

LW RESEARCH DAY 2024

**UNEARTHING THE UNWRITTEN: MATERIALS AND
METHODS FOR INVESTIGATING THE PRE-
COLONIAL HISTORIES OF SOUTH INDIAN
UPLAND FOREST-DWELLERS**

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HEGEL ON GEOGRAPHICAL DETERMINISM

“*Africa proper* [...] has no historical interest of its own, for we find its inhabitants living in barbarism and savagery in a land which has not furnished them with any integral ingredient of culture. **From the earliest historical times, Africa has remained cut off from all contacts with the rest of the world** [...]. **Its isolation is** not just a result of its tropical nature, but an essential **consequence of its geographical character**. The main characteristic of Africa proper is that it appears to be predominantly an upland region, and in particular, that it has a very narrow coastal strip, habitable only in a few isolated spots. [...] Beyond it [the coastal strip], however, lies **the belt of swampland, full of the most luxuriant vegetation; it is also the home of all manner of rapacious animals, and its atmosphere is pestilential and almost poisonous to breathe**. This, **as in Ceylon**, has made it virtually **impossible to reach the interior**.”

GWF Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* 1830 [1975]: 174-175

INDIAN UPLAND FOREST-DWELLERS

- Mischaracterised as remote, isolated, and therefore "primitive" and non-historical.
- Regarded as subjects of ethnographic rather than archaeological research, leading to insufficient and superficial exploration of their histories.



Kanikkar man, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India III*
(Thurston 1909)

“Whose (Samudragupta’s) extraordinary valour had been increased through the forcible extermination of many **kings of Āryāvarta**, such as, Rudradeva, Matila, Nāgadatta, Candravarman, Gaṇapatināga, Nāgasena, Ācyuta-Nandin, Balavarman – who made all the **kings of the forest regions** become (his) servants.”

Allahabad pillar inscription (Fleet 1888: 217)
4th century CE



(Obverse) Samudragupta, 4th century CE (British Museum)

INDIAN UPLAND FOREST-DWELLERS



Historical role

- Supplied forest goods within and beyond Asia since at least the 3rd millennium BCE.
- Crucial role in the Indian Ocean trade through extensive ecological knowledge.

Colonial marginalisation

- Early 19th-century British appropriation of forested lands from indigenous owners.
- Reduced to subaltern status in the global economy.

Colonial legacy

- Economic neglect reinforces the misconception of perpetual marginality.

FOREST PRODUCTS LISTED IN THE ARTHAŚĀSTRA

HARD WOODS

Teak, Tiniśa, Dhanvana, Arjuna, Madhūka, Tilaka, sal, sissoo, acacia, mimusops, siris, catch, chir pine, Palmyra palm, Indian copal, flowering murdah, white catch, Kuśāmra, Priyaka, Dhava

REEDS

Uṭaja, Cimiya, Cāpa, Veṇu, Vaṃśa, Sātina, Kaṇṭaka, Bhāllūka

VINES

Vetra, Śīkavallī, Vāśī, Śyāmalatā, Nāgalatā

FIBROUS PLANTS

Mālatī, Mūrvā, Arka, Śaṇa, Gavedhukā, Atasī

MATERIAL FOR ROPES

Muñja, Balbaja

LEAVES (writing material)

Tālī palm, Palmyra palm, and birch

FLOWERS

Flame of the forest, safflower, and crocus

MEDICINAL PRODUCTS

Bulbous roots, roots, fruits

Arthaśāstra 2.17.4-16 (Olivelle 2013: 141)

1st-3rd century CE

POISONS (snakes and insects)

Kālakūṭa, Vatsanābha, Hālāhala, Meṣaśṛṅga, Mustā, Kuṣṭha, Mahāviṣa, Vellitaka, Gaurārdra, Bālaka, Mārkaṭa, Haimavata, Kāliṅgaka, Dāradaka, Aṅkolasāraka, and Uṣṭraka

SKIN, BONES, BILE, TENDONS, EYES, TEETH, HORNS, HOOVES, AND TAILS

Monitor lizards, Serakas, leopards, bears, river dolphins, lions, tigers, elephants, buffaloes, yaks, deer, rhinoceros, wild cattle, and gayals, or of other deer, game animals, birds, and vicious animals

METALS

Iron, copper, steel, bronze, lead, tin, Vaikṛntaka, and brass

VESSELS (cane or clay)

CHARCOAL, HUSKS, AND ASHES

(enclosures for deer, game animals, birds, and vicious animals; and enclosures for firewood and grass)



Flame of the forest
Photograph: Wikimedia

IMPORTS FROM INDIA TO IMPERIAL ROME

PLANT PRODUCTS: SPICES, AROMATICS, DRUGS, AND DYES

Cardamom, cinnamon, costus, ginger, malabathrum, nard, pepper, dyes

PRECIOUS MATERIALS

Gemstones (diamond, sapphire, emerald, opal, amethyst, onyx)

