

Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean upto 7th Century A.D.

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There are many reasons for Sri Lanka playing a pivotal role in the East-West trading system. The first reason was the existence of a maritime trade network interconnecting the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, West Asia, India, and the Far East countries. The central position of Sri Lanka, its multicultural civilization and highly developed social system facilitated its growth as a trading center. The second reason for the success is the existence of sea routes and land routes and many natural harbours such as Mahātīttha, (Māntai) Gokanna (Trincomalee), Uūrathota, Godavāya, and many lagoons and estuaries with navigable rivers.

Thirdly, the rich natural resources found in Sri Lanka, and availability of valuable commodities such as precious gems and pearls, elephant tusks, tortoise shells, expensive timber and cloth materials. The export of spices, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, pepper, cardamom etc.¹ attracted merchants to the island. Further, ship repairs, availability of materials for the same, clean water, and other requirements attracted foreign traders from various parts of the world. The aim of this brief introduction is to highlight the status of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean in the context of international sea-trade and its socio-economic situation up to the 7th century A.D.

Sri Lanka being in the center of sea-routes connecting China and the South Eastern countries with the Middle East and the Mediterranean countries, sea-farers could have arrived there from the earliest times. Excavations at Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu reveal that the

¹. Osmand Boparachchi, "Seafaring in the Indian Ocean: Archaeological Evidence from Sri Lanka", in Himanshu Prabha Ray and Jean Francois Salles, (eds.), **Tradition and Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean, International Seminar on Techno-Archaeological Perspective of Seafaring in the Indian Ocean**, Manohar, (New Delhi, 1996), pp. 59-77; "A Study in Locating Places Named in Ancient Foreign Coins, Hitherto Unknown Sri Lankan Context", in G.P.S.H. De Silva and C.G. Urugoda, (eds.), **Sesquicentennial Commemorative Volume of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka 1845-1995**, (Colombo, 1995), pp. 127-139

inhabitants of Sri Lanka in the pre-Christian era gave a warm to welcome to foreign merchants visiting their shores. It may be inferred from their activities that trade instincts dominated them than the agricultural pursuits.² Sri Lanka played host to small scale navigators. As a result, technological and cultural interactions would have developed. That is shown by the microlithic tool findings during excavations of Terri site of Tamil Nadu and Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka.³ Since the later half of the 1st century B.C. Sri Lankan coastal region was known to have had contacts with far off places like the Persian Gulf, Sind, Gujarat and Indonesian ports. Since early historic times, traders, immigrants and religious preachers seem to have sailed in the Indian Ocean in large number of ships. Those ships ranged from small canoes to large ships carrying thousands of men owing to very advanced ship building techniques; no wonder natives of Sri Lanka too followed them as they had the sea right round.⁴ Sea-faring activities of the earliest period began in the Indian sub-continent along the western coastal region.⁵

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2. S.U. Deraniyagala, “*The Proto and Early Historic Radio Carbon Chronology of Sri Lanka*”, **Ancient Ceylon**, Vol.06, Department of Archaeology,(Colombo, 1986), pp. 251-292; **Ancient Ceylon**, Vol.12, Department of Archaeology,(Colombo, 1990), pp. 211-250; **The Pre-history of Sri Lanka: An Ecological Perspective**, 2 Parts, Department of Archaeology,(Colombo, 1992)
 3. S.U. Deraniyagala, “*Radio Carbon Dating of Early Brahmi Script in Sri Lanka*”, **Ancient Ceylon**, Vol. II, Archaeological Department, (Colombo, 1990), pp. 149-168; R.A.E. Coningham and F.R. Allchin, “*The Rise of Cities in Sri Lanka*”, in F.R. Allchin, (ed.), **The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia**, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 152-184; R.A.E. Coningham and F.R. Allchin, C.M. Batt and D. Lucy, “*Passage to India: Anuradhapura and the Early Use of the Brahmi Script*”, **Archaeological Journal**, Vol. VI, No. I, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 73-97; G. Juleff, **Early Iron and Steel in Sri Lanka: A Study of the Samanawewa Area**, Mainz am Rhein, (Verlag Philipp Von Zabern, 1998); HimanshuPrabha Ray, **The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia**, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 117-120
 4. R.A.L.H.Gunawardana, “*Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and Their Impact on Pre-colonial Sri Lanka*”, in Satish Chandra, (ed.), **The Indian Ocean: Explorations in History, Commerce and Politics**, Sage Publication, (New Delhi, 1987), pp. 54-89; “*Seaways to Siediba: Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and Their Impact on Pre-colonial Sri Lanka*”, **Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea**, p.25-45; “*Seaways to Siediba*”, **Kalyani**, Vol.V and VI, 1896-87, p.13; A. Lagamuwa, “*Navigational Activities and International Relationships Revealed Through Ancient Inscriptions in Sri Lanka*”, in DayaAmarasekara, H. Dheerananda and RohithaDasanayaka, (eds.), ‘**Induwara**’ **Professor A.D.P. Kalansuriya Felicitation Volume**, Ariya Publisher, (Warakapola, 2004), pp. 823-858
 5. Clarence Maloney, “*The Beginnings of Civilization in South India*” **Journal of Asian Studies**, Vol. XXIX, No. 3, 1970, p. 606

