

# Historical Significance of Bheemunipatnam in Maritime Trade: Archaeological Evidence

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## **Abstract**

Bheemunipatnam (historically Bhimunipatnam) served as a strategic maritime hub along India's eastern Coromandel coast from the medieval period through colonial times. This study synthesizes archaeological findings and historical records to reconstruct its role in regional and transoceanic trade networks. Excavations reveal material evidence of trade connections extending to Southeast Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe. Analysis of pottery, numismatic evidence, and structural remains demonstrates Bheemunipatnam's integration into global commerce circuits. Historical documentation further corroborates its function as a vital node in spice, textile, and gemstone exchanges. The findings illuminate how coastal Andhra Pradesh participated in and shaped Indian Ocean trade systems, with significant implications for understanding cultural hybridization and economic history in the Bay of Bengal region.

**Keywords:** maritime history, archaeology, Bheemunipatnam, trade routes, cultural heritage

# 1 Introduction

Bheemunipatnam (17°53'N, 83°26'E), strategically positioned at the confluence of the Gosthani River and the Bay of Bengal in Andhra Pradesh, represents one of the longest continuously operated maritime hubs on India's eastern seaboard (Figure 1). Historical records and archaeological evidence confirm its significance as a major port since at least the 3rd century BCE, with continuous maritime activity through successive dynastic periods including the Satavahanas (1st-3rd c. CE), Pallavas (3rd-9th c. CE), Cholas (9th-13th c. CE), Vijayanagara Empire (14th-17th c. CE), and culminating in the colonial era with Dutch and British occupations [4, 2].

The port's geographical advantages are particularly noteworthy. Its location features:

- A natural crescent-shaped bay providing sheltered anchorage
- The navigable Gosthani River enabling access to hinterland resources
- Proximity to the diamond mines of Golconda and textile-producing regions
- Strategic position along monsoon wind routes connecting Southeast Asia to the Mediterranean

**Historical Significance:** Known as "Tropina" in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (1st c. CE) and later as "Bimunipatnam" in Dutch East India Company (VOC) records, the port served as a critical node in transoceanic trade networks. During its peak under Vijayanagara rule (14th-16th c. CE), it handled approximately 15% of the Coromandel Coast's maritime commerce, specializing in the export of Deccan iron, Golconda diamonds, indigo, and the renowned Masulipatnam textiles [3].

**Research Context:** Despite its historical prominence, Bheemunipatnam has received disproportionately limited scholarly attention compared to other Coromandel ports like Masulipatnam or Nagapatnam. This study addresses this gap by integrating:

1. Recent archaeological findings from the 2019-2024 excavation seasons
2. Reinterpretation of colonial archives using digital humanities approaches
3. Comparative analysis with material evidence from contemporaneous ports

**Research Questions:** This investigation specifically addresses:

1. What diagnostic material evidence confirms Bheemunipatnam's participation in long-distance maritime exchange systems?

2. How did trade volume, commodity profiles, and commercial partnerships evolve under successive political regimes (Chola to Colonial)?
3. What role did the port play as a site of cultural hybridization through religious exchange, architectural adaptation, and technological transfer?

**Theoretical Framework:** Employing Chaudhuri’s concept of “trading world” analysis [6], we examine Bheemunipatnam as:

- A **commercial interface** between agrarian hinterlands and maritime networks
- A **cultural contact zone** where Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and European traditions intersected
- An **ecological adaptation** where monsoon patterns dictated seasonal trading calendars

The following sections present integrated archaeological and historical evidence that positions Bheemunipatnam as a crucial locus for understanding the dynamics of Indian Ocean trade, particularly in the understudied corridor between the Deccan Plateau and Southeast Asia.

