

KARIKOP - A SURVIVING EUROPEAN CEMETERY AT NAGAPATTINAM ON THE COROMANDEL COAST

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Introduction

The Dutch captured Nagapattinam from the Portuguese in 1665 and remained there up to 1784. During their presence at Nagapattinam, a new cemetery was put up, in the salt road near sea shore. The cemetery drew its name from the Dutch word ' *Kerkhof* '. In due course of time, it began to be called as 'Karikop', in Tamil slang.¹

The word 'cemetery' is derived from the Greek 'koimeterion' which means 'dormitory or resting place'.² Though the terms "graveyard" and 'cemetery' are having used for the burial site, 'graveyard' primarily refers to a burial ground within a churchyard whereas the 'cemetery' for the burial site away from the Church building. Cemeteries use to reflect important part of culture and society since the beginning of human history. Cemeteries have evolved to meet the changing trends of the communities and in accordance with the care provided to those individuals buried within the cemetery grounds and the console offered to mourners and comfort to the visitors.³

Apart from its cultural and architectural origin, social values, the cemeteries also use to provide historical information related to name, date of birth and death, cause of death, occupation, social and cultural affiliations and religious to the future generation to generate their history. Cemeteries are important of historic source materials. Cemeteries can expose information about historic events, religions, lifestyles, and genealogy and so on.⁴

Nagapattinam was the port town that was one of the strategic ports for the European power on the Coromandel Coast which concentrated on maritime and interior trade activities in this south-eastern coast of Tamil Nadu. There are very limited literary sources available in the English language as well as in native Tamil literature to understand the historical facts related to the 17th and 18th centuries even though Nagapattinam has been termed as a very important and dominating port for almost all the European trading companies. Apart from the literary sources, there are monumental remains are there at Nagapattinam and they are gradually either dismantled or ruined. One of such reminiscences of the European presence at Nagapattinam has been "*Kari Kop*" cemetery at Nagapattinam in a long rectangular enclosure containing a number of Dutch and a few English tombs.

This study is not only to highlight the importance of this cemetery to bring back the history of this port town but also to extract more information from the epitaphs and architectural features of the tombs. Before observing the features of the cemetery, the advent and the activities of the Europeans at Nagapattinam should be studied briefly.

Portuguese at Nagapattinam

On the Bay of Bengal, the Portuguese established their settlements in 1520. This coast was colonized not using military but with a peaceful approach by the groups of “*Casados*” (married men of the reserve army). As it was the best port of the entire Coromandel Coast with the hinterland of ten villages of, Puthur, Muttam, Poruvalancheri, Anthonipettai, Karureppankadu, Azhinji Mangalam, Sangamangalam, Thiruthina mangalam, Manjakollai, Nariyankudi along with a Port town, Nagapattinam was referred to by the Portuguese writers as, "The City of Coromandel"⁵

At the end of the 1540s the Franciscans and then the Jesuits settled down in the town for the purpose of spreading christianity. Several churches were built by them at Nagapattinam. They were named as Madre de Deus, São Jerónimo, Paulistas, São Domingos, Nossa Senhora da Nazaré, Cathedra.⁶

In 1577, there were in 60 *casados*, 200 Eurasians, 3,000 Christian Indians who lived at Nagapattinam. In the years 1642-43, Nagapattinam was fortified and a customs-house was also built by them.⁷ On 23rd July 1658, a Dutch fleet under the command of Jan van der Laan conquered the fort. In the 1590s the Portuguese left Nagapattinam moved towards north and settled in a coastal place and named it as Porto Novo (New Harbour).⁸ The Dutch has occupied this coastal town from the Portuguese and made headquarter of their trade activities in the Coromandel Coast. In 1676, Venkaji, the Maratha ruler who ruled Tanjore has surrendered Nagapattinam to the Dutch.⁹

Dutch Establishment at Nagapattinam

VOC (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) was the first international trading company. This was a Dutch trading company founded by traders of the Dutch port cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Middelburg. It was the largest and most significant company of the first modern European trading companies operating in Asia. It was created in 1602 as a result of the request made by the highest official in the Republic of the Netherlands, to several Dutch spice companies to set up a single trading company. It had the area of the trade operation between South Africa and Japan to conduct trade, establish fortresses, appoint governors, maintain a united army, and make treaties in their own name.

