

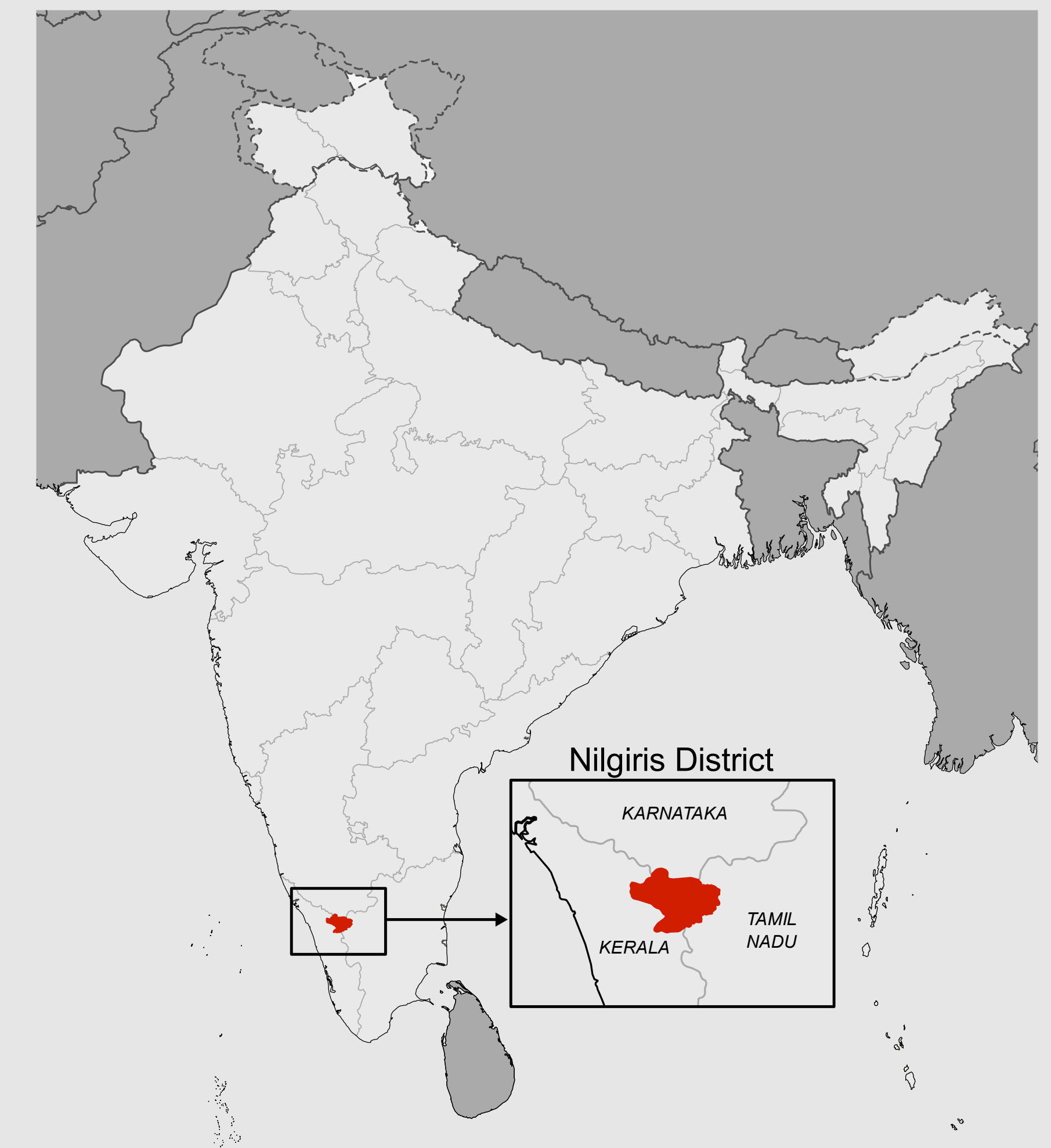
# IF STONES AND PLANTS COULD SPEAK: A NEW HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE NILGIRI MOUNTAINS (SOUTH INDIA)

## A "HAPPY COUNTRY WITHOUT HISTORY"?

The Nilgiri Mountains in south India are a region of **montane subtropical forests** with peaks over 2600 m. They are part of the Western Ghats and are inhabited by more than **sixteen different ethnic groups**. The British first explored the region in 1812, establishing colonial rule shortly thereafter. **Little is known about the precolonial period**: there are **no written sources** from an insider perspective, and external historical references to the Nilgiris and its inhabitants are scanty. However, the region yields **several pre-modern funerary sites**.

Lack of written records and of visible traces of ancient settlements has long fostered a view of the Nilgiris as **one of those happy countries which have no history**. [...] **It never contained any towns worth sacking or fort worth capture; and the only inhabitants were poor graziers and cultivators** (Francis 1908: 90).

This view is the fruit of **anthropological misrecognitions** which see forest-dwellers, foragers, hunters, and more in general **non-literate and non-state-organised societies**, as isolated, immutable, frozen in time, in other words **non-historical**.



The Nilgiri Archaeological Project strives to **re-integrate the history of the Nilgiris into mainstream historiography** by looking more closely at **non-textual material culture** and at **environmental aspects**.

Grave goods and memorial stones from the Nilgiris, on the one hand, and natural resources from the broader region of the Western Ghats, on the other hand, speak of a **long-term history of interaction of the south-western Indian uplands with lowland polities of India and beyond**: **archaeological and environmental data enable a much-needed re-interpretation of the Nilgiris' past**.



High-tin bronze bowl with central knob, within incised concentric circles, Nilgiri Mountains, 12th-16th c. (Ph: British Museum).

