Kodumanal: Craft Production on an Ancient Trade Corridor

Beads, iron, inscriptions and an inland production community in early South India

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Direct answer. Kodumanal was an Iron Age–Early Historic settlement and cemetery in the Noyyal basin where craftspeople worked stone beads, iron, textiles and other materials. Its location on an inland route connected mineral and production zones with the west and east coasts. The site securely documents specialised production and literacy, but claims about named dynasties, Roman colonies or direct identification with a literary place require separate evidence.

Contents

1 Scope and method

This review combines the Tamil Nadu archaeology record with specialist studies of craft production, beads, metallurgy and epigraphy. It distinguishes production evidence from distribution, and archaeological context from literary identification.

2 Landscape and chronology

Kodumanal occupied the Noyyal basin on a trans-peninsular corridor during the Iron Age–Early Historic transition. Habitation and cemetery contexts, ceramics, inscriptions and scientific dates must be correlated phase by phase rather than treated as one undifferentiated horizon.

3 Lapidary production

Debitage, raw materials, blanks, drilling stages and finished beads demonstrate organised stone-working. Technological diversity is best interpreted through communities of practice and exchange of skills, without assigning each method to a bounded ethnic population.

4 Metals, textiles and scale

Furnaces, slag and iron artefacts document metallurgy; spindle whorls document textile work. Spatial concentrations suggest specialised activity, though household and workshop production may coexist. Claims for steel require compositional and microstructural confirmation.

5 Writing and administration

Tamil-Brahmi potsherds place short written texts within a production and exchange settlement. Names and marks imply literacy practices, labelling or ownership routines, but their brevity limits reconstruction of institutions and population-wide literacy.

6 Mortuary evidence

Megalithic burials connect the settlement with regional funerary traditions. Variation in architecture and goods indicates selected social display but cannot be converted directly into ranks, castes or professions.

7 Network interpretation

Kodumanal linked resources, skilled labour and inland routes to coastal markets. Imported items and distant raw materials demonstrate connectivity; they do not establish direct voyages, foreign colonies or exclusive control by a dynasty.

8 Evidence assessment

Strong	Specialised bead production, iron working, textile activity, habitation, burials and Tamil-Brahmi sherds.
Probable	Production exceeded local consumption and served trans-peninsular exchange networks.
Contested	Exact beginning of phases, scale of steel production and identification with literary Kodumanam.
Unresolved	Workshop organisation, political control, population-wide literacy and identities of individual producers.

9 Conclusion

Kodumanal makes an inland economy visible. Production debris, tools, inscriptions and burials reveal skilled communities whose work connected resources to distant consumers. The evidence supports craft specialisation and broad exchange more strongly than claims for a single dynasty, ethnic group or direct foreign presence.

References

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This paper is an evidence review for public scholarship.

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