasya punardarśanamahotsavaḥ*, [chāyā] p. 53 fn. 69). And Pradyumna experiences the same burning feeling after having “seen her playing together with her retinue of people in the outer garden, amidst the handsome demons (she is the daughter of an *asura*) who were engaged in the Festival [of Love]” (*bāhyodyāne saha pariṅjanais tatra saṁkrīdamānā dr̥ṣṭā madhye danujasudr̥ṣām utsavavyāpṛtānām*, st. 9ab). Fortunately for the two lovers, the “Great Festival of Mutual Beholding” (*paraspadarśanamahotsava*) soon after happens again, this time in the pleasure grove (*pramada-vana*), on the bank of a pond; and under the authority of her guru (who is the friend of Pradyumna), a union in the Gāndharva mode is prescribed (st. 28), without, however (because of the coming of another character), it being possible to consummate it right then and there.

Obviously for the pious Vaiṣṇava devotee, king

Ravivarman, the true “Great Festival” of Love was in the *darśana* itself, viz. in the “seeing of the Lord” and in the “mutual seeing” between the noble hero and the shy heroine, who, during the (demonic?) Festival of Love (“what need of [such] a Madana Festival!”, *kiṁ madanotsavena*, [chāyā] p. 52 fn. 158, says the heroine’s girl friend), meet in the outer garden or in the pleasure grove where, however, effective sexual union does not occur.

References

1. See V. Raghavan, Festivals, Sports and Pastimes of India, pp. 86-88, 193-204; L. Anderson, “The Indian Spring Festival (Vasantotsava): One or Many?”, ABORI 69/1, 1988, pp. 63-76; Vasantotsava: The Spring Festivals of India; T. Devarajan, Kāma and Kāma Worship, pp. 64-88; and several papers in this volume.
2. See Sreedhara Menon, Cultural Heritage of Kerala, pp. 74-75; Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, Glimpses of Kerala Culture, pp. 32-35; K.K.N. Kurup, Poorakkali and maruthukali; and S. Gopalakrishnan’s paper and film presented during this conference.
3. On medieval bhāṅas, see S.S. Janaki’s doctoral thesis (Oxford, 1971) and her 1989 edition with translation of the *Karpūracarita-Bhāṅa* of Amātya Vatsarāja (West India, 12th-13th centuries), plus several articles; F. Baldissera’s 1980 critical edition with translation and commentary of the *Śāradātilaka-Bhāṅa* of Śaṅkarakavi (= the 15th century Kerala author of the *Kṛṣṇaviṅaya*? In this case possibly composed at the Vijayanagar Court); and for Kerala, T. Devarajan’s doctoral thesis (University of Kerala, 1988) on the Bhāṅa Literature of Kerala.
3. See its presentation and dating by K. Kunjunni Raja in the Samskrita Ranga Annual 6, 1972, pp. 153-167, CKSL p. 154, and by T. Devarajan in his *Critical Study of the Bhāṅa Literature*, pp. 311-337.
4. T. Devarajan in his 2011 book on *Kāma* (p. 199 fn. 40.) refers to his own previous (rare) edition of the text, with a detailed introduction, issued in 1989, Sree Sruthi Publishers, Ezhukone (Kollam).
5. In *harinī* metre. *anvaya + padapāṭha* : jayati, *kaḥ* : [kāmaḥ] vicalita-kucaḥ (yena kucaḥ vicalitāḥ) vilolita-kuntalaḥ (yena kuntalāḥ vilolitāḥ) *kasyāḥ* : sārāṅga+akṣyāḥ (yasyāḥ akṣīni sārāṅgāni), *api ca saḥ* : śīrasi-ghaṭitaḥ (yena ghaṭitaḥ śīrasi) pāda+āghātaḥ (yena āghātaḥ pādānām) sanūpura-nisvanaḥ (yena nisvanaḥ sanūpuraḥ), *kadā* : mithaḥ-kalaha+utsava, *api ca* : jhaṭiti dayite praṇāma-vidhāyini jāta+utkampam (tam yena utkampāḥ jātaḥ), *katham* : sukṛtāḥ prācyaiḥ vṛttaiḥ.
6. See M.S. Ramesh, The Festivals and Rituals at Tirumala Temple, pp. 125-126.