## MATERIAL CULTURE

### GRAVE GOODS

Grave goods from Nilgiris tombs (approx. 12th-16th century), such as high-tin bronze bowls with cosmological symbols, reveal upland-lowland exchanges and highlight enduring connections between the Nilgiri uplands and the Deccan plains across centuries.

### MEMORIAL STONES

Memorial stones from the Nilgiris (provisionally dated from c. the 12th century on) display iconographic repertoire and style commonly encountered on memorial stones from the plains of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, revealing the influence – if not even the active involvement – of craftsmanship from beyond the Nilgiris.



Hero-stone from Bettada, Nilgiri Mountains (Ph: Letizia Trinco).

## ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS

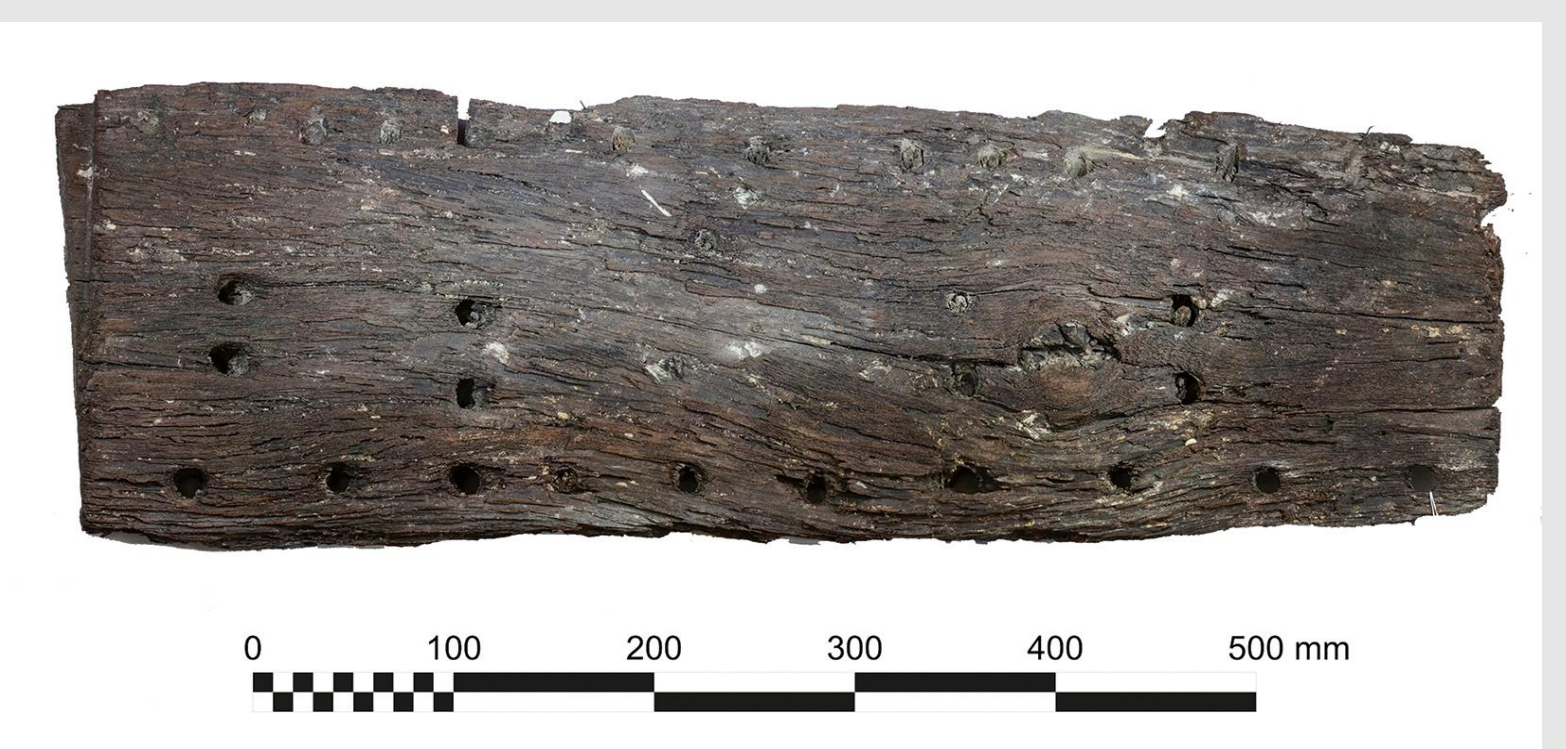
### FOREST PRODUCTS

As part of the Western Ghats, the Nilgiri Mountains are rich in timber and non-timber forest products, including medicinal plants, spices, ivory, gemstones, and metal ores. Indigenous forest-dwellers, with extensive ecological knowledge, gathered these resources. Nilgiri teak, crucial in medieval Gulf and colonial shipbuilding, was highly valued in the Arabian Peninsula.

### EARLY BOTANICAL TREATISES

Early botanical treatises (16th-17th centuries) depict the flora of the Western Ghats before the large-scale introduction of species during the later colonial phase.

The *Hortus Malabaricus* (1678-1693) by H. A. van Rheedee is the earliest work that explicitly relies on the ethnobotanical knowledge of a forest-dwelling community: the healers from the Ezhava community, toddy tappers living in the forests of the Western Ghats.



Fragment of boat plank made of teak from the site of Al-Waleed, Oman, 10th-15th c. (Ph: Ghidoni 2021).



Teak forest in the Western Ghats and cardamom pods (Ph: Wikipedia).



Gatherer of cardamom from the Western Ghats (Malabar) as depicted in Van Rheedee's *Hortus Malabaricus*, 1678-1693 (vol. 11, tab. 4).

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