In early days Palk Strait too had been a very important route of sea-faring. During the proto-historic period men used to travel up and down using known sea-routes and shipping techniques in this region. This made them rich, and they could offer to build small scale channel systems, and cultural monuments. International trade flourished using the monetary system. The use of the Brahmi letters (scripts/lithographic letters) shows their importance during that period as they were widely used.⁶ Many ancient coins and seals with early Brahmi script have been found recently from Ruhunu region of Sri Lanka.⁷ Most probably Tamil Nadu in South India may have introduced Brahmi letters through cultural contacts cultivated during the course of their trade with Sri Lanka.⁸

As expected there were many instances of crossing the Palk Strait during the very early period. For that purpose, Indian ports like Kāvīrapattana and Kantakasolapattana, and Sri Lankan ports such as Jambukolapattana⁹, Mahāthittha¹⁰ and Gokanna were used as connecting harbours. This would have been the background for the eastern and the western coastal trade in the Indian sub-continent. Besides the stories found in ancient chronicles,

⁶.K.V.SoundaraRajan. “Pre Asokan Writing in India” in S.P. Gupta and K.S. Ramachandran, (eds.), **The Origin of Brahmi Script**, Indian History and Cultural Society, D.K. Publications, (Delhi, 1979), pp. 54-64; M. Dais “Trade in Ancient Sri Lanka: Epigraphical Evidence”, Paper presented at the Conference on **Seafaring Communities In the Indian Ocean**, (Lyon, 1997) 1-7 July

⁷.OsmandBopeararchchi, “Archaeological Evidence on Changing Pattern of International Trade Relation of Ancient Sri Lanka”, in OsmandBopeararchchi and D.P.M. Weerakkody, (eds.), **Origin, Evolution and Circulation of Foreign Coins in the Indian Ocean**, Manohar, (New Delhi, 1998), pp. 133-178; OsmandBopeararchchi and R.M. Wickramasinghe, **Ruhuna-An Ancient Civilization Re-Visited: Numismatic and Archaeological Evidence on Inland and Maritime Trade**, (Colombo, 1999), pp. 51-70

⁸. I. Mahadevan, “Recent Trends in Early Tamil Epigraphy: An Overview”, **Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies**, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1995, pp. 1-31; “Old Sinhalese Inscriptions from Indian Ports: New Evidence for Ancient India-Sri Lanka Contacts”, **Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies**, Vol. 14, No. I, 1996, pp. 55-67; Jayasiri Lankage, **Sinhala Varna Mālāwé Vikāshanaya**, S. Godage, (Colombo, 1996), p. 4

⁹. Similarly during the reign of Devanampiyatissa king, the famous nun Sanghamitta (princess) came from Thamraliptha to Jambukolapattana (B.C.250-210) **Mahāvamsa**, (ed.), W. Geiger, Pali Text Society (P.T.S), (London, 1950), Ch. 11, VV. 23

¹⁰. In the story of Prince Vijaya, who sent emissaries to Madura (Madura puraya) and back, and also the arrival of Princess Baddakachchāyana. **Mahāvamsa**, Ch. 7, VV. 49-74

inscriptions of Duwegala in Polonnaruwa district,¹¹ Paramākandain Puttalam district¹² and Maligātenna in Kurunegala district,¹³ give us an idea of Sri Lankan navigational activities.

Onesikritos of Astypaleia, a commander of Alexander's fleet, was the first Greek to write about Taprobanê (Sri Lanka), and he certainly had access to information from the Indians who were in contact with the navigators sailing to Sri Lanka. Further it was stated that after 20 days of seafaring from India one could reach Sri Lanka; Strabo confirms this drawing his information on the earlier records of Onesikritos.¹⁴ It could be true only when travelling from North India to Sri Lanka but it would not take so much time to travel from South India. Before it established relations with northern India, Sri Lanka had close relations with South India.¹⁵ Ilubaratha Sumana, a trader from Tamil Nadu, recorded in an inscription¹⁶ found in Sri Lanka, confirms the close relationship the island had with Tamil Nadu and the Tamils referred to Sri Lankan traders visited Tamil Nadu as Illavaran.¹⁷ This status of close

¹¹. S. Paranavitana, **Inscriptions of Ceylon, (IC)** Vol. 1, Department of Archaeology, (Colombo, 1970), plate. Xxv

¹². **Ibid.**, p. 83

¹³. **Ibid.**, p. 76

¹⁴. J.W. McCrindle, **Ancient India as Described in Classical Literature**, Archibald Constable, (Westminster, 1901), p. 20 ; K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, **Foreign Notices of South India**, University of Madras, (Madras, 1942), pp. 46-48

¹⁵. S.K. Sitrapalam, "*The Form 'Dameda' of Sri Lankan Brahmi Inscriptions: An Historical Assessment*", in I.K. Sarma, D.V. Devaraj and R. Gopal, (eds.), **Narsimhapriya (Prof. A.V.N. Murthy Felicitation Volume), Essays on Indian Archaeology, Epigraphy, Numismatics, Art, Architecture, Iconography, and Cultural History**, Sandeep Prahashan, (New Delhi, 2000), pp. 76-86; Raj Somadeva, "*Andhra-Sri Lanka sub-system? Probably another way of thinking*", in S.P. Gupta and Sunil Gupta, (eds.), **Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology**, No. I, Centre for Research & Training in History, Archaeology and Palaeo-Environment, (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 8-20

