SUNKEN SHIPS AND A LONG-LOST PORT
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Unlike Mormugao and Panaji, our most ancient port of Chandrapura (today’s Chandor) lay miles inland from the Arabian Sea, on the banks of the Paroda River, a tributary of the Zuari. Excavations reveal that it flourished in the second century B.C., in the Satavahana period. Ships also sailed from Vallipattana (probably Velim in Salcete taluka) and Gopakapattana to the Arabian and African coasts to trade cotton goods, diamonds and other precious stones, spices, and perfumes. The finding of Roman coins in Pilar near Gopakapattana has been cited as proof that Roman ships called at our ports well before the Christian era.

These early contacts with West Asian and East African countries were continued by the Shilaharas and Kadambas, who established themselves as maritime powers. Still later, Old Goa under the Portuguese was a prosperous capital. Merchants from Arabia, Mozambique, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Java, and China came to trade.

With so much seaborne traffic over more than twenty centuries, it is safe to assume that hundreds of wooden sailing ships must have been wrecked off our shores and at the entrances to our harbours, yet we have no records of shipwrecks in Goan waters prior to 1500 A.D.

Records at the Goa State Archives, Panaji, indicate most wrecks off Goa occurred in shallow waters mainly due to the uneven topography and severe storms. Records in Lisbon name numerous ships that were wrecked between 1497 and 1862 during voyages between Portugal and Goa. The S. Cristovam was wrecked off Goa in a storm on August 17, 1594, while returning to Goa. The nau S. Andre left Lisbon on February 17, 1607 and was lost at a bank off Goa on arriving in May 1608. The Nossa Senhora dos Remédios and a sister vessel also struck a bank off Goa in a storm on January 28, 1616; the people were saved, the cargo was lost.

SHIPS WRECKED IN NERUL RIVER

Twelve ships bound for Calcutta sank outside Aguada Bay. Seven smaller vessels carrying one million xerifins were lost in the Nerul River in April 1648 during a cyclonic wind. Five, including the Santa Helena, Sao Francisco, and Sao Thome, left Portugal in 1651; only two reached Goa and they
too were wrecked in a storm on March 10, 1651. The *pataxo Santa Teresa de Jesus*, carrying royal money (and a small bag of precious stones belonging to one Manoel Dias) from Goa to Chaul and Bassein, sank at the bar off Goa on May 18, 1658. Some cargo was saved; some was stolen. Similarly, the brig *Champion* was wrecked on the Mandovi sandbar in September 1862.

As part of a systematic investigation of shipwrecks off Goa, the Marine Archaeology Centre at the NIO in Dona Paula has conducted metal detector as well as underwater visual surveys at Sunchi and St. George’s Reefs. Onshore explorations have been conducted at Gopakapattana.

The shallow Sunchi Reef region is full of laterite rock, with plenty of wave action. The remains of a wreck, scattered over a large area, included four two-metre long cast-iron cannon, the barrel of a handgun, a cast-iron cannonball, an iron anchor, Martaban pottery, broken glass bottles, elephant tusks, hippopotamus teeth, Chinese ceramics, a copper strap and copper vessel, a lead pipe, stone and clay bricks, and dressed granite blocks. The four cannon and single cannonball suggest they came from a lightly armed merchant ship; the tusks and teeth were probably picked up on a routine stop in Africa. Thermoluminescence dating indicates that the Martaban shards are about 360 years old, plus or minus 40 years. Thus the wreck may have occurred between 1600 and 1680 A.D. No remains of the ship itself were found.

**THE WRECK AT ST. GEORGE’S REEF**

St. George’s Reef lies on the eastern side of Grande Island. The remains of a wreck, scattered widely at a depth of 15 metres, included various terracotta artefacts: a Corinthian capital, roof and ridge tiles, white clay chimney bricks and numerous floor tiles, the last two items inscribed ‘Basel Mission Tile Works 1865.’ A timber piece two metres long and 75 cm in circumference was found near the reef. C14 dating suggests the wreck is about 115 years old, and therefore occurred in the latter part of the 19th century.

The discovery has thrown light on the Basel Mission Company, a Swiss missionary organization that came to India in 1834 and established tile factories, the first being in Jeppo, Mangalore, in 1865. The fact that so many artefacts dated 1865 were concentrated on the reef’s south and southeastern side suggests that the vessel was coming from the south, probably carrying items from the Jeppo factory not long after they were made.

The Sunchi and St. George findings prove that our region possesses rich potential for shipwreck archaeology. However, the Portuguese data in our archives needs to be sifted to identify the names and locations of other wrecks, so that further explorations will fill other gaps in Goa’s maritime history.

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All that’s left of the ancient port of Gopakapattana is now a ruined wall seen only at very low tide. Before the Kadambas, the port is believed to have been used by the Chalukya Rashtrakuta and the Silahara dynasties from 540 to 1008 A.D. (Photo: National Institute of Oceanography, Dona Paula.)

**THE RIDDLE OF GOPAKAPATTANA**

Our onshore exploration and trial scraping at Gopakapattana revealed stone walls of well-dressed laterite blocks running perpendicularly as well as parallel to the Zuari River. At some places the walls lie buried in the sediment and have also been disturbed; the longest is 1.5 km in length. Several bastions occur at regular intervals along one wall; six stone steps lead from the shore to the main wall. All these structures lie very close to the broad Kadamba royal road that ran from Gopakapattana to Ela.

Although these explorations have not yet yielded any datable findings, artefacts from Gopakapattana at the Pilar Museum confirm that it may have been an ancient port.