




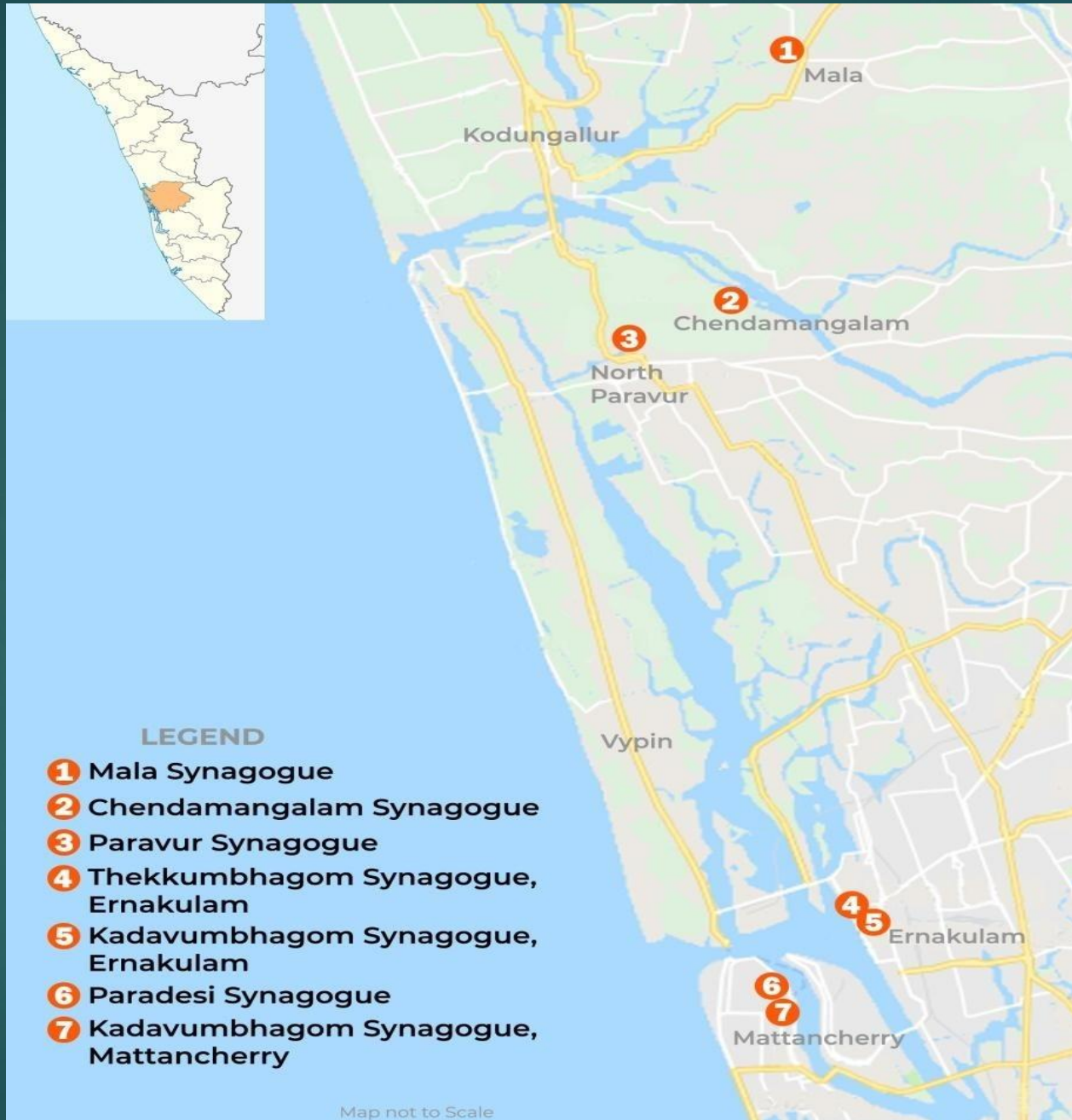
PRE HISTORIC REMAINS OF JEWISM

BY STEFFY VARGHESE

THE SEVEN SYNAGOGUES OF KOCHI

- ▶ All seven synagogues of the Cochin Jews share certain common characteristics making it part of a distinct group, but no two synagogues are identical. At the outset, it is interesting to note the location of the settlements where the synagogues were built. The early Jewish settlements are believed to have been concentrated in Kodungallur, which used to be the major port city in the region before the emergence of Kochi as a major port. The decline of Kodungallur led to Jewish settlements emerging in the nearby regions of Mala, Paravur and Chendamangalam, each of which has a synagogue of its own. A major shift to Kochi is believed to have occurred later on.