¹⁶. **IC**, Vol. 1, p. 94

¹⁷. K. Rajan, "*Early Maritime Activities of the Tamils*", in Himanshu Prabha Ray and Jean Francois Salles, (eds.), **Tradition and Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean, International Seminar on Techno-Archaeological Perspective of Seafaring in the Indian Ocean**, Manohar, (New Delhi, 1996), pp. 97-108; "*Trade Between India and Sri Lanka on Early Historic Time*" **Seminar on Indo-Sri Lankan Relations**, 26-27, December 2001, Department of History, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka; G. Venkataraman, "*Tamil Culture and Its Influences in South-East Asian Countries*", in Daya Amarasekara and Rohitha Dasanayaka, (eds.), **Essays in History and Sociology in Honour of Professor W.M. Sirisena**, Ariya Publisher, Warakapola, 2007, pp. 277-319

connection is confirmed by the inscriptions found in Kodumanal in Tamil Nadu and Ridiyagama in Sri Lanka.¹⁸ The Sri Lanka-Tamil interaction is much more explicitly illustrated by a number of such donatives records in Sri Lanka where Tamil merchants and people of the *vēlar* clan are mentioned in the context of gifts to Buddhists.¹⁹ According to some symbols found on the inscriptions, the identity of contemporary traders or merchant guilds who performed an agent and played important role to this relations is revealed.²⁰ The names of many officers concerned with trade are recorded in those Brahmi inscriptions.²¹ According to Kanduruveva inscription, *AtiAdaka* was an officer in charge of elephants. In the inscription at Periyapuliyanikulam *AsaAdaka* is used to designate the officer in charge of horses in the stable.²² Most expensive horses were imported in Sri Lanka; they were in high demand and sheds with servants were assigned to keep those animals in stables.²³ The Tamil merchants who brought horses for sale in Sri Lanka are mentioned in *Mahāvamsa* too.²⁴ The Brahmi inscription reveals that the Sri Lankan merchants purchased valuable commodities in addition to horses.

¹⁸.M.D. Sampath, “*Srilankan and Tamil Brahmi Scripts: A Comparative Study*”, in I.K. Sarma, D.V. Devaraj and R. Gopal, (eds.), **Narsimhapriya (Prof. A.V.N. Murthy Felicitation Volume), Essays on Indian Archaeology, Epigraphy, Numismatics, Art, Architecture, Iconography, and Cultural History**, SandeepPrakashan, (New Delhi, 2000), pp. 87-93

¹⁹.IC, Vol. I, Nos. 356 and 357; I. Mahadeven, “*Corpus of the Tamil Brahmi Inscriptions*”, in R. Nagaswamy (ed.), **Seminar on Inscriptions**, University of Madras, (Madras, 1968), No. 51; “*An Old Sinhalese Inscription from Arikamedu*”, **Seminar on Epigraphy, KuppuswamiySastri Birth Centenary**, University of Madras, (Madras, 1981); “*Ancient Tamil Contacts Abroad: Recent Epigraphic Evidence*”, Reverend Fr. X.S. ThaniNayagam Memorial Lecture, ThaniNayagan Foundation Trust, Colombo, **Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies**, Vol. XII, No. I, 1994, pp. 136-155; R. Champakalaksmi, **Trade Ideology and Urbanization: South India 300 B.C. to 1300 A.D.**, OxfordUniversity Press, (New Delhi, 1996), pp. 108, 185

²⁰.F.R.Allchin, **The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia: The Emergence of Cities and State**, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge, 1995); HimanshuPrabha Ray, **op.cit.**, 2003

²¹.IC, Vol. I, p.78, No.993

²².IC, p. Vol. I, 28, No.31

²³.IC, Vol. I, p.28, No.315

²⁴.*Mahāvamsa*, Ch. 21, V. 10

In the period of *Janapada*, there were minerals in many places in Sri Lanka, and people gathered in places like Kelaniya, Yatahalena, Ambulambe and Kiramakugolla where there were deposits of Hematite, Limonite and Goethite in not so deep soil, and iron deposits also close by. In Thittawela and Ranagirimada regions, there were iron ores in the shallow soils. Pearls were found along north western coastal region, and for gems the mountain ranges were famous from ancient times. Yatahalena and Kiramakugolla colonies were situated where there were gem deposits. Kollandeniya area in Buttala and Okkampitiya contained important gem deposits, and Ambangaga also had gem deposits covering a large area.²⁵

Brahmi records of the early period mention 7 places for cutting and polishing gems.²⁶ A few of the places are mentioned as gem cutting centers by some inscriptions. But gems were not found in the area, and therefore it is inferred that gems were brought from different areas to this place and gem cutting work was carried on by the artisans and also there was trade exchange at that period. Pearls, gems, and tusks were found within the country; other luxury items of foreign countries were in demand, and as such far and wide foreign trade system developed. The *Mahāvamsa* records that a gift sent by King Asoka to King Devanampiyatissa through emissaries were of three types: valuable gems, a rare conch shell with right hand directional turn, and eight kinds of pearls.²⁷ Megasthenes of the Royal council of Maurya Kingdom also mentions about the gold and magnificent gems of Sri Lanka.²⁸ Kautilya too refers to Sri Lankan gems.²⁹

During these periods, (3rd century B.C. to 1st century B.C.) refined instruments were widely used throughout the island to engrave inscriptions and cut the edge of margins of

²⁵. Lesly Gunawardana, “*Purātana Sri Lankawé Déshapālana Āyatana Parināmayé MulAwadhiyak*”, in **PRAWĀDA**, 2001 April-June No. 18, Smāja Vidyāññaing Sangamaya, (Colombo, 2001), pp. 38-39

²⁶. IC, Vol. I. Nos. 74; p. 17. No. 209, p. 42, No. 546; p. 60, No. 791; p. 62, No. 807; p. 81, No. 1033