Semiprecious stones (jasper, crystal, carnelian, banded agate)

Animal products (pearls, ivory, tortoiseshells, turtleshells)

TEXTILES

Cotton, silk

NON-PRECIOUS METALS, WOODS, AND STONES

Iron, steel, aloe wood, ebony, sandalwood, teak, bamboo, marble (or gypsum alabaster)

ANIMALS

Elephants, tigers, lions, panthers, leopards, rhinos, baboons, snakes, peacocks, parrots

SLAVES

Cobb 2018

Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century CE



Roman gold ring with beryl, late 2nd-3rd century
Photograph: MET, New York



Mosaic depicting the capture of a tiger, 4th century CE
Villa del Casale, Piazza Armerina (Sicily)
Photograph: Patrizio Pensabene and Enrico Gallochio

CAṆKAM LITERATURE (ca. 100 BCE–250 CE)

[...] the flourishing town of Muciṛi, where **the large beautiful ships built by the Yavaṇas came with gold**, disturbing the white foams of the fair Pēriyāru (= ‘big river’) called Cuḷi of the Cēralar, **(and) returned with pepper.**

Akanānūru 149, 7–11 (Karttunen 2015: 294)



Aureus of Emperor Claudius I dated 46-47 CE found at Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu
Photograph: British Museum

Black pepper from India found at Berenike, Egypt
Cappers 2006: fig. 4.58

PERIPLUS MARIS ERYTHRAEI

Every year there turns up **at the border of Thina a certain tribe, short in body and very flat-faced . . . called Sesatai**. . . . They come with their wives and children bearing great packs resembling mats of green leaves and then remain at some spot on the border between them and those on the Thina side, and they hold a festival for several days, spreading out their mats under them, and then take off for their own homes in the interior. **The [? locals],** counting on this, then turn up in the area, **collect what the Sesatai had spread out, extract the fibers from the reeds,** which are called *petroi*, **and lightly doubling over the leaves and rolling them into ball-like shapes, they string them on the fibers from the reeds.**

There are three grades: what is called big-ball **malabathron** from the bigger leaves; medium-ball from the lesser leaves; and small-ball from the smaller. Thus three grades of malabathron are produced, and then they are transported into India by the people who make them.

Casson 1989: 91 (64-65)
1st century CE



Cinnamomum malabathrum

www.indiabiodiversity.org



ITALY

GREEKS

PONTUS

CASPIAN SEA

LAKE MAEOTIS

BACTRIA

"The very warlike nation of the Bactrians" (Chap.47)

Alexandria
Bucephalus

PERSIA

PARTHIANS

SCYTHIA

LYBIA

ARABIA

PERSIAN SEA

GEDROSIA

ARIACA

Ptolemais of the Hunt

Frankincense

Suppala (Sopara)
Galliena (Kalyan)
Semylla (Chaul)

Iron Steel Cloth

AETHIOPIA

AFRICA

AZANIA

ERYTHRAEAN SEA

Wine
Laodicea

Diospolis

Brass
Copper
Iron

Arsinoe

Cloth

NABATAEANS

Petra
MALICHAS

White Village

Mussel Harbour (Myos Hormos)

Berenice

BERBERS

CARNAITES

Wine
Grain

ELEAZUS

Asich

Barigaza

NAMBANUS

DOSARENE (Orissa)

Ganges

Meroe

Adulis

CHARIBAEI

Sabath

Moscha

Mandagora
Palaepatmoe
Melizigara
Byzantium
Togarum

DAKINABADES (DAKSHINAPATHA)

Axumiles (Axum)

Coloe

Muza

Saphar

Cana

Arabia (Aden)

Aurannoboas

SANDANES

Spices

AETHIOPIA

Ivory

Avalites

Mosyllum

Cape Elephant

Dioscoridus Island

Naura (Cannanore)

CEROBOTHTRA (CHERAS)

Sopatma

Poduca (Pondicherry)

Argaru (Uraiyur)

AFRICA

CYENEUM

BERBERS

Spices

Cinnamon

Slaves

Tyndis

Muziris

Camara (Kalapattana)

Palaesimundu Island, Taprobane

Malao

Mundus

Pano

Opone

Nelcynda

Colchi (Korkai)

Sarapion

Cape Comari

IMPORTS FROM INDIA TO THE MIDDLE EAST (AND THE MEDITERRANEAN)

SPICES, AROMATICS, DYEING AND VARNISHING PLANTS, AND MEDICAL HERBS

Spices (cardamom, cinnamon, clove, pepper)

Medical herbs (aloe, costus, myrobalan, rheum)

