

KEELADI EXCAVATION: HISTORY

NEWS: What sparked the keeladi controversy?

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

The Keeladi excavation in Tamil Nadu has revealed evidence of an advanced urban settlement from the Sangam period, but debates continue over dating methods, prompting ASI's request for further scientific validation of findings.

Background of the Keeladi Excavation

- The Keeladi excavation site is situated near the Vaigai River in Tamil Nadu, in the Sivaganga district.
- Excavation at the site began in 2014 under the leadership of archaeologist K. Amarnath Ramakrishna of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).
- Since its inception, the excavation has unearthed more than 7,500 artifacts, including structural remains such as brick walls, ring wells, water channels, and drainage systems.
- The site's cultural remains point towards a well-planned urban settlement dated to around the 2nd century BCE, consistent with the Sangam period in Tamil history.

Scientific Significance of the Findings

- Researchers employed carbon dating and stratigraphic analysis to establish the chronological framework of the site.
- Notably, Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) dating was used on charcoal samples from the site, supporting estimates of the site's antiquity.
- The artifacts revealed an absence of religious iconography, suggesting the settlement was primarily civic in nature and possibly secular in outlook.
- Findings, such as inscribed pottery and evidence of brick structures, provide valuable insights into urbanization, literacy, and technological advancement in ancient South India.

Submission of the Report

- In 2021, Mr. Ramakrishna submitted a comprehensive 982-page report based on the first two phases of the excavation, covering the period from 2014 to 2016.
- The report documented the chronological stratigraphy of the site, detailed descriptions of the artifacts, and outlined the scientific dating methodologies used.
- The findings highlighted the cultural and material richness of Keeladi, underscoring its importance as a major urban center in the early historic period.

ASI's Request for Revision

- After reviewing the report for more than two years, the ASI requested revisions in early 2024, raising questions about the scientific validation of dating and stratigraphic interpretations.
- The ASI sought additional clarifications and further data to support claims regarding the site's age and the depth of cultural deposits.
- Mr. Ramakrishna declined to revise the report, maintaining that it conformed to established archaeological and scientific standards, including AMS dating and stratigraphic sequencing.

Administrative Developments

- In June 2024, Mr. Ramakrishna was transferred from his position in Delhi to Greater Noida, taking up a new post within the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities (NMMA).
- The transfer came amid debates within the archaeological community regarding the Keeladi findings and the interpretation of data.

Ongoing Work and Public Interest

- Since 2019, the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology has independently carried forward further excavations at Keeladi, building on the earlier ASI-led work.
- The state department has published its own reports and findings, affirming the site's significance as a major urban settlement of the Sangam era.
- A dedicated museum for Keeladi has been established to display artifacts, facilitate research, and promote public education on ancient Tamil culture and urban history.
- The site continues to attract attention from scholars, students, and the general public, making it a focal point of historical and cultural inquiry in South India.

Conclusion

- The Keeladi excavation has opened a new chapter in understanding early urban life in South India, providing evidence of advanced civic planning, literacy, and technological expertise during the Sangam period.
- Scientific debates regarding dating methods and interpretations are part of the rigorous process of archaeological research and peer review.
- Continued excavations and research at Keeladi promise to further enrich the historical narrative of ancient Tamil civilization and its contributions to the broader history of the Indian subcontinent.

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