²⁷. *Mahāvamsa*, Ch. 11, VV. 7-27

²⁸. J.W. McCrindle, **Ancient India as Described in Classical Literature**, Archibald Constable, (Westminster, 1901), p. 102; K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, **Foreign Notices of South India**, University of Madras, (Madras, 1942), pp. 41-42

²⁹. **Kautilya: The Arthashastra**, (ed.), L.N. Rangarajan, Penguin Books, (New Delhi, 1987), (2.11.2), p. 87; **Kautilya's Arthashastra**, (trans.), R. Shamasatry, Wesleyan Mission Press, (Mysore, 1929), p. 83

caves. For that purpose, sharp polished tools with perfect workmanship were used for that purpose. Rough and crude rocks were broken down to slabs and their surfaces were polished to write Brahmi scripts. Inscriptions reveal that iron smiths (*kabara*) and copper smiths (*kumbakara*)³⁰ also were employed for their expertise and they were able to manufacture valuable items with iron and copper. Their economic system facilitated both internal and external trade. In many inscriptions, there are references to traders (*vanija-vanicha-merchant guild*).³¹ Brahmi inscriptions of early period refer to an offering of a cave temple by an (*Kobodhiyamahapugi*)³² association of merchants. Similarly an inscription found at Kaduruwewa in Kurunegala also mentions about an offering by “*kabodhi*”³³ group. According to Paranavitana, *Kabodhi* means traders living in North Western India or *Kamboja* region who were trading in Sri Lanka during that period.³⁴

Any study of sea-borne commerce of ancient Sri Lanka has to be based on literary and epigraphical sources on the one hand, and archaeological evidence on the other. Very little information could be gathered from the Pali chronicles and the Sinhala literature of monastic authors who were mostly concerned with providing detailed information about the political and religious history of the island.³⁵ On the other hand, foreign notices, especially Indian, Greek, Roman, Persian, Arabs and Chinese, are more valuable as sources of evidence on the flourishing trade and economic prosperity of ancient Sri Lanka.

³⁰.IC, Vol. I, p.13, No. 161d; p. 24, No. 301; p. 28, Nos. 305-51; p. 54, No. 720

³¹.IC, Vol. I., p.28, Nos.56-57; p.37. No.480, p.40, No.515; p.45, Nos.585, 591; p. 49, No.660; p.70, No.897

³².IC, Vol. I, p.42, No.553

³³.IC, Vol. I, p. 77, No.990

³⁴.IC, Vol. I, pp.xc-xci

³⁵.*Mahāvamsa*, included only two reference to foreign traders-*Mahāvamsa*, Ch. 10, V. 90; Ch. 22, VV. 60-64

During the second half of the 4th century B.C. beginning from Onesikritos, there were about 40 Greek and Roman authors³⁶ who had written about Sri Lanka. They revealed that Sri Lanka was involved in foreign affairs; at least 10 such writers wrote about foreign trade. Sri Lanka was famous for elephants, and this is mentioned by Strabo, while Dionysius in the 2nd century A.D. made a description of Asian elephants (indigenous to Sri Lanka). Solinus Polyhistor records about the elephants and pearls of Sri Lanka, and says that this Island was involved in commercial activities of the east and the west.³⁷ Local products of Sri Lanka in his time were ginger, honey, gold, silver and gems. Several sea-ports and commercial centers all round the island have been recorded by Ptolemy.³⁸ Those involved in sea trade along the coastal region of Sri Lanka and South India made their turtles *sangara* (made of single logs bound together) using long timbers tied together forming a floating vessel as mentioned by the Periplus; he has also mentioned muslin clothes as entrepôt trade.³⁹

Describing the exodus of Buddhist monks to South India during the troubled times in the reign of King Vattagamani (B.C.103-77), *Sammohavinodani* refers to an unusual type of raft that the monks supposedly used. The raft which was constructed at the port of Jambukola is said to have had “three decks”(tibhumakam). The lowest deck which tended to be immersed in water was evidently not used. The travellers occupied the second deck, and their belongings were kept in the third. The voyage was considered to be so perilous that some monks preferred to remain behind arguing that there was little difference between dying on

³⁶. D.P. M. Weerakkody, **Taprobanê: Ancient Sri Lanka as Known to Greeks and Romans**, Brepols, (Turnhout, 1997)

³⁷. D.P M. Weerakkody, “*The Earliest Greek Notices of Sri Lanka*”, **Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities**, Vol. 10, 1984, pp.1-26

³⁸. **Clodius Ptolemaeus, Geographia Strassburg Edition of 1513**, (ed.), R.A. Skelton, (Amsterdam, 1966), p.52; **Ancient India as Described by Ptolemy**, (ed.), John .W McCrindle, Munshiram Manoharlal, (New Delhi, 2000 reprint), pp. 247-259

³⁹. **The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea**, (ed. and trans.), G.W.B. Huntingford, Hakluyt Society, (London, 1980), p.46

the sea and dying on the land.⁴⁰ Whatever it is, Sri Lankawas involved in full navigational activities in the Indian Ocean since this period. Pliny's description confirms their sea-faring activities in early period. He describes that those ships of Taprobanê could carry 3000 amphorae or 75 tonnes load.⁴¹

Presenting information about the island abstracted from the works of Onesikritos, Megasthenes and Eratosthenes Pliny states that "in former days" the voyage between the island and the mainland used to take twenty days, but the duration had become less as a result of improvement in rigging. Thus ships used by the Sri Lankans appear to have improved in both capacity and speed.⁴² It was in Pliny's time that the first trade mission from Sri Lanka reached the Roman court. The envoys of the Sri Lankan ruler informed Pliny that they also maintained trade relations with the Chinese (Seres). Pliny was told that the father of the Sri Lankan envoy who came to Rome had been to China several times.⁴³ During the reign of King Bhatthikabhaya (B.C. 22-07), a team of emissaries was sent to Rome (*romānukka*) to bring beautiful beads from the Mediterranean region in order to decorate *Mahāthupa* (Ruwanveliséya); this is recorded in the *Vamsatthappakasini*.⁴⁴ This was the beginning of a period of extensive commercial activity which linked the island with Rome in the west and Nan-king in the east.