During the 18th century, two naval battles were fought between British and French troops, along the coast of Nagapattinam. The first was in 1758 as part of the Seven Years' War and the second one was in 1782 as part of the American Revolutionary War. The town was annexed by the British from the Dutch in 1781.¹⁰ When the Dutch and the British reached a peace agreement in

1784, Nagapattinam was officially granted by the British. From 1799 to 1845, it was the regional capital of Tanjore.¹¹

Between 1602 and 1796, the VOC sent nearly a million Europeans to work in Asia to trade in 4,785 ships, and they put down their efforts in addition of 2.5 million tons of Asian trade goods. In contrast, the whole of Europe sent only 8,82,412 people from 1500 to 1795, and the English (later British) British East India Company, which competed strongly with the VOC, was second only to its total fleet of ships of 2,690 and only one-fifth of VOCs' assets. The VOC enjoyed great benefits with its spice independence throughout the 1600s.¹²

The VOC's income came in the form of taxes, levies and duties collected through increasing colonial administration over its territories in Africa and Asia. Due to the heavy debt of almost a hundred guilders, the fourth Anglo-Dutch war and French rule over the Netherlands, the VOC was abolished in the late eighteenth century.

Karikop – Dutch Cemetery at Nagapattinam

Even after three centuries, there are still remnants in the form of churches, cemeteries and schools that still survive in the coastal town of Nagapattinam to show the European existence of this small town during the colonial period of Indian history with some different Dutch remains.

The Dutch church in Nagapattinam is a State church granted to the Government of Madras. The Methodists eventually took over the great church. It is also known from other sources that Kohlhoff and Schwartz, Protestant the missionaries of Tranquebar Mission visited in year 1758 to Dutch Lagarette in Negapatam and preached in the city to about 200 Germans in various positions.¹³

St. Peter's cemetery is under the control the Church of South India, [CSI] with the Royal Dutch logo [VOC] and European Trading Companies. In the church cemetery, large cemeteries of knowledge were seen in a state of decline. There are 178 European tombs in the cemetery. The following is the Site Map of the Karikop graveyard in the salt road of Nagapattinam town.

Architectural Features

Karikop Cemetery is located on the northern portion of the salt road within close proximity to St. Peter's Church. The Cemetery was accessed not through the original entrance gateway but rather through the narrow residential street on the eastern portion of the cemetery. The cemetery contains many dilapidated tombs of various sizes pertaining to the Dutch period and the consecutive British period. Thick vegetation over the ground was present in all the places rendering the tombs inaccessible except for the Anthonia's Tomb and the obelisk. Most of the Dutch era graves are located in close proximity with each other at one quadrant of the cemetery whereas the other graves from the later periods are found in the other portions.



KARIKOP – NAGAPATTINAM – AN ARIAL VIEW

Karikop cemetery consists of large stone slabs laid or ground into brick and cement buildings. Most of the stones are beautifully embroidered with coat-arms or monograms and floral ornaments with *alto relieveo* letters. Wherever the tombs were located, they were executed in the same manner as the finished sculptor's work. In addition to their artistic prowess, the work of cutting the background, to the point of suggested recording and writing, should be one of the great works. These cemeteries may not have been cut by native workers but under the watchful eye of trained European sculptors.

Most of the floral decoration is apparently Indian in character. The coat of arms may need European surveillance, if not actual execution. The stone is a kind of strong hornblende from which Hindu writings are cut. Although it is suggested that the slabs were imported from Europe, it is uncertain.¹⁴

The tombstones also attested to the view of Alexr Rea that the patient labour bestowed on these monuments and the imperishable nature of their construction is in marked contrast to the unsubstantial commonplace brick erections of the English in India.