METALS

Iron and steel, brass and bronze vessels

TEXTILES

Silk, cotton

PEARLS, BEADS, COWRIE SHELLS AND AMBERGRIS

SHOES AND OTHER LEATHERWORK

TROPICAL FRUITS

Mangos, bananas, coconuts

TIMBER

Bamboo, brazilwood, sandalwood, and teak

SLAVES

Nainar 1942

Arab Geographer's Knowledge of Southern India



Arab merchants sailing to India (ca. 13th century)
(from Hariri's Maqamat. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
Ms. Arabe 5847)

THE NILGIRI ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

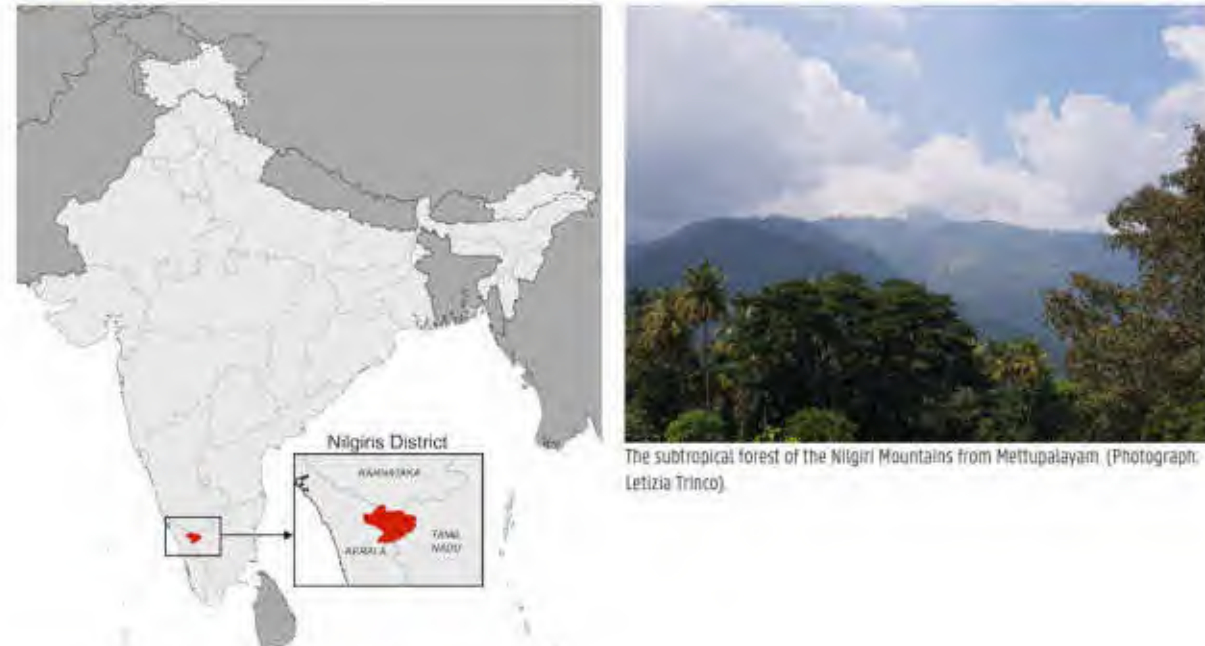
Culture and Environment in the Upland Forests of South India from Antiquity to Early Modernity



The *Nilgiri Archaeological Project* is a 5-year research project (2021-2026) funded by the Odysseus Programme of the Research Foundation-Flanders (FWO) with a Type II grant (n. G0FD621N) that was awarded to [Daniela De Simone](#) at Ghent University. The project is hosted by [SANGH \(South Asia Network Ghent\)](#) in collaboration with the [Central University of Karnataka \(Kataburagi\)](#), the [Chennai Museum](#), the [French Institute of Pondicherry](#), and the [National Institute of Advanced Studies \(Bengaluru\)](#).

The aim of the *Nilgiri Archaeological Project* is to move beyond the conventional view that sees South Indian upland forest-dwellers as secondary actors on the stage of global history, and change our understanding of the role they played in the making of world civilisation. To this end, a team of international researchers with expertise in Indian archaeology, palynology and palaeoecology, historical ethnobotany, ethnolinguistics, literature and epigraphy will focus on the Nilgiri Mountains in southern India, a region of montane subtropical forests and the homeland of several ethnic groups, from the start of the Common Era to the early 19th century.

[Read more](#)



The Nilgiris District of Tamil Nadu. (Map: Letizia Trinco)

The subtropical forest of the Nilgiri Mountains from Mettupalayam. (Photograph: Letizia Trinco)

NILGIRI ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

Aim Integrate the histories of Indian upland forest-dwellers into the history of civilisation.