Another source of information about seafaring in the Indian Ocean is of course archaeological evidence like coins, ceramics, beads, seals, ivory, glass, and similar materials discovered either sporadically or in archaeological excavations. It is true that even an exhaustive study of these more or less indestructible materials will not give a complete

⁴⁰. *Sammohavinodani*, D A.P. Buddhadatta, Pali Text Society, (London, 1956), pp. 445-446-Quoted from R.A.L.H Gunawardana, "Seaways to Sieldiba: Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and their Impact on Pre-colonial Sri Lanka", **Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea**, p. 26

⁴¹. J.W. McCrindle, **Ancient India as Described in Classical Literature**, Archibald Constable, (Westminster, 1901), p. 102

⁴². R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, "Seaways to Sieldiba", **op.cit.**, p. 27

⁴³. **Ibid.**

⁴⁴. *Vamsatthappakasini*, (ed.), G.P. Malalasekara, Pali Text Society, (London, 1953), p. 630

picture of exports and imports, because products like textiles, wood, and other botanical items would have disintegrated due to the rigid tropical climate, and therefore they are automatically eliminated from any deep research. Archaeological evidence collected and compiled by Codrington was published early in the 20th century.⁴⁵ Those could be very useful for later studies. Similarly during previous decade, various archaeologists and historians commenced scientific excavations in Anuradhapura citadel.⁴⁶ Abayagiriya,⁴⁷ Jetavana⁴⁸ and Sigiriya,⁴⁹ ancient city of Tissamaharama⁵⁰ and found many valuable archaeological finds confirming the close relation Sri Lanka had with western countries.

Besides, in excavations in sea-port areas, many archaeological data have been found. Mantai, Kantarodai and Kuchchavali excavations were very significant. As in India, in Sri Lanka too the capital city and other important cities and towns were situated in the interior of the country, but the associated sea-ports were at the coastal area. The most prosperous sea-port of ancient Sri Lanka was Mantai, situated on the bank of Aruchi Aru river or Malwathu Oya mouth. The capital city Anuradhapura was connected with the sea-port through this river, Mantai (Sinhala-Mantota, Pali-Mahatittha, Tamil-Mantotam, Mantodai, Greek-Modouttou, Latin-Magana Civitas). This sea-port played an important role

⁴⁵.H.W. Codrington, *op.cit.*, 1916, 1924

⁴⁶. S.U. Deraniyagala, “*Excavation in the Citadel of Anuradhapura Gedige 1984: A Preliminary Report*”, *Ancient Ceylon*, Vol.06, 1986 and *The Pre-history of Sri Lanka: An Ecological Perspective*, Department of Archaeology, 2 Parts, (Colombo, 1992)

⁴⁷.S. B.Hettiarchchi and T.G.Kulathunga, *Abhayagiri*, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, (Colombo, 1992); C. Wikramagamage, *Abhayagiri Vihara Project: Anuradhapura*, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, (Colombo, 1984)

⁴⁸.H. Rathnayaka, *Jetavanaramaya Project, Anuradhapura: First Archaeological Excavation and Research Report January-June 1982*, Central Cultural Fund, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, (Colombo, 1984); “*The Jetavana Treasure*”, *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea*, pp. 45-61

⁴⁹.Senake Bandaranayake, *Sigiriya Project, First Archeological Excavation and Research Project- January-September 1982*, Central Cultural Fund, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, (Colombo, 1984)

⁵⁰. H.J. Weisshaar, H. Roth and W. Wijeyapala, (eds.), *Ancient Ruhuna: Sri Lanka-German Archaeological Project in the Southern Province*, Vol. I, Verlag Philipp von Zabern, (Mainz am Rhein, 2001); C. Jayasingha, *The Ancient Monetary Systems of Sri Lanka: Their Origin and Formation (circa 300 BC to 100 AD)*, Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, Post-Graduate Institution of Archaeology, (Colombo, 2000)

in maritime trade between the East and West, and was a very successful commercial center. The first excavations conducted in Mantota were in 1887.⁵¹ But more successful excavations carried out during 1980-1984, and subsequently in 1990 detailed reports were published.⁵² After the excavation of Kantharodai by P.E. Perisin (1917-1919), Vimala Begley and others conducted a very successful excavation.⁵³ Similar to Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa also is situated on the bank of river Mahaveli which flows to sea at Gokanna. Though Gokanna became a flourishing harbour from the 11th century when the royal capital was transferred from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa, there is sufficient evidence to show that it was known as early as the 5th century A.D. to merchants who reached the island from the east.⁵⁴ This did not happen by chance. In ancient Sri Lanka, the southern capital was Tissamaharamaya, which was accepted as an important historical and respectable place and this was due to its