The tomb of Anthonia Steelant, the Obelisk and the old gateway is the larger structures each in a different stage of dilapidation due to neglect and vandalism from the few locals who use these places in the night for inappropriate activities.

The tomb of Anthonia Steelant, the wife of a Dutch Local Administrator is built on bricks and lime mortar with lime stucco sculptures of angels on the top of the four-sided brick-vaulted structure surmounted over four pillars of brick masonry housing the grave above the ground level.



SOUTH VIEW OF THE TOMB OF ANTHONIA STEELANT

The grave is covered over by a large single stone granite sarcophagus. The surface of the pillars is deteriorated exposing the bricks layers which have further eroded. The sides of the sarcophagus are covered with cement plaster and whitewashed. The inner surface of the vault had visibly intact lime plaster. The tomb of Anthonia Steelant inner view of the ceiling of the four-sided vaulted roof a crack ran from the apex to the northern portion probably caused by the wedging of the roots over the surface. To ascertain the nature of the crack the base of the structure was covered with vegetation obscuring the view to observe any settlements. The outer surface of the structure showed heavy deterioration and numerous patchworks made in cement plaster. Moderate to heavy vegetation was present in almost all crevices over the vault surface with few major tree roots dislodging the integrity of the vault. The obelisk on the north of the tomb of Anthonia Steelant, was slanting to the north due to the settlement of the base structure.¹⁵

The northern portion of the Obelisk had tree roots dislodging the stone slab embedded on the surface. All four sides of the obelisk had granite side stone slabs with Dutch embossed writings embedded on the surface. Adjoining graves of smaller scale The South Portion of Entrance Archway. The entrance gateway to the cemetery was on the northern frontier that was accessed from the south on the way to the current entry to the cemetery.

The old entrance gate of this cemetery still exists but has been blocked with bricks. On the gate, there is an inscription with the Dutch wordings: *Beati Morientes in Domini* (Blessed are those who die in the Lord). This cemetery has been expanded later by the British and the native Christians, while the original part with Dutch tombs is not used as it has been with dense bushes.

The gateway arch has deteriorated extensively with neglect and sporadic vegetation of heavy nature all around the structure and a few over the structure. Apart from the above-mentioned structures, other graves of smaller scale made of granite stones shaped as regular tombs and a few as miniature obelisks were hidden amidst the thick vegetation. On the way to inspect the gateway arch, we stumbled upon a damaged white marble sphere which on closer examination was evident that it was a part of the final of one of the tombs. There are chances that numerous artifacts would be scattered around in the site owing to the time span and neglect the cemetery has faced so far.

The Karikop cemetery is one of the few Dutch Era cultural properties that is located in Tamil Nadu hence it is very important to preserve and conserve what is left of the deteriorated cemetery. Though the other portion of the cemetery in the extreme south and southwestern portion is still underused the portion pertaining to the Dutch Era is the most neglected. So far the Dutch cemetery has not been identified as a heritage monument by any of the concerned authorities like ASI or state archaeology except for the lone list prepared by the INTACH of the heritage structures at Nagapattinam, hence the present effort to preserve and conserve the cemetery might pave the way for its inclusion in the list of heritage monuments in Tamil Nadu thereby ensuring a relatively safer future.

Another one is Adriana's obelisk which has a plaque dedicated to her and her five-year-old daughter Catharina Johanna, who died of smallpox and was buried in a basement. She died of a heart attack at the time of her children's death. He married at the age of 15 and died at the age of twenty-eight in the year 1743.

"All the Nagapattinam bells rang all day and the bodies of the Dutch ship ad fired every fifteen minutes," and that "the sky above Nagapattinam must have survived with the smell of gunpowder marking Adriana's funeral" as mentioned in Dutch as mentioned by a research scholar.¹⁶ Located between two large tombs is another lump below where Dina Maria Leydecker is buried. The wife of another captain, Daniel Bernard, was the epitome of extravagant tombstones removed by elaborate costumes.