Objectives Develop a transdisciplinary framework and methods for the study of the history of forest people and other South Asian indigenous communities.

www.nilgiri.be



Udhagamandalam

Doddabetta (2637 m)



30 km





TODA, KOTA AND BADAGA PEOPLE OF THE NILGIRI MOUNTAINS



Photographs: Daniela De Simone (left), S. Udayakumar (centre, right)

“The Nilgiri district may almost be said to be one of those happy countries which have no history. Even had it been sufficiently rich or strategically important to tempt an invader, its inhospitable climate, the difficulties of the passes up to it and the feverish jungle which hedged it round would have deterred any but the boldest. But it never contained any towns worth sacking or forts worth capture; and the only inhabitants were poor graziers and cultivators.”

William Francis 1908:90

Madras (Presidency)
MADRAS DISTRICT GAZETTEERS.

THE NILGIRIS.

BY
W. FRANCIS,
INDIAN CIVIL SERVICE.

MADRAS:
PRINTED BY THE SUPERINTENDENT, GOVERNMENT PRESS.

1908.



“The great powerful minister of Bittideva [Viṣṇuwardhana] was Puṇisa who had frightened the Todavas (Tōdas), driven the Kongas underground, slaughtered Poluvas, put to death the Maleyāḷas, frightened the pride of the arms of king Kāḷa and **entering the Nīla mountains he brought (?) fame to the goddess of Victory”**.

Rice 1898:10, no. 83



Hoysala inscription dated AD 1117 at Pārśvanātha Jain temple at Chāmarājanagara, Karnataka.

Photographs: Nitin H. P.

1. Built and Natural Environment



Draw-well tomb at Ezhukottai and
memorial stones at Tudurmattam,
Nilgiri Mountains

Photographs: Daniela De Simone (above),
Letizia Trinco (below)