⁵¹. W.T.S. Boake, **Journal of Royal Asiatic Society, (Ceylon Branch)**, Vol. X, No. 35, 1887, pp. 107-117

⁵². John. Carswell and, Martha Prickett Fernando “*Mantai 1980: A Preliminary Investigation*”, **Ancient Ceylon**, No. 5, Department of Archaeology, (Colombo, 1984), pp.3-80; J. Carswell, “*Excavations at the Port of Mantai*”, **Symposium on India in the Roman Period, Archaeological Institute of America**, (San Antonio, 1987), January; Roland Silva and J. Bonzek, “*Māntai: A Second Arikamedu*” **Antiquity**, Vol. LIX, 1985, pp. 46-47; J. Carswell, “*The Excavation of Mantai*”, **Ancient Ceylon**, Vol. 7, 1990, pp.17-28; “*The Port of Mantai*”, in V. Begley and R.De.Puma, (eds.), **Rome and India: The Ancient Sea Trade**, University of Wisconsin Press, (Madison,1991), pp. 197-203; The Moira Tampoe, “*Maritime Trade between China and the West: An Archaeological Study of the Ceramics from Siraf (Persian Gulf) 8th and 15th Centuries A.D.*”, **BAR, (British Archaeology Report)**, International Series 555, (Oxford, 1989); Martha Prickett Fernando, “*Sri Lanka’s Foreign Trade Before A.D. 600: Archaeological Evidence*”, in K.M. De Silva, S. Kiribamune, and C.R de Silva, (eds.), **Asian Panorama: Essays in Asian History, Past and Present**, Vikas Publishing House, (New Delhi, 1990), pp.151-180; Martha Prickett Fernando, “*Durable Goods the Archaeological Evidence of Sri Lanka’s Role in the Indian Ocean Trade*”, **Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea**, pp. 61-74; “*The Great Port and Entrepôt in Indian Trade*”, **Ibid.**, pp.115-122; Roland Silva and Jan Bouzek, “*Māntai-A Second Arikamedu: A Note on Roman Finds*”, **Ibid.**, pp. 123-124; Sirima Kiribamune, “*The Role of the Port City of Mahātīttha (Māntota) in the Trade Network of the Indian Ocean*”, **The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities**, Vol. XVII-XVIII, No. 1 and 2, 1991-1992, pp. 171-192; Moira Tampoe, “*Ceramics and Other Evidence from the Partner Ports of the Western Indian Ocean (8th –10th Century A.D.)*”, **Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea**, pp. 85-103; “*The Spice Island Route: Sri Lanka’s Participations in Maritime Trade and the Archaeological Evidence from Mantai and Galle Harbour*”, **Sesquicentennial Commemorative Volume of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka**, 1845-1995, (Colombo, 1995), pp.159-210

⁵³. V. Begley, “*Archaeological Exploration in Northern Ceylon*”, **Expedition**, Bulletin of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, Vol. 9, No. 4, (Summer, 1967), pp.21-29

⁵⁴. **Chūlavamsa**, Ch. XLV, vv. 70-80- mentions Gokanna at the mouth of the Mahaveli Ganga, at the Bay of Trincomalee, during the reign of Kitsirimegha (A.D. 555-573).

proximity to the sea-port Kirinda, where the Kirindioya⁵⁵ flows into sea. In this process of commercial activities Kalathittya (Kalutara) played an active role.⁵⁶ In the excavations carried out recently in the southern provinces, a large number of coins, beads⁵⁷ and seals and other mineral items were found. Hundreds of coins have been discovered from places like Hambantota (2119, later 2828), Matara (3300) and Colombo (422). Some of them coins were dated after the 6th century period. In addition, there were 30,000 coins from Godavaya, and 20,000 from Hungama including Bentota, Kalutara, and Negambo regions. Indo-Roman coins were found in large quantities.⁵⁸

All those sea-ports of Sri Lanka were situated at the mouth of rivers and enormous amount of coins discovered there show the extent of commercial activities with the western world. Those coins mostly belonged to emperors like Claudius, Augustus, Nero and Uralian and their regional rulers like Tetrachms. By the 1st century B.C. western traders visited directly Sri Lanka, and this is proved by the number of coins found. This fact would have influenced Ptolemy to write details about Taprobanê. In order to record accurate details he would have definitely obtained reliable information from navigators and merchants who had

⁵⁵.R.B. Dissanayaka, **The Archaeology of Pottery Recovered from the Lower KirindiOya Basin in Southern Sri Lanka**, Unpublished M. Phil Thesis, Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology, (Colombo, 2000); R. Somadeva, **Urban Origins in Southern Sri Lanka: Archaeology of Lower KirindiOya Basin**, Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University, (Uppsala, 2005)

⁵⁶. See for details, B.J.Perera, "*The Foreign Trade and Commerce of Ancient Ceylon*", 4 parts, **Ceylon Historical Journal (CHJ)** Vol.1, January 1952, pp. 109-119; 192-204; April, 301-320; July-August, 14-22

⁵⁷. Anne Sibylle Hannibal and S. Deraniyagala, "*Beads from Anuradhapura and Tissamaharamaya, Sri Lanka: Trade Contacts in the Early Historic Period*", in S.P. Gupta and Sunil Gupta, (eds.), **Journal of Indian Ocean Archaeology**, No. I, Centre for Research & Training in History, Archaeology and Palaeo-Environment, (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 21-24