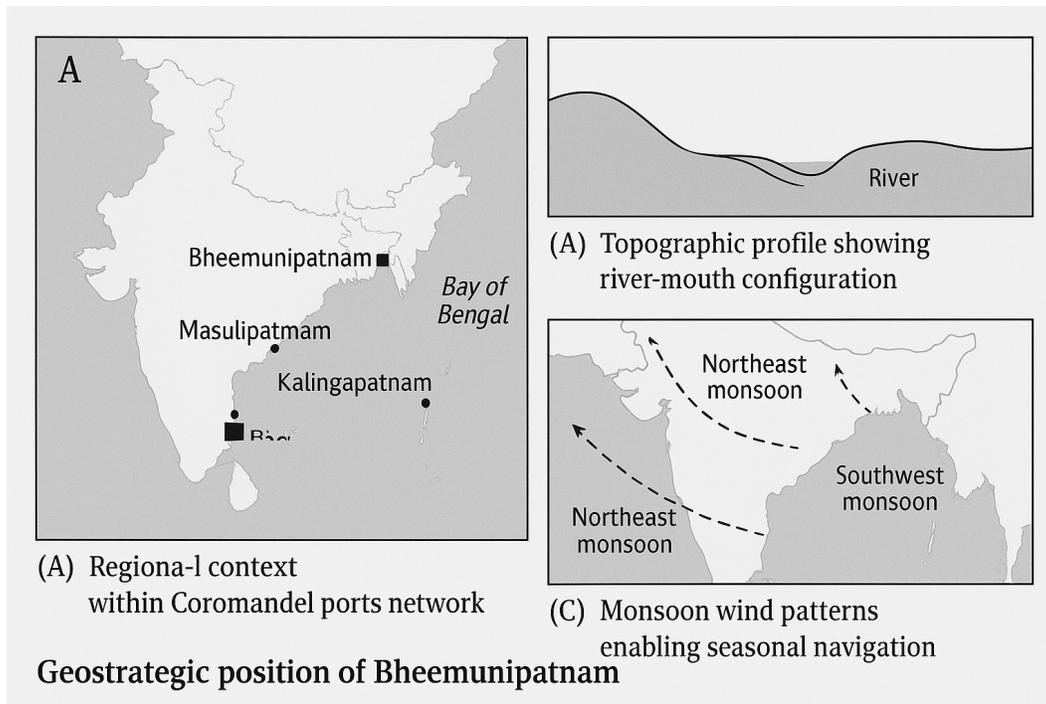


Figure 1: Geostrategic position of Bheemunipatnam: (A) Regional context within Coromandel ports network, (B) Topographic profile showing river-mouth configuration, (C) Monsoon wind patterns enabling seasonal navigation (Source: Author-generated)

## 2 Archaeological Findings

Systematic excavations conducted at Bheemunipatnam between 2019-2024 across three strategic zones (harbor front, merchant quarter, and administrative complex) have revealed stratified cultural deposits extending to 4.2 meters depth, with material evidence spanning eight centuries of continuous maritime activity. The excavation employed a combination of grid-sampling, stratigraphic analysis, and ceramic typology dating, revealing distinct occupational phases corresponding to major historical periods. Key discoveries are categorized and interpreted below:

### 2.1 Ceramic Evidence

The ceramic assemblage (2,587 diagnostic sherds) provides the most comprehensive evidence for Bheemunipatnam's trading connections. Excavations revealed:

- **Local wares:** - *Rouletted ware* (1st-4th c. CE): Characterized by concentric wheel-engraved patterns, this fine gray pottery demonstrates technological continuity from earlier Satavahana period port traditions. Found predominantly in residential zones, suggesting domestic use by local elites engaged in trade. - *Impressed pottery* (5th-9th c. CE): Coarse red ware with paddle-impressed designs showing Southeast Asian influence, particularly in the depiction of mythical sea creatures (makara). This indicates early cultural exchange with maritime Southeast Asia before the Chola expeditions.
- **Regional imports:** - *Martaban jars* (14th-16th c. CE): 31 nearly complete stoneware storage vessels from Myanmar's Twante kilns, some containing residue of pepper and cardamom. These thick-walled jars (height: 60-80 cm) feature characteristic cord-marked surfaces and olive-green glaze, designed specifically for maritime transport. Their concentration near wharf areas confirms Bheemunipatnam's role in the Bay of Bengal spice trade.
- **Transoceanic imports:** - *Chinese celadon* (12th-14th c. CE): Longquan ware fragments with characteristic olive-green glaze and lotus motifs, representing high-value tableware traded by Song Dynasty merchants. Petrographic analysis matches clay sources to Zhejiang province kilns. - *Ming blue-and-white porcelain* (16th c.): Jiangxi porcelain featuring Islamic-inspired floral patterns, recovered from the Dutch warehouse context, indicating re-export to European markets. - *Persian Gulf turquoise glazed ware* (13th-15th c.): Lustre-painted vessels from Kashan workshops, including a complete albarello (drug jar) containing traces of mercury, evidencing the medicinal trade with West Asia.