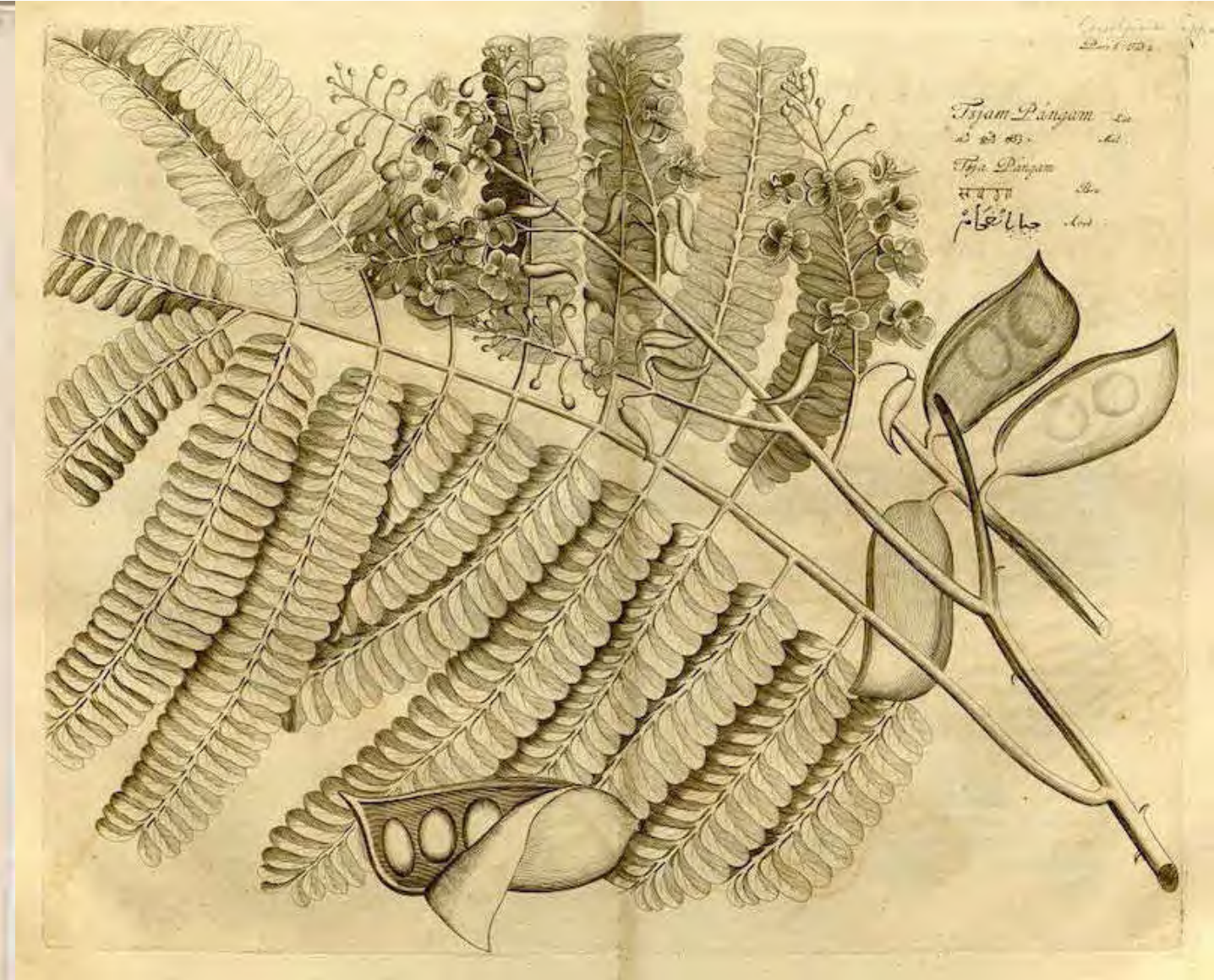


2. Museum collections

Photographs: British Museum

3. Written Texts and Oral Histories





4. Early Colonial Botanical Literature and Collections

Photographs: EIC herbarium, Kew Gardens (left),
Hortus Indicus Malabaricus, Wellcome Collection (right)

Udhagamandalam

Kotagiri

Doddabetta (2637 m)



BUILT AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Ezhukottai, Nilgiri Mountains
Photograph: S. Udayakumar





Melur, Nilgiri Mountains.
(Photographs: Letizia Trinco).



AN ACCOUNT
OF THE
PRIMITIVE TRIBES AND MONUMENTS
OF THE
NILAGIRIS.

BY THE LATE
JAMES WILKINSON BREEKS,
OF THE MADRAS CIVIL SERVICE, COMMISSIONER OF THE NILAGIRIS;

EDITED BY
HIS WIDOW.



LONDON:
INDIA MUSEUM,
1873.

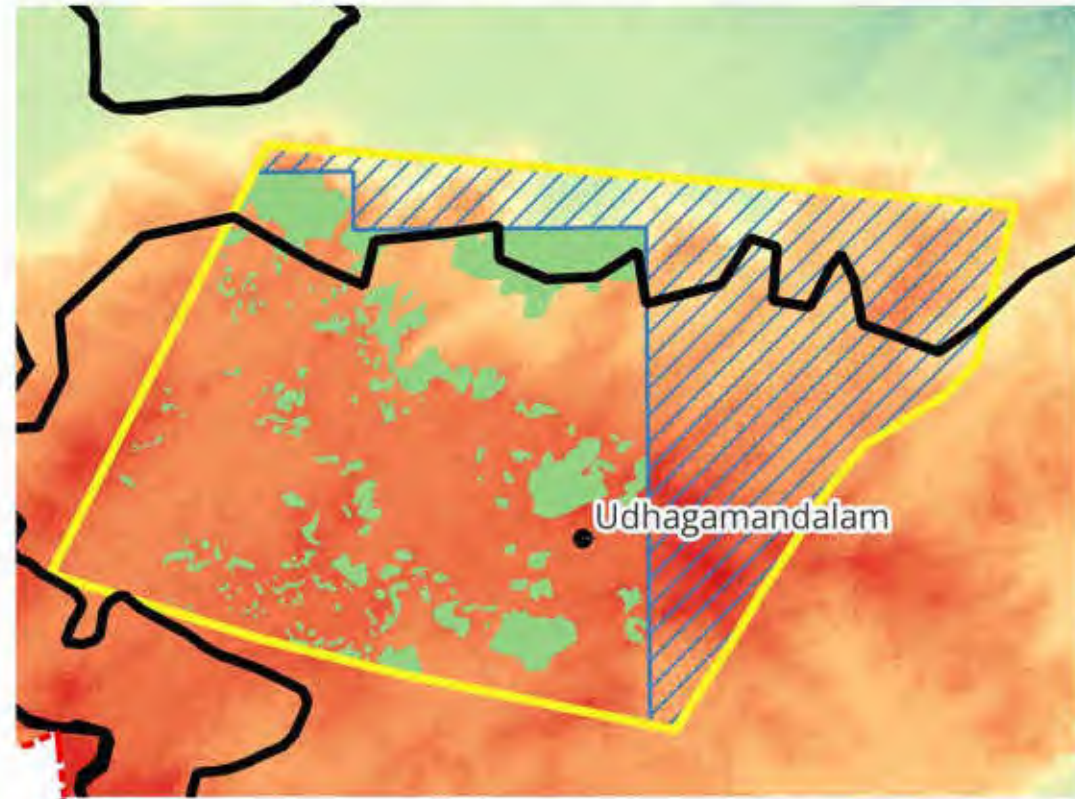
W^o H. ALLEN AND CO., 13, WATERLOO PLACE, S.W.
Publishers to the India Office.



