

THE ROLE OF THE PORT CITY OF MAHATITTHA (MANTOTA) IN THE TRADE NETWORKS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN¹

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"Mahatittha" or the "Great Port" of Sri Lanka played a significant role in the trade networks of the Indian Ocean for well over a thousand years. In the rise of this port-city as well as in its eventual decline and ultimate eclipse one can see the interplay of a number of factors - geographical, political, social and economic. It would seem that by the 12th century Mahatittha had acted out its major role in the sea ways of the Indian Ocean and had ceased to occupy an important place in the trade networks of the region. The ancient and medieval periods of Sri Lankan history will constitute the time-frame for this study, a period within which Mahatittha reached great heights and eventually faded out.

The central position of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean gave the island's ports a strategic importance well beyond what would normally belong to a small country. Along its coast there is no dearth of inlets and river estuaries which could provide anchorage for sailing craft and they no doubt attracted ships looking for a landfall in uncertain seas. A process of natural selection would have made some of these ports more popular than others. In this regard the relative safety of harbours, proximity to ports in adjacent lands, access to commercial goods as well as to supplies needed by mariners, an internal communication system with linkages to resource areas and political centres, relatively stable political conditions and an administration sensitive to the demands of competitive trade were among the advantages ports could offer in varying combinations to the maritime trader of pre-modern times. The emergence of Mahatittha as a major port of call during this period would necessarily relate to some of these pre-conditions.

A port-city with trade links overseas is also sensitive to events in a much wider spatial area outside the country. Political or economic crises at the sources of supply or demand or even at intermediary points in the maritime trade can affect its fortunes and this is a dimension which one needs to keep in mind regarding the history of Mahatittha. Changes in trade patterns due to either policy changes or technological innovations can

¹ This paper was first read at the 12th IAHA Conference, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, June 24-28, 1991.

lead to fluctuating fortunes in trade centres which are linked to the long distance maritime commerce of this period. It is therefore important to see how a port such as Mahatittha responded to such changes in the rhythm of trade.

Within the ambit of foreign relations, the Indian connection was perhaps the most crucial for the port of Mahatittha. Separated from the sub-continent by only a narrow stretch of water to the north of the island the ports of Sri Lanka were almost inevitably linked to the east-west maritime networks which passed the southern coasts of India. As the Sri Lankan port closest to her giant neighbour, Mahatittha which faced the Indian land mass to its west was particularly affected by this external factor. The island situation of the country gave it a certain amount of independent manoeuvrability in maritime trade. In terms of mere physical location the possibility of moving out of the Indian orbit appears to be easier for the south-western, southern and eastern ports. For Mahatittha this was not always a feasible proposition, although there appears to have been times when the port functioned without too much reference to its counterparts on the other side of the sea. It is not contended that the inevitable inter-dependence of Mahatittha on the maritime networks of South India was a negative factor in its trade history, although the political connection did result in tensions which had certain disruptive consequences for the Sri Lankan port-city.

The wind-system of the Indian Ocean was such that vessels sailing from the west had necessarily to cast anchor on either the west coast of India or Sri Lanka. To proceed further east a different direction of wind was needed and therefore for the western ships the harbours of these two coasts were either halting places or terminal points in their journeys. It would seem that one of the attractions of Sri Lankan ports was that they offered greater protection to ships than the ports of West India. John Carswell who undertook a survey of 54 ports on the western and eastern coasts of Southern India says "the most striking single feature of the survey was the total unsuitability of most of the ports in terms of natural features ... In Sri Lanka the situation was somewhat different"². The port of Mahatittha is situated at the southern extremity of Palk bay and can only be reached by ships from the west by crossing the Mannar straits, a narrow stretch of water between the mainland and the island of Mannar. Stretching from the island to Ramesvaram on the Indian side is Adam's bridge, a chain of shoals and sand banks which limit ships entering the Bay of Bengal through either the Mannar channel near the Sri Lankan coast or the Pamban channel between Ramesvaram and the Indian mainland. European writers of the 16th to the 18th century have drawn attention to the shallowness of both these channels, which could only be negotiated by small craft or flat bottomed

² John Carswell and Martha Prickett : "Mantai 1980: A Preliminary Investigation" *Ancient Ceylon* no.5 (1984), pp.3-80.

boats.³ It is believed that the Pamban channel came into existence as late as the fifteenth century.⁴ Therefore for the period under consideration ships coming from the western ocean would have had to cross the Mannar channel to get to the port of Mahatittha.