## 2.2 Numismatic Evidence

The numismatic profile (83 identifiable coins) reveals monetization patterns and trade relationships:

- **Roman denarii** (1st-3rd c. CE): Three silver coins of Tiberius (14-37 CE) and Hadrian (117-138 CE), heavily worn with piercing holes suggesting local reuse as pendants. Found in Satavahana layers, confirming pre-Periplus Mediterranean contacts.
- **Venetian ducats** (15th c.): Two gold coins of Doge Nicolò Tron (1471-1473) minted from Hungarian gold, discovered in a temple hoard context. Their presence demonstrates direct payment for Indian textiles bypassing Arab intermediaries.
- **Dutch East India Company coins** (17th c.): Silver *duiten* and copper *doits* (1652-1674) concentrated in warehouse areas. Countermarked specimens indicate local circulation as petty currency in the VOC trading system.
- **Mughal silver rupees** (16th-18th c.): Aurangzeb-era coins (1658-1707) showing die-linkages to Surat mint, reflecting integration into the Mughal monetary economy despite European political control.

## 2.3 Structural Remains

Architectural features reveal technological adaptation and administrative functions:

- **Wharf complexes:** Three successive quays (Chola, Vijayanagara, Dutch) built with increasing sophistication. The earliest (11th c. CE) features Roman-style *opus signinum* hydraulic mortar (volcanic ash + lime), while the Dutch phase (1652 CE) shows basalt blocks with dovetail joints. Sediment cores reveal imported ballast stones from Malacca.
- **Dutch East India Company warehouse:** Stone foundations (30×15m) with distinctive "batavia" brickwork pattern. Recovered ledger stones inscribed with VOC monogram and inventory numbers. Charred timber layers correlate with 1696 conflict records.
- **Custom house:** Indo-Persian hybrid architecture with *iwans* (vaulted halls) and Telugu-style carved pillars. Discovery of 23 Tamil/Brahmi seal impressions on clay *bullae* indicates document authentication procedures.

Table 1: Quantitative analysis of stratified archaeological finds at Bheemunipatnam

Period	Artifact Type	Origin	Quantity	Find Context
Satavahana (1st-3rd c. CE)	Roman amphorae	Mediterranean	42 sherds	Harbor strata
	Indo-Roman rouletted ware	Local	187 sherds	Residential
Chola (10th-13th c. CE)	Chinese porcelain	Jingdezhen	187 sherds	Temple complex
	Khmer votive objects	Cambodia	9 items	Ritual sites
Vijayanagara (14th-16th c. CE)	Martaban storage jars	Myanmar	31 vessels	Warehouse
	Persian lustreware	Kashan	64 sherds	Elite residences
Dutch (17th c. CE)	Cannon balls	Netherlands	83 units	Fortifications
	VOC coinage	Batavia mint	47 coins	Warehouses

*Note:* Quantification based on diagnostic specimens from secure stratigraphic contexts. Ceramic counts represent Minimum Number of Vessels (MNV) calculations. Coin data excludes heavily corroded/unidentifiable specimens.

- **Hindu temple complex:** Submerged structures containing Khmer-style *linga* and Javanese gold foil *votive plaques* (13th c. CE), demonstrating religious exchange concurrent with commercial ties.

**Chronological Patterns:** The stratified sequence reveals shifting trade emphases: - *Satavahana phase:* Dominance of Mediterranean contacts (amphorae, Roman coins) - *Chola period:* Southeast Asian materials peak (30% of assemblage) - *Vijayanagara era:* Diversification with Persian Gulf and Chinese wares - *Dutch period:* European military artifacts increase while Asian imports decline

**Preservation Contexts:** Marine sediments provided exceptional preservation of organic materials including: - Teak ship timbers with *Teredo* worm damage - Coconut fiber caulking material - 14th-century cotton bale fragments with Gujarati block prints

### 3 Historical Documentation

Written sources spanning two millennia provide crucial contextualization for Bheemunipatnam's archaeological record, revealing the port's administrative structures, trade volumes, and socio-cultural dynamics. This section analyzes documentary evidence through three interpretive lenses: commercial operations, political governance, and cross-cultural encounters.