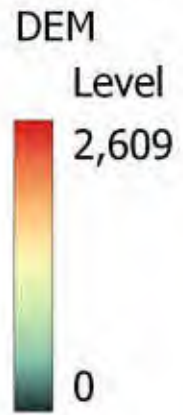
'James Wilkinson Breeks', Camille Silvy 1860,
albumen print (National Portrait Gallery)



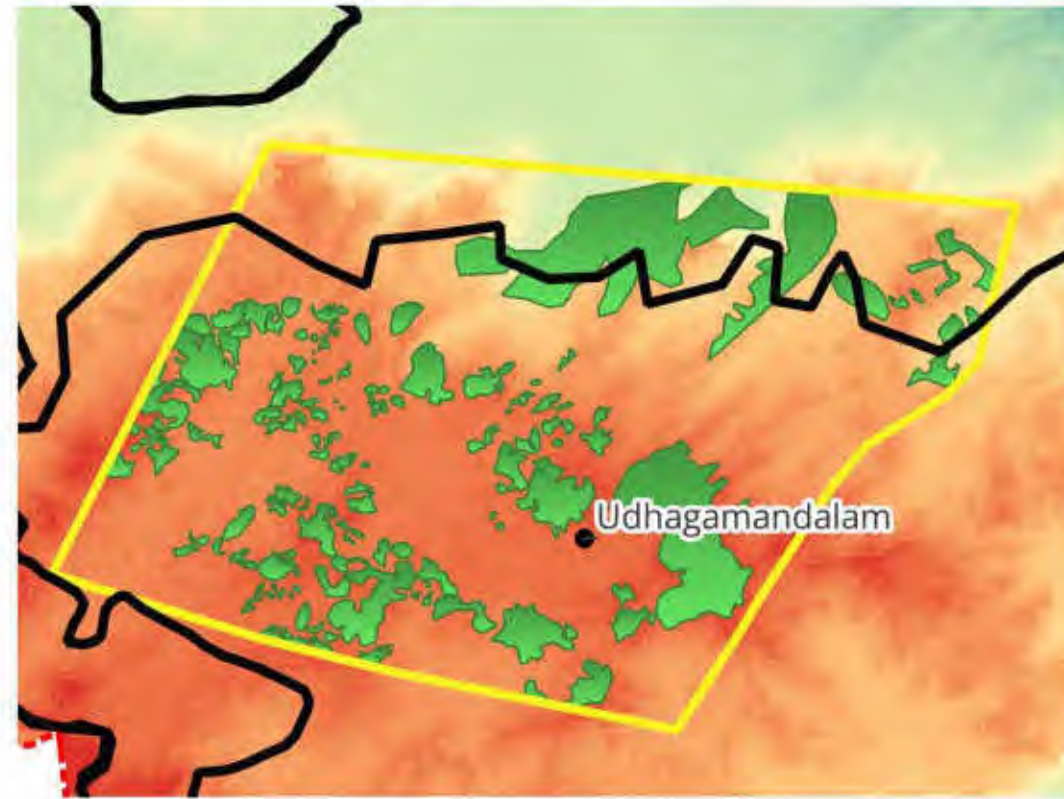
1930 Forest cover 46.36 km²



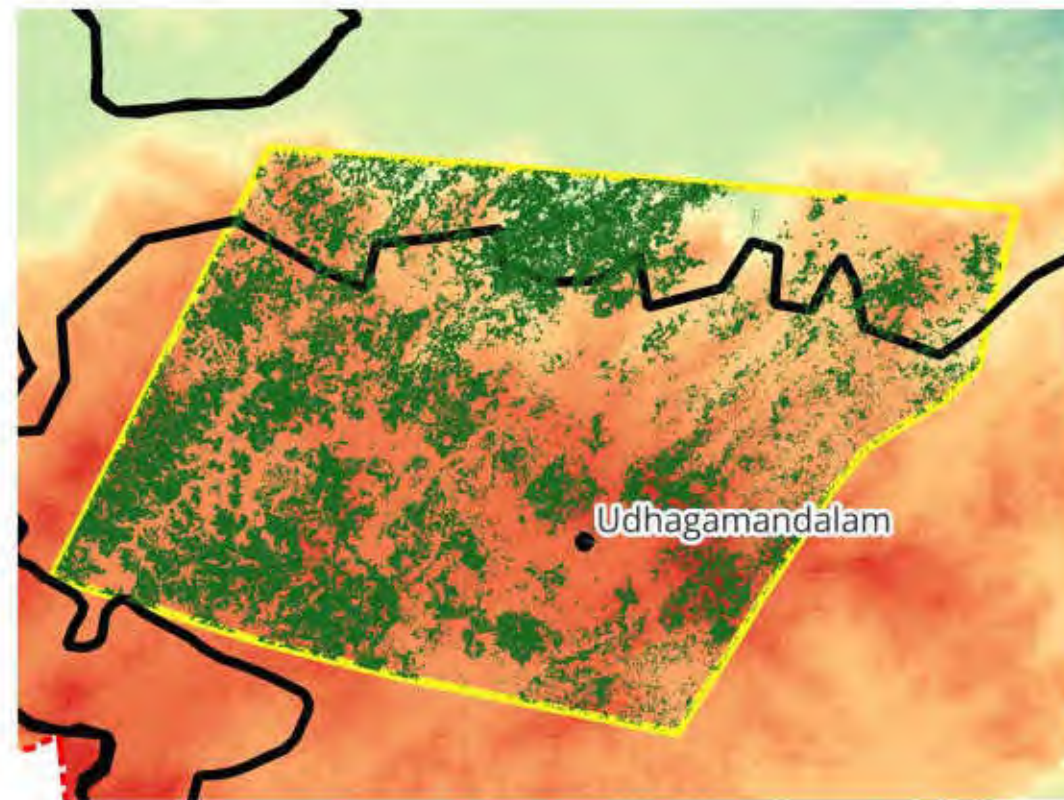
- NBR boundaries
- RSRA
- 1930 No data
- Forest 1930