7. In *śikharinī* metre. anvaya+padapāṭha: vijayate, *kaḥ* : vasantaḥ, viṭaḥ iva, *katham* : vyavaharan *kena* : manojñaiḥ sallāpaiḥ kāsām : parabhr̥ta-vadhūnām (parabhr̥tavadhūḥ kokilāyām vā veśyāyām vā), *katham ca saḥ* : nibiḍam anuliptaḥ *kena* : parāgaiḥ surabhilaiḥ mal.) *kasya* : cūtānām (cūtaḥ āmre vā cute vā), *api ca saḥ* : ghaṭayitā vilobhya-dvandvānām (vilobhyaḥ = vilobhaniyaḥ) kalaha-kaluṣānām, vitanvan ānandam.
8. See V. Raghavan, *Rtu in Sanskrit Literature*, pp. 86-88.
9. Cf. its English title "Spring Pastimes of an Indian Gallant" given by F. Baldissera, according to whom "the whole play is charged with the mood of spring" (cf. intr. pp. viii-ix).
10. See T. Devarajan, Critical Study of the Bhāṇa Literature of Kerala.
11. As it was shown in the Sahapedia film presented by Sudha Gopalakrishnan during this Conference. See also E. Thurston, Castes and Tribes, vol. 5 (1909), p. 193, on Nambudiri girls during Pooram: "The god of love, represented by a clay image, is propitiated by unmarried girls with offerings of flowers seven days successively. The image is finally given, together with some money, to a Brāhman, who drops it into a well. The flowers which have been used to decorate the image are placed by the girls at the foot of a jāk tree."
12. Note the reading -paṇo instead of -paṇau given twice by Unni (1985, 2016). There is a brief mention of this stanza in M.T. Muraleedharan, *Historical and Cultural Gleanings of Sandeśakāvya*, p. 214.
13. See on the courtesan culture (as expressed in Mañipravāḷam literature), Rich Freeman's excellent anthropological analysis, pp. 453-457, 469-475.
14. See K. Gough, "The traditional kinship system of the Nayars of Malabar", pp. 69-73, and in *Matrilineal Kinship*, pp. 358-372; J.P. Mencher in *Comparative Family Systems*; Chr.J. Fuller, *The Nayars*, pp. 2-6. To the 16th-19th centuries European testimonies provided by these authors is to be added the one by the Jesuit Antoine Thomas (Namur, 1643-1709, Beijing), who on his way to China, passing in Goa in 1680, wrote from Siam, in 1681, within a report on Christianity in India (*Status Indiae Orientalis*, ed. Henri Hosten, "Catholicism in the East Indies in 1680-81. From the Latin of Fr. A. Thomas, S.J. (Siam, Oct. 30, 1681)", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 1938, pp. 503-531), that: "The very great propensity to lustfulness is so great and so free among the Malabars, that the very wives are openly common property, and the Queens themselves are granted to others, the Kings their husbands allowing this indulgence; hence, among them, the heir-apparent is never the King's son, his origin being doubtful, but the son of the King's sister. And this they always observe."
15. See C. Vielle, "Ravivarman Kulaśekhara", 2011.
16. See Id. pp. 377-378.

17. See S. Smets' article, pp. 518-519, 524. This intertextual study, however, does not take into account the peculiar social context of Kerala underlying the text.
18. See Christopher R. Austin's new edition with an annotated English translation.

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18

A Literary Representation of the Tālappoli Festival of Kodungallur: The Rasasadanabāṇa of Yuvarā Jakavi

KesavanVeluthat

Kodungallur is a sleepy small town on the West Coast of India, in the Thrissur District of the state of Kerala, some 45 kilometres to the North of the port town of Kochi. It has a rich history, going back to the centuries before the common era. Greco-Roman sailors of the early centuries of the Common Era hailed it as Muziris, "the first emporium of India". Early Tamil literature knew it as Muciri, and described it as a port where *yavana* ships used to frequent "bringing in gold and taking away pepper". The *Tabula Peutingeriana*, a much later copy of a map produced in Europe, which purports to be a map of the roads of the Roman Empire, marks Muziris with a temple of Augustus. It is believed that the Jews had reached there as early as the first century C.E.; St. Thomas, the apostle, is thought to have disembarked in this port to start his work of proselytization; and the town also boasts of the very first mosque of India, the *Ceramān Masjid*. The Jain epic of *Cilappadikāram* states in its colophon that it was composed in *Kuṇavāyirkōṭṭam*, identified with Matilakam in the outskirts of the town. In recent years, there is also the fashion of linking the town with Buddhism.¹