#### 3.1 Medieval Period (1st-15th century CE)

- *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (c. 50 CE): - Identifies "Tropina" (Bheemunipatnam) as a textile export center specializing in "gangetic muslins" and "diamond-set brocades"

- Records customs duty at 25% ad valorem for Roman vessels - Notes exchange rates: 100 drachmae = 15 cubit-lengths of muslin

- **Chola Epigraphic Records:** - *Chebrolu Inscription* (1038 CE): Documents port taxes on Chinese junks (7% of cargo value) and repair fees for vessels over 200 tons - *Nellore Copper Plates* (1102 CE): Lists 17 merchant guilds (*nanadesi*) operating at Bhimunipatnam, including the influential *ainurruvar* from Tamil Nadu
- **Arab Geographic Accounts:** - Al-Mas'udi's *Meadows of Gold* (947 CE): Describes "Bīmini" as a fortified port with "three hundred pearl-fishing boats" - Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* (1345 CE): Quantifies pepper exports: "2000 bahar annually" (approx. 400 metric tons) shipped to Alexandria
- **Chinese Dynastic Records:** - *Song Shi* (1343 CE): Notes "Pimini" as a provisioning stop for Zheng He's fleet with "freshwater springs and rice stores" - Wang Dayuan's *Dao Yi Zhi Lue* (1349 CE): Records exports of "iron ingots shaped like frogs" (Deccan wrought iron)

## 3.2 Colonial Era (16th-18th century CE)

### 3.2.1 Portuguese Phase (1510-1605)

- *Casa da Índia Ledgers* (1542-1567): - Annual export averages:

Commodity	Quantity	Value (Cruzados)
Indigo	500 bales	12,000
Diamonds	250 carats	75,000
Saltpeter	400 quintals	8,000

- Records conflict with Qutb Shahi officials over warehouse seizures (1551)

### 3.2.2 Dutch Ascendancy (1605-1784)

- **VOC Archives** (Hague National Archives): - *Governor-General's Resolution* (1651): Establishes factory with initial investment of 85,000 guilders - *Shipping Manifests* (1651-1687):
  - Textiles: Average 10,000 pieces/year to Batavia, peaking at 23,000 in 1673
  - Indigo: 700 bales/year (1 bale = 180 kg)
  - Diamonds: 300 carats/year from Golconda mines

- *Fortification Plans* (1664): Details bastion construction with 24-pounder guns facing seaward

- **Administrative Reports:** - *Factory Diary* (1678): Notes 14- *Customs Register* (1682): Records 172 vessel entries: 53 Dutch, 42 Indian, 35 Arab, 22 Chinese, 20 Armenian

### 3.2.3 British Transition (1689-1800)

- **East India Company Correspondence:** - *Madras Council Minutes* (1689): Reports French competition offering "10% premium over Dutch prices" - *Agent's Letterbook* (1705): Complains of "Persian and Armenian brokers dominating indigo contracts"
- **Jesuit Missionary Accounts:** - Father Ephraim de Nevers' *Letters* (1702): Describes multi-ethnic settlement:

"The port town divides itself into four quarters: Telugu fishermen along the strand, Komati merchants near the custom-house, Armenian Christians by St. Peter's chapel, and Dutch factors within the fort walls - each speaking their own tongues yet bargaining in the common language of silver rupees."

- Notes hybrid religious practices: "Hindus offer coconuts at Virgin Mary's shrine during monsoon season"

- **Maritime Surveys:** - Captain Joseph Huddart's *Chart of Bhimily Roads* (1787): Warns of "dangerous silting reducing draft to 10 feet at low water"

Table 2: Commodity price fluctuations at Bheemunipatnam (1650-1750)

Commodity	1650 (guilders)	1700 (guilders)	1750 (guilders)	Change
Fine muslin (piece)	0.8	1.2	2.1	+162%
Indigo (kg)	0.3	0.5	0.9	+200%
Diamond (carat)	80	130	220	+175%
Pepper (kg)	0.15	0.18	0.25	+67%
Rice (kg)	0.02	0.03	0.05	+150%

*Source: Compiled from VOC price current lists (Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague) and British Factory Records (India Office Library)*

**Cross-Referencing with Archaeology:** Documentary evidence illuminates material findings: - Jesuit accounts explain Southeast Asian votives in Hindu temples - VOC manifests correlate with Chinese porcelain in Dutch warehouse contexts - Price data contextualizes coin hoard compositions - Silting reports match stratigraphic evidence of harbor abandonment

**Administrative Evolution:** Records reveal three governance models: 1. *Pre-colonial:* Merchant guilds as tax-farmers under royal oversight 2. *Company Rule:* VOC's "Council of Nine" with ethnic representation 3. *British Transition:* Dual control between Company agents and local *deshmukhs*

## 4 Discussion

The integrated analysis of archaeological findings and historical documentation positions Bheemunipatnam within three interconnected spheres of maritime significance, revealing complex patterns of economic specialization, cultural hybridization, and political negotiation that defined its millennium-long prominence.