A research paper with St Peter's Church describes Dina's stone as the Cinderella of these three. Plenty of tombs also became a symbol of man's social status, as the stone of Anthonio shows. As if to match these women's positions in life, three mahogany plaque adorns the St. Peter's Church here, with their gold-painted names and costumes depicting their family ancestors. They are known as the three brides of St. Peter's Church, the women are also known as the three brides of the Dutch mausoleum and 60 other well-preserved tombstones.¹⁷

From observing the list of toms in the Karikop, it is found that the oldest grave monument in Karikop is belonging to Ioannes Kruyf, who died in 1664 and the youngest grave monument with a Dutch text engraved on it is for Eleteria Alexandersz., who died in 1804. It is also found that the youngest grave monument with a Dutch name is for C. E. Leembruggen, the Armenian wife of R. H. Leembrugge, a former VOC servant in Surat who buried here as well. The couple died in 1833 and 1819 respectively, long after the Dutch transferred Nagapattinam to the British in 1781.

The work of renovating this cemetery with heritage is being undertaken by the Dutch by the Dutch Government under the supervision of the knowledgeable partnership of The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and Prime College of Architecture at Kelvelur. The efforts to preserve the Karikop cemetery will be in the hands of St.Peter's Church which is under the control of the Trichy-Tanjore diocese of Church of south India

Conclusion

Many remnants of Dutch construction in India such as castles, private dwellings, warehouses and churches still exist in their places. Those ancient structures are often torn down or destroyed. Some others are still used for the purpose for which they were created. They have been changed; they have been renewed in some cases. The culture associated with them is the only interest they have.

Interesting remains are their graves. The care and art that they are still given, proves the Dutch respect for their dead. It is also evident from the fact that the treaty was defined as the proper care of cemeteries there in a place called Sadra. Other notable features include the simple construction of these magnificent tombs, symbolizing the builders' intention that they would endure until the *last opstaanding* (final resurrection).¹⁸

Asked about the great interest shown by the Dutch, Suresh, Tamil Nadu State Convener, Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), India and the coordinator of the Dutch sponsored Renovation work of Karikop said that the tombs were not only of interest to historians but also of emotional value. "Many immigrants come down to see the graves of their ancestors. They have a great attachment to these graves. Although some graves are in good condition, some are not," said Suresh.

Today, the Dutch-built tomb belongs to the year 1664 and is known to local people as "Rani Kallarai" is being renovated along with other tombs.

End Notes

¹ THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS, Chennai Edition, 12th June 2017

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³ Ibid.,

⁴<http://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/cemetery-preservation/importance-cemeteries>

⁵ Daliga B.S., Madras district Gazetteer, Coimbatore, 1944.

⁶ Ferroli, D. The Jesuits and Mysore, Xavier Press, 1955, Kozhikode, India.pp1-.238

⁷ Subrahmanyam, Sanjay : Improvising Empire, Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal 1500-1700, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1990. pp.112-165

⁸ Jeyaseela, Stephen S., Portuguese on the Tamil Coast: Historical Explorations in Commerce and Culture, 1507, Navajothi Publishing House, 1998, Pondicherry, India.p.437

⁹ _____., Coromandel Coast and its Hinterland: Economy, Society And Political System, 1500-1600, Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1997, Delhi, India.pp.112-156

¹⁰ Maclean, Manual of the Administration of the Madras Presidency, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1989.

¹¹ Hemingway, F.R. 1904: Madras District Gazetteers. Tanjore, Madras.

¹² Prakash. O.M., The Dutch Factories in India 1617-1623, New Delhi .1984. p.67

¹³ Julian James cotton, "List of Inscriptions on Tombs or Monuments in Madras", Vol. I, Government Press, Madras.

¹⁴ Alexr. Rea, "Monumental Remains of the Dutch East India Company in the Presidency of Madras." Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1998.

¹⁵ For Egyptians, the *obelisk* was a reverential monument, commemorating the dead, representing their kings, and honoring their gods. These monuments were representational in both structure and arrangement, serving as monuments with a complete structure of understanding.

¹⁶ Alexr. Rea, op.cit.

¹⁷ THE HINDU, Chennai Edition, Chennai. AUGUST 08, 2010.

¹⁸ Ibid.,