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- ▶ Four of the seven synagogues can be found in Kochi, with two in Market Road in Ernakulam city and the other two located in Mattancherry. All the synagogues, with the exception of the Paradesi Synagogue, fell into disuse in the 1950s and 1960s when a vast majority of the congregation immigrated to Israel.
 - ▶ Since then many of the synagogues in disuse were subject to alterations or encroachments. However, prudent efforts were able to transform some of the previously abandoned synagogues into museums, active houses of prayer or even tourist destinations, while others continue to be locked and face disintegration. The synagogues are listed below in the order followed in the map



MALA SYNAGOGUE, THRISSUR

- ▶ The Mala Synagogue is believed to have been constructed in AD 1400, with the building being renovated in AD 1792. It was severely damaged during the 1780s by the army of Tipu Sultan during the Anglo-Mysore Wars.[6] The inscriptions on the frieze in the synagogue's gallery engraved in Hebrew and Malayalam put the year as AD 1909 when a major refurbishment occurred. The Jewish populace of Mala, as in the case of a majority of the Cochin Jewish community, left for Israel in 1955. Subsequently, the synagogue passed on to the Panchayat. Initially repurposed as a school, the building subsequently fell into disuse. Originally, the synagogue had a gatehouse and breezeway connecting the sanctuary, which was demolished recently after being cut off from the building by land encroachments and constructions.

PARAVUR SYNAGOGUE, NORTH PARAVUR

- ▶ The current structure of the Paravur Synagogue was constructed in AD 1616 on the same site which is believed to have housed another synagogue since AD 1164
- ▶ It is composed of different spaces arranged axially, starting from the padippura and ending at the ark inside the sanctuary, making it the longest among the Kerala synagogues
- ▶ This axial arrangement is believed to have been influenced by the spaces of other religious buildings in Kerala at that time which followed a similar pattern.
- ▶ It underwent restoration between 2010 and 2013 and currently functions as the Kerala Jews History Museum

THEKKUMBHAGOM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM:

- ▶ Thekkumbhagom means ‘on the south side’. It is believed to have been constructed in AD 1580 and was demolished in the 1930s due to deterioration.
- ▶ The current structure was constructed between mid to late 1930s, and it followed the architectural style prevalent in Kerala at that time, making it notably different from the other synagogues which were constructed a few centuries ago.
- ▶ The lavish use of stained glass windows can be observed here. The synagogue currently remains non-operational.

KADAVUMBHAGOM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM

- ▶ Kadavumbhagom translates as ‘the side on the landing place (for boats)’. It is believed to have been built in the early eighteenth century.
- ▶ The synagogue is unique in appearance from the other Kerala synagogues as its front facade has chamfered edges.
- ▶ The synagogue was closed down by AD 1972 when a majority of the members emigrated to Israel, leaving behind not enough men to form a *minyan* (quorum of ten Jewish adults).
- ▶ The synagogue was eventually vandalised, with all the glass lamps, brass pillars and even the bimah stolen. It has since then been under the care of Mr Elias Josephai who runs a plant and aquarium business, Cochin Blossoms, in the big hall outside the synagogue sanctuary. The synagogue was reopened in December 2018 after renovation.

PARADESI SYNAGOGUE, MATTANCHERRY:

- ▶ The synagogue has its roots intertwined with the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), which, towards the end of the fifteenth century, witnessed concentrated efforts to expel Jews.
- ▶ Spain decreed in AD 1492 and Portugal in AD 1497 to eradicate Judaism from their lands, resulting in the forced exile of the community to other areas.
- ▶ Kochi welcomed these Sephardi Jews, whose growing numbers led to the establishment of the Paradesi (foreigner) Synagogue in 1568.
- ▶ The synagogue was expanded during the Dutch period and a clock tower was added in the 1760s, which is a feature unique to the Paradesi Synagogue among the Kerala synagogues.
- ▶ In addition to the Kadavumbhagom Synagogue in Ernakulam, it is one of the two active synagogues among the Cochin Jewish synagogues at present and remains open to tourists on non-Jewish holidays.

KADAVUMBHAGOM SYNAGOGUE, MATTANCHERRY:

- ▶ The Kadavumbhagom Synagogue in Mattancherry was built by the Malabari Jews in AD 1549.
- ▶ Although this synagogue is located close to the Paradesi Synagogue, it underwent constant neglect and much alteration over the decades after the Jewish congregation left for Israel in AD 1955.
- ▶ Like in the Paradesi Synagogue, a gatehouse and an attached breezeway were part of the original structure, which were demolished over the years, and the synagogue ended up being a warehouse for a while.
- ▶ Today, only a shell of the sanctuary remains as the building continues to decay. The interior of the synagogue followed a similar pattern as that of the Paradesi Synagogue.
- ▶ It contained intricate wood work on the ceiling and a gallery with a second bimah, which were dismantled and taken to Israel in 1991, and is currently housed in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

CHENDAMANGALAM SYNAGOGUE, NORTH PARAVUR:

- ▶ The synagogue was built near the Periyar River with local narratives citing AD 1420 as the year of construction, and various accounts citing it as being rebuilt in AD 1614.
- ▶ It currently functions as the Kerala Jews Lifestyle Museum.

Thank
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