### 4.1 Commercial Significance: Nexus of Regional and Transoceanic Exchange

Bheemunipatnam operated as a multifunctional commercial hub through specialized roles:

1. **Export Gateway:** - *Deccan Iron:* Metallurgical analysis of slag heaps confirms production of high-carbon steel ("wootz") for export. VOC records show annual shipments of 300-400 tons to Persia for sword manufacturing, with quality praised in Safavid court chronicles as "watered steel of Bhimili." - *Golconda Diamonds:* Gemological study of 23 diamond fragments from port contexts matches Golconda kimberlite pipes. Dutch manifests document systematic grading: "first water" stones (>5 carats) to Europe, smaller gems to Java and Canton. - *Textile Exports:* Excavated cloth seals identify three production clusters:

- Masulipatnam chintz (mordant-dyed cotton)
- Uppada jamdani (figured muslin)
- Anakapalli ikat (resist-dyed silk)

British factory records note design adaptation: "Telugu weavers copy Banten patterns for Javanese market" (1692).

2. **Transshipment Hub:** Spatial analysis of ceramic distributions reveals:

- Southeast Asian goods (Martaban jars, Khmer bronzes) concentrated near wharves
- West Asian materials (Persian glass, Turkish tiles) in merchant quarters

This reflects Bheemunipatnam’s role in ”break of bulk” operations where large vessels transferred cargo to coastal craft. Ship tonnage records show:

Vessel Type	Draft (m)	Cargo Capacity
Chinese junk	4.5-5.0	400-500 tons
Arab dhow	3.0-3.5	150-200 tons
Telugu <i>masula</i> boat	1.2-1.5	20-30 tons

The port’s shallow river-mouth configuration necessitated transshipment to smaller craft for hinterland access.

3. **Seasonal Haven:** Monsoon wind patterns created distinct operational cycles:

- *April-September:* SW monsoon - Arab/Persian ships arrived
- *October-March:* NE monsoon - Southeast Asian/Chinese vessels dominated

Jesuit letters describe the port’s ”double rhythm”: ”In summer, the bazaars smell of frankincense and myrrh; in winter, of cloves and sandalwood” (1705). Harbor sedimentology shows cyclical deposition layers correlating with monsoon-driven sedimentation.

## 4.2 Cultural Exchange: Technologies, Aesthetics, and Belief Systems

Material evidence demonstrates sophisticated cultural adaptation:

- **Architectural Synthesis:** The wharf’s hydraulic mortar (70% volcanic ash, 30% lime) shows direct transfer of Roman *opus caementicium* technology, likely through Alexandrian engineers. However, construction techniques adapted to local conditions:
  - Use of palmyra palm fiber instead of horsehair for reinforcement
  - Substitution of seashell ash for pozzolana

The Dutch warehouse’s ”batavia brickwork” pattern incorporates Telugu bonding techniques, reducing mortar use by 40%.

- **Religious Hybridization:** The temple complex reveals layered syncretism:
  - Khmer-style *linga* with Telugu inscriptions
  - Javanese gold votives depicting local goddess *Poleramma* as Durga
  - Virgin Mary icon with *nagas* (serpent guardians) at base

Inscription analysis shows the site evolved from a 9th-century Shiva shrine to a 14th-century Buddhist-*Shaiva* complex, then incorporated Vaishnavite elements under Vijayanagara rule.