⁵⁸. Osmand Boparachchi, 1994, **op.cit.**, p. 63; "*An Unknown Indo-Roman Coin Hord from Sri Lanka*", **Palma11, Commemoration Volume of the Classical Association of Ceylon Golden Jubilee (1935-1985)**, 1985, pp.81-87; "*Some Observations on Roman Coins Found in Recent Excavation at Sigiriya*", **Ancient Ceylon**, Vol.8, Department of Archaeology, (Colombo, 1990), pp.20-37; "*Archaeological Evidence on Changing Pattern of International Trade Relation of Ancient Sri Lanka*", in Osmand Boparachchi and D.P.M. Weerakkody, (eds.), **Origin, Evolution and Circulation of Foreign Coins in the Indian Ocean**, Manohar, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 133-178, "*Archaeological Evidence on Maritime and Inland Trade of Ancient Sri Lanka*", **Multi-Disciplinary International Conference on the Occasion of 50th Anniversary of Independence of Sri Lanka**, 1998 February 23-25, Colombo, Sri Lanka

wide knowledge of Sri Lanka. The main link of the Sri Lanka-Roman trade relation was Arikamedu in India.

According to the Periplus, ships sailing from Egypt to India used south west monsoon wind in the month of July.⁵⁹ By September or October they reached via the Bay of Eden the eastern coastal ports of India. After buying their products at coastal ports of India, all ships sailed back in November taking advantage of the south western monsoon wind. If they were to face challenges and sail to Sri Lanka they would miss the south western wind. If that happened they would waste one year until next November waiting for the south western monsoon wind. Therefore all merchants brought Sri Lankan merchandise to Arikamedu trade center; this was more advantageous, than sailing to Sri Lanka.⁶⁰ Thus Roman settlements came to be established in India. During this era, Indian agents or traders performed a bigger role as intermediate agents. The excavations carried out at Kuda Akurugoda and Maha Akurugoda in Ruhunu region found Roman coins minted at Arikamedu, glasses (Arateen), seals, beads and many more products; they are an asset for the identification of the entire picture of trade at the time.⁶¹ Besides these coins, the seals, beads and pieces of ceramics proving the trade relations were also found at the same excavation site.⁶²

⁵⁹. *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, (ed.), L. Casson, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989, p.39

⁶⁰. Osmand Bopearachchi, “*Seafaring in the Indian Ocean*”, **op.cit.**, p.69; P. Berghaus, “*Roman Coins from India and Their Imitations*”, in A.K.Jha, (ed.), **Coinage, Trade and Economy**, Indian Institute for Research in Numismatic Studies, (Nasik, 1991), pp. 108-121

⁶¹. Osmand Bopearachchi and R.M. Wickramasinghe, **Ruhuna-An Ancient Civilization Re-Visited: Numismatic and Archeological Evidence on Inland and Maritime Trade**, (Colombo, 1999); Osmand Bopearachchi, “*Archeological Evidence on Changing Patterns in International Trade Relations of Ancient Sri Lanka*”, in Osmand. Bopearachchi and D.P.M. Weerakkody, **op.cit.**, 1998, pp.133-178; O. Kessler, “*The Discovery of an Ancient Sea Port at the Silk Road of the Sea-archaeological Relics of the Godavaya Harbour*”, in M. Domroes and H.Roth, (eds.), **Sri Lanka: Past and Present**, Weikersheim, (Margraf Verlag, 1998), pp. 12-37

⁶². Moira Tampoe, “*Ceramics and Other Evidence from the Partner Ports of the Western Indian Ocean (8th – 10th Century A.D.)*”, **op.cit.**, pp. 85-103; “*The Spice Island Route: Sri Lanka’s Participations in Maritime Trade and the Archaeological Evidence from Mantai and Galle Harbour*”, **op.cit.**, pp.176-177; V. Begley, “*Ceramic Evidence for Pre Periplus. Trade on the Indian Coast*”, in V. Begley and R. D. De. Puma, (eds.), **Rome and India: The Ancient Sea Trade**, University of Wisconsin Press, (Madison, 1991), pp. 157-196

By the 4th and 5th centuries, Sri Lanka and western world had well developed trade relations. Subsequently, the Persian Empire also joined this race resulting in a vast improvement of trade. There were about two hundred thousand pieces of Roman coins belonging to that period, and they were found mostly in the coastal region of Sri Lanka.⁶³ There were many genuine Roman coins as well as forged coins found among Abhayagiri and Jetavana monastery complex excavation site. Most fascinating imported objects were Roman decorated creations like intaglios depicting Roman figures, emperor standing and holding a globe, seals showing three lions, ladies figures depicted on glass items and many more exquisite articles.⁶⁴ In addition, the Sigiriya excavation brought to light about 3000 Indo-Roman coins, of which only about 40 per cent were genuine Roman coins. Those coins were from the great emperor Constantine's time to King Macian's (A.D.450-457).time⁶⁵ According to. D.P.M. Weerakkody,⁶⁶ both Roman and Indo-Roman coins may have circulated in South India for a considerable time before reaching Sri Lanka in the later half of the 5th century. His hypothesis is based on the theory that from the mid-5th century, Sri Lanka was under foreign rule, having been invaded by a certain Pandu from South India who set up a dynasty at Anuradhapura which according to the *Mahāvamsa* ruled 27 years (433-460 A.D.); the Roman and Indo-Roman coins may have been introduced in Sri Lanka from South India by these invaders.