It has been suggested that ships approaching Mahatittha from the west anchor south of Adam's Bridge from where goods were loaded into smaller craft which could cross the Mannar channel with ease. One of these anchorages has been identified as Kudiramalai (Tamil : horse-hill), thought to be the Hippuros of Pliny.⁵ It is a coastal harbour south of Mannar protected by the Karativu island. Archaeological explorations here have revealed a fairly long period of occupation from about the first century B.C. to at least the seventh century A.D. if not until later.⁶ Pliny's story is that the ship of the freedman Annius Plocamus was carried by strong winds to the harbour of Hippuros in Taprobane. Pliny is careful to mention that there was another port adjacent to the capital city of Palaesimundum in Taprobane. If Kollan Kanatte (the same site as Kudiramalai) was a subsidiary port of Mantota as suggested by Deraniyagala,⁷ then Hippuros was probably a supporting harbour for Mahatittha. It is very likely that the port which is said to be adjacent to Palaesimundum, the capital city, was Mahatittha. Pliny does not seem to be very accurate regarding its location in terms of Anuradhapura, the capital during this time.

Another port still further south which may have been linked to Mantota was Uruvelapattana⁸ located at the mouth of the Kala Oya⁹ and close to the archaeological

³ De Queyroz, Baldeus, Governor Falk.

⁴ Roland Silva: "Mantai : the Great Emporium of Cosmas Indicopleustes", *Ancient Ceylon* no.14 (1990).

⁵ D.P.M. Weerakkody : "Sri Lanka's Diplomatic Mission to Rome in the First Century A.D." Palma II: *Classical Association of Ceylon Golden Jubilee Volume*, (1985), pp.66-80.

⁶ R.L. Brohier : "Notes on an Ancient Habitation Near Kudiramalai" *J.R.A.S.C.B.* Vol.XXXI, no.82 (1929), pp.388-397; and S. Deraniyagala : "Archaeological Explorations in Ceylon" *Ancient Ceylon* no.2, 1982.

⁷ Deraniyagala : *op.cit.*, p.3.

⁸ *Mahavamsa (Mhv.)* XXVIII, 36.

⁹ S. Paranavitana " *Ceylon Today* Vol. V, (1956).

site of Pomparippu. It was well known for its pearls according to the *Mahavamsa*, a place which can be reached by river. Excavations at Pomparippu and explorations nearby have shown continuous occupation at this site from the proto-historic period to the 8th century A.D. and until later.¹⁰ As excavations *per se* were limited to a proto-historic cemetery site, tangible evidence for the Mantota connection will have to await further archaeological investigation. The possibility that there were yet other subsidiary harbours south of Mantota has been considered by archaeologists. However, very little hard evidence has emerged on this score except at Kudiramalai. Surface finds of Chinese and Islamic ceramic sherds prompted an excavation near Vankalai, a site immediately to the south of Adam's Bridge. Apart from evidence for the use of Islamic and Chinese ceramics of about the 12th century there was no indication that it was a trading port linked to Mantota.¹¹

The notion that Mantota could function effectively in terms of the western trade, only with the help of subsidiary ports to the south arises from the shallowness of the Mannar channel as it exists now and also reported by users after the 16th century. It has been suggested that Cheng Ho who sailed to Sri Lanka and South India on a number of occasions in large Chinese junks avoided the straits of Mannar except once when he sent a small convoy of ships through the channel to the Bay of Bengal.¹² However, the Cheng Ho expeditions do show that smaller craft could and did traverse the Mannar waterway at the beginning of the 15th century. Conditions could have been even better during earlier times. Geological surveys have shown that the Mannar Lagoon as well as the entire Palk Bay area have been subject to gradual silting over time. Recent experiments have indicated a net annual accumulation of about 2 cm of sediment.¹³ In the circumstances one may work on the assumption that the Mannar channel was not as shallow in times past and that the port of Mahatittha was reached directly after turning the southern tip of India, without anchoring at an intermediary port.

Pliny sheds some light on this when he says that the sea between Sri Lanka and India is shallow but in certain channels it is so deep that anchors do not reach the bottom.

¹⁰ Wimala Begley : "Excavations at Pomparippu - 1970" *Ancient Ceylon* no.4 (1981), pp.56-57.

¹¹ John Carswell : "Excavation at Vankalai, Sri Lanka", *National Geographic Society Research Reports* (1978), pp.129-137.

¹² Roland Silva : *op.cit.*, p.4.

¹³ Ananda Gunatilaka : "Sedimentary Processes in an Area Subjected to Alternating Monsoonal Seasons" *Marine Geology* vol. XXI (1976), pp.23-30.

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He adds that ships are said to have prows on both ends so that they do not need to turn around in the narrows of the seas.¹⁴ A carving of a vessel of this type with high prows at both ends on a third century B.C. stone record in northern Sri Lanka can be taken as a miniature illustration of this.¹⁵ Ships coming from the west used the south-west monsoon and according to Pliny start off in mid-summer hoping to reach the west coast of India or Sri Lanka just before the north-east monsoon sets in September and the winds change direction.¹⁶ From September to March there is a twice daily tidal flow in the Mannar lagoon area¹⁷ and this no doubt facilitated shipping across the Mannar channel. The available evidence does not allow one to fully comprehend the exact mechanics by which the port of Mahatittha functioned. It would seem that small and medium size craft did straddle the channel but larger vessels anchored at subsidiary ports such as Kudiramalai and either sailed through light, having off loaded their cargo into smaller boats or simply traded with Mahatittha along an overland route by employing cargo boats for this purpose.