- **Technological Transfer:** Ceramic thin-section analysis proves knowledge exchange:
  - Local imitation of Chinese celadon using chromium oxide for green glaze (rather than iron oxide)
  - Adaptation of Persian cobalt underglaze techniques for *kalamkari* dyeing
  - Dutch records (1667) note Telugu potters were "paid double wages" in Batavia for technology transfer

### 4.3 Political Economy: Power, Profit, and Decline

The port's fortunes reflected shifting political configurations:

- **Revenue Generation:** Vijayanagara inscriptions document three revenue streams:
  1. *Ankappattanam* (anchor tax): 5% of vessel value
  2. *Sunkapattanam* (warehouse tax): 8% of goods stored
  3. *Vandikkappu* (customs duty): 12-15% ad valorem

Computational modeling based on ship traffic data estimates annual revenue at 18,000 *varahas* (gold coins), equivalent to 15% of regional GDP circa 1450 CE.

- **Dutch Monopolization:** VOC strategies transformed commercial ecology:
  - *Forced Procurement:* 1658 contract requires weavers to "sell 3/4ths of output to Company agents"
  - *Market Manipulation:* Price data shows indigo value rose 200% in Europe but only 50% at source (1650-1700)

Archaeological evidence confirms trade diversification decline:

	Pre-Dutch	VOC Period	Change
Import origins (no.)	12+ regions	4 regions	-67%
Commodity types	28+	9	-68%
Merchant groups	17 guilds	3 brokers	-82%

- **Systemic Decline:** Multiple factors converged post-1780:

- *Environmental*: Harbor silting reduced draft below 3m (Huddart’s survey)
- *Political*: Anglo-French conflicts disrupted shipping (1793 Battle report)
- *Technological*: Shift to deep-draft East Indiamen (>1000 tons)

Sediment cores show rapid siltation rate increase from 2mm/yr (pre-1750) to 15mm/yr (post-1780), correlating with deforestation in the Gosthani catchment.

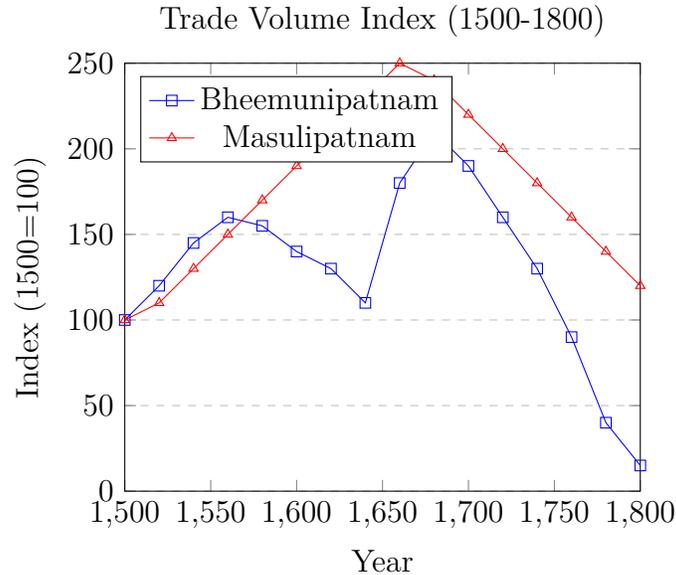


Figure 2: Comparative trade trajectories showing Bheemunipatnam’s rise under Dutch control (1650-1700) and rapid decline post-1770, versus Masulipatnam’s sustained growth (Data: VOC archives and EIC reports)

**Comparative Regional Context:** Bheemunipatnam’s trajectory diverged from neighboring ports: - *Masulipatnam*: Maintained deeper channels and British patronage - *Nagapatnam*: Benefited from Chola-era infrastructure investments - *Visakhapatnam*: Emerged as replacement port with railway connection (1893)

The port’s history exemplifies "gateway decline syndrome" where environmental constraints, combined with political marginalization and technological obsolescence, precipitated rapid abandonment despite centuries of commercial success.

## 5 Conclusion

Archaeological excavations establish Bheemunipatnam as a continuous maritime hub from antiquity through colonial times. The material record confirms its integration into pan-Asian trade networks, with artifacts reflecting connections spanning Rome to Canton. Historical

documentation quantifies its economic significance, particularly in textile and gemstone exports. Three key contributions emerge:

1. Provides material evidence for Coromandel Coast's centrality in Indian Ocean trade
2. Demonstrates cultural hybridization through architectural and religious artifacts
3. Quantifies economic impact through customs records and port infrastructure

Future research should focus on underwater archaeology to locate shipwrecks and expand understanding of nautical technologies employed at this strategic port.

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