1965 Forest cover 76.57 km²

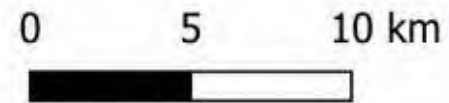


- NBR boundaries
 - RSRA
 - Forest 1965
- DEM
Elevation
2,609
0



- Forest Cover 2023
 - NBR boundaries
 - RSRA
- DEM
Level
2,609
0

2023 Forest cover 134.02 km²



AFFORESTATION



1960s



Present day





MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Photographs: British Museum







Photographs: British Museum,
Maheswaran 2011, Wessels-Mevissen 2002



BUFFALO FIGURINES FROM NILGIRI TOMBS



Animal	150
Buffalo	
Full body	26
Head	21
Horn	12
Gaur	
Full body	3
Head	8
Horn	6
Elephant (head)	3
Boar	1
Leopard	3
Snake	2
Bird	15
Two-headed animal	1
Unidentified	
Full body	23
Head	6
Horn	5
Leg	15



Tharnad-mund
(c. 2100 m
amsl), hamlet of
the chief of the
Tawrrawdr clan
(Wenlock
Downs, Nilgiri
Mountains)

Ph: Daniela De Simone



THE TODAS

- Population: 2002
(Census of India 2011)
- Population in 1891: 730
(Census of British India 1891)
- Pastoralists (until 1970s)
- Language: Toda



Photograph: Daniela De Simone

THE TODAS AND THE MEGALITHIC TOMBS

“Ēn was “the first Toda who came” [...] his son was Dirkish, who built the munds and the temples and the cairns on *Seven Cairn hill*, and *Nātanéri hill*, no others; [...] all the other cairns were built before the Todas came up.”

Brecks 1873:34

WRITTEN TEXTS AND ORAL HISTORIES



ORAL HISTORIES

“[...] in the time of Charamparimatei they [the Badagas] killed the father of the Thodares [Todas].”

Father Giacomo Fenicio (1603) in
Rivers (1906:729)

THE BADAGAS

- Population: 132.102
(Census of India 2011)
- Population in 1891: 29.362
(Census of British India 1891)
- Farmers (until 1970s)
- Language: Badaga