At the same time Sri Lanka traded with far eastern China. Close upon the 2nd century, cordial atmosphere with China existed, and this is confirmed by historical sources. There is a record that in the year A.D.97 elephant tusks were sent to China with cattle having humps.⁶⁷

⁶³.(Third brass) See cvrits Peipvblcaie type, Salvs Reipvblcaeviirtvs Exerciti 2 type, Cloria Romanorvm 21 type, Gloria Romanorvm 23 type-Osmand Bopearachchi, 1990, **op.cit.** p.70; "A Study in Locating Places Named in Ancient Foreign Coins, Hitherto Unknown Sri Lankan Context", in G.P.S.H. De Silva and C.G. Uragoda, (eds.), **Sesquicentennial Commemorative Volume of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka 1845-1995**, (Colombo, 1995), pp. 127-139

⁶⁴.Hema Rathnayaka, **op.cit.**, 1990, p. 50

⁶⁵.Osmand Bopearachchi, **op.cit.**, 1990

⁶⁶. D.P.M. Weerakkody, **op.cit.**, 1995

⁶⁷.K.A.Nilakanta Satri, "The Beginning of Intercourse between India and China", **The Indian Historical Quarterly**, Vol. 14, No.2 June 1938, p. 26

There is evidence that in the year A.D.120 elephants tusks and other valuable offerings were sent again through missionaries to China.⁶⁸ Similarly in the 3rd century A.D., Chinese records refer to Sri Lanka (Shihtze) supplying cinnamon, mercury, hsun-lun, turmeric, slorax, costus, and valuable essences.⁶⁹ Some of these products could have been exchanged by Middle East countries, with Sri Lanka.⁷⁰ In the year A.D.412 a statue of the Buddha made out of jade was taken to China from Sri Lanka, and this could have resulted in the arrival of Buddhist nuns (*Bhikkhuni*) in China. In A.D. 426 Buddhist nuns from Sri Lanka visited China and began spreading Buddhism in China. Anyway there can be no doubt that these visits were facilitated because of the trade relation existing between the two countries.⁷¹ Mahinda Werake found in the Chinese epic *HathparapureIthihāsaya* that during the reign of Emperor Ping (A.D. 1-6) a mission from Sri Lanka reached China and therefore the relations with China could be traced back to a very early period.⁷²

Besides these, there are references in different works that in the years A.D. 435, 515, 523, 527, 531, 670, 711, 746, 750, and 762 Sri Lankan missions were sent to China.⁷³

⁶⁸.T.W.Kingsmill, "The Manteses and the Golden Chersones", **Journal of Royal Asiatic Society (North China Branch)**, Vol. XXXV, p.99

⁶⁹. O.W. Wolters, **Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins of Śrīvijaya**, Cornell University Press, (Ithaca, New York, 1967), pp. 73-74

⁷⁰.W.I.Siriweera, "*Pre-Colonial Sri Lanka's Maritime Commerce with Special Reference to Its Ports*", **Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea**, pp.125-133

⁷¹. R.A.L.H.Gunawardana, "*Subtle Silks of Ferrous Firmness: Buddhist Nuns in Ancient and Early Medieval Sri Lanka and Their Role in the Propagation of Buddhism*", **The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities**, Vol. XIV, No 1 & 2, 1988, pp. 1-59

⁷².Mahinda Werake, "*Sino Sri Lanka Relations During the Pre-Colonial Times*", **Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea**, pp. 221-132

⁷³. Sir James Emerson Tennent, **Ceylon: An Account of Island Physical, Historical, and Topographical with Notices of Its Natural History, Antiquities and Productions**, Green Longman and Roberts, (London, 1859), pp. 514-529; M. Sylvain Levi, "Chino Sinhalese Relations", Translated from French by Johan, M Senaviratna, **Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Ceylon Branch**, Vol. XXIV, No.68, 1915\16, pp. 74-105

Archaeological evidence found from Mantai,⁷⁴ Alahena Pirivena in Polonnaruwa⁷⁵ and Galle⁷⁶ goes to confirm that such a relation really existed between Sri Lanka and China. Chinese ceramic plates, pieces of Chinese-ware and coins were found in the excavated sites. During this period Sri Lanka would have had close relation with South East Asian countries, although there are no written records to prove this. But one cannot say that trade relations did not exist at all.⁷⁷ As such Sri Lanka performed an active role in the East West trading system, and therefore Sri Lankan economy prospered due to this growth in trade.



⁷⁴. J. Carswell, “*The Excavation of Mantai*”, **Ancient Ceylon**, Vol. 7, Department of Archaeology, (Colombo, 1990), pp. 17-28

⁷⁵. P.L.Prematilaka, “*Chinese Ceramics Discovered in Sri Lanka*”, **Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea**, pp.233-244

⁷⁶. Moira Tampoe, “*Ceramics and Other Evidence from the Partner Ports of the Western Indian Ocean (8th–10th A.D.)*”, **op.cit.**, pp. 85-103; “*The Spice Island Route: Sri Lanka’s Participations in Maritime Trade and the Archaeological Evidence from Mantai and Galle Harbour*”, **op.cit.**, pp. 176-177

⁷⁷. W.M. Sirisena, “*Sri Lanka’s Commercial Relations with the Outside World from Earliest Times to 8th Century A.D.*”, **Sri Lanka Journal of South Asian Studies**, University of Jaffna, Vol. 2, No. 01, 1980, pp. 12-31 and **Sri Lanka and South East Asia: Political, Religious and Cultural Relations from A.D. c. 1000 to c. 1500**, E.J, Brill, (Leiden, 1978); K.R. Hall, **Maritime Trade and State Development In Early Southeast Asia**, University of Hawaii Press, (Honolulu, 1985)