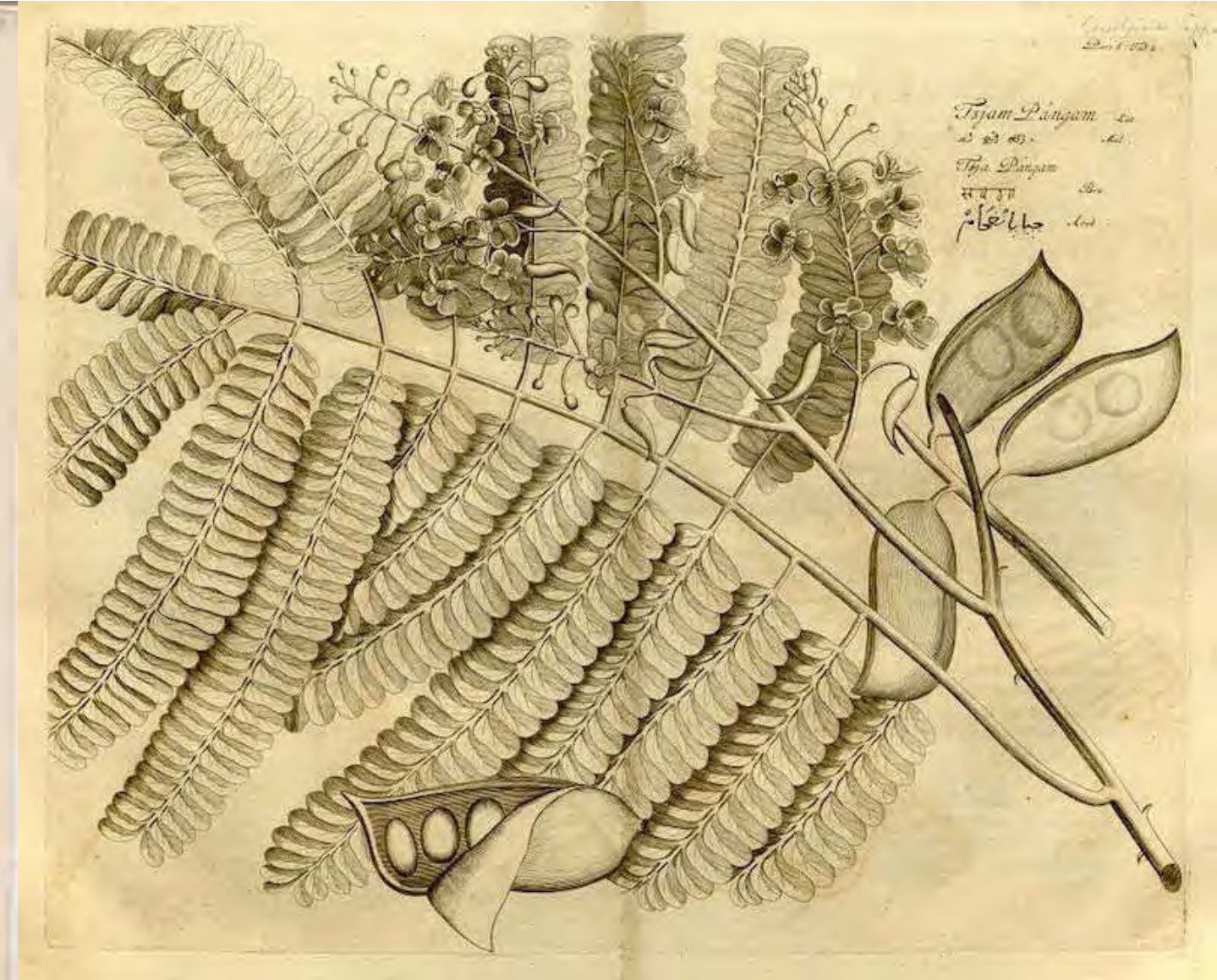


Photograph: Uday S.

ORAL TEXTS

“According to a tradition which the Toda have preserved, **they once had a King and Queen** reigning over them, but all that they now know about them is that **they were subdued and deprived of their authority by one of the Rajahs of the house of Oomatoor** [Ummatur], who was driven to the Hills by his rival, an ancestor of the present Rajah of Mysore, and **took possession of the tract lying between the Orange Valley and Ootacamund**, called by the Badagas ‘Todanaud.’ The usurper built a fort named Malékoté, near Kalhatty, the ruins of which still exist and prove that it must have been a comparatively strong place.”

Metz 1864:44



EARLY COLONIAL BOTANICAL LITERATURE AND COLLECTIONS

Photographs: EIC herbarium, Kew Gardens (left),
Hortus Indicus Malabaricus, Wellcome Collection (right)

HORTUS INDICUS MALABARICUS,

Continens

Regni Malabarici apud Indos celeberrimi
omnis generis Plantas rariores,

*Latinis, Malabaricis, Arabicis, & Bramanum Characteribus nominibusque expressas,
Unà cum Floribus, Fructibus & seminibus, naturali magnitudine à
peritissimis pictoribus delineatas, & ad vivum exhibitas.*

*Addita insuper accuratâ earundem descriptione, quâ colores, odores, sapes, facultates,
& precipua in Medicinâ vires exactissimè demonstrantur.*

ADORNATUS

PER

HENRICUM van RHEEDE, van DRAAKENSTEIN,
Nuperrimè Malabarici Regni Governatorem, nunc supremi Consessus apud
Indos Belgas Senatorem Extraordinarium, & primum successorem
loco ordinario destinatum,

ET

JOHANNEM CASEARIUM, Ecclesiast. in Cochin.

Notis adauxit, & Commentariis illustravit

ARNOLDUS SYEN, Medicinæ & Botanices in Academia
Lugduno-Batava Professor.



AMSTELODAMI,

Sumptibus { JOANNIS van SOMEREN,
ET
JOANNIS van DYCK.
Anno c1o 1o c LXXVIII.



Hendrik van Rheede's *Hortus Indicus
Malabaricus* (1678-1693).

Itty Achudan Healer from the Ezhava or forest-dwelling toddy tappers community collected plants and provided empirical functional taxonomies



Itty Achudan's lamp house,
Kadakkarappally, Kerala.

CONCLUSIONS

- The *Nilgiri Archaeological Project* is uncovering the long-overlooked histories of South Indian upland forest-dwellers, challenging colonial narratives that marginalised these communities as "non-historical."
- Through integrating archaeological, palaeoenvironmental, and historical research, the project is redefining upland forest communities not as isolated or primitive, but as integral actors in the broader narrative of world history.
- Evidence from megalithic tombs, grave goods, terracotta figurines, and oral histories highlights the cultural complexity of forest-dwelling societies, their rituals, and their ecological knowledge, underscoring their contributions to local and global civilisations.

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