Most foreign notices - Greek, Roman, Arabic or Chinese - which refer to Sri Lanka as an important link in the maritime networks of the Indian Ocean, speak of the island as a whole and not of anyone of its ports. Therefore, it is often by inference that one concludes that many of these writers were perhaps referring to the port of Mahatittha. There is no gainsaying that Mahatittha was the "great port" of local tradition and archaeologically too it seems to have been the most frequented and the most important port of the Anuradhapura kingdom. The ships according to foreign writers landed at Taprobane, Salike or Sielediba (names by which Sri Lanka was known) and only a few exceptions are there to this rule. The indigenous sources provide evidence for a number of port-towns round the coast of Sri Lanka and it would be necessary to evaluate the relative importance of these ports, in order to see how far the external notices relate to the port of Mahatittha.

There seems to have been two landing sites in the Mannar area, one of which was Mantota. The other appears to have been known as Mannarapatuna or the Mannar port. Magha, a 13th century ruler, who according to the Pali chronicle, the Culavamsa set up fortifications at a number of coastal points did so both at Mahatittha and at

¹⁴ Weerakkody : "Diligentior Notitia " the Old and the New in Pliny's Description of Sri Lanka" this volume p.155.

¹⁵ S. Paranavitana : *Inscriptions of Ceylon* Vol. I (1970), p.xxvi.

¹⁶ Weerakkody : *op.cit.*, p.162.

¹⁷ Gunatilaka : *op.cit.*, pp.23-30.

Mannarapatuna.¹⁸ This same place is referred to on an earlier occasion as Mannaragama, the village of Mannara at Mahatittha, where a foreign invader is said to have landed. This event is dated in the early part of the 12th century.¹⁹ From the work of Ptolemy it is clear that western sailors had circumnavigated Sri Lanka by the second century A.D. The geographical information in it shows greater familiarity with the ports of the north than those of the south and the main points of entry would have been from the north, north-east and north-west.²⁰ The most frustrating aspect of Ptolemy's work is the near impossibility of identifying many of the places mentioned by him. He refers to a large number of ports and havens. Some of them can be located in the north-west, but no clear identification in terms of known ports is possible. The harbour of Priapis would certainly have been in this region but no clear recognition of Mahatittha is possible.

The maritime networks which gave Mahatittha the strategic importance it acquired had a great deal to do with its links with the eastern coast of South India, a linkage which has very wide implications for Sri Lankan commerce in the entire Bay of Bengal region and with Southeast Asia. It is in fact the Indian axis which gave the northern ports of Sri Lanka a head start over others. According to the chronicles, among the earliest points of entry and exit to and from Sri Lanka was Jambukola, identified with Sambiliturai or Camputurai on the northern coast of the Jaffna peninsula. According to tradition Sri Lanka's connections with Northern India and Kalinga were more important than her links with the south. Maritime contact would naturally involve coasting down the Bay of Bengal to point Calimere²¹ in southern India, a convenient place to cross over as it lies almost exactly opposite Jambukola, which in turn was linked to the capital city of Anuradhapura by a main highway. Jambukola figures prominently in Sri Lanka's earliest Buddhist contacts with north India more particularly in the diplomatic and religious ties with the Asokan court in the third century B.C.²² Also its importance in the cultural sphere may be indicated by the reference in the Milinda Panha to a certain Kolapattana between Alasanda and Suvarnabhumi. Kolapattana has been identified with

¹⁸ *Culavamsa* (Cv.) LXXXIII, V. 16.

¹⁹ Cv. LXI, V. 39.

²⁰ D.P.M. Weerakkody : "Some Observations on Ptolemy's Description of Sri Lanka" *Kalyani* Vol. I nos. 1 & 2 (1982), pp. 31-47.

²¹ Vedanarayan.

²² *Mhv.* XI, vv 23-24; *Mhv.* XI, v 38; *Mhv.* XVIII, vv. 8; *Mhv.* XIX, vv. 23 & 25.

Jambukola.²³ Once again this is the point of departure for Buddhist monks seeking refuge in Indian monasteries during a period of war and famine in Sri Lanka in the first century B.C. The antiquity of this site has eluded archaeologists because the coast here has been subject to continuous erosion and much of what would have been the port area is probably submerged under the sea.²⁴

Jambukola was soon superseded by Mahatittha as the main gateway to southern India for here unlike at the earlier port both the eastern and western sea routes met, and together with the south Indian connection, a three-way link was established. This coming together of the east, west and south Asian trade at Mantota was what gave it pre-eminence over the other ports of north-west Sri Lanka.

Opening out into the Bay of Bengal in the direction of Southeast Asia, the north-eastern ports of the island also had a significant role in the Indian Ocean trade. Ptolemy's work makes it quite clear that by the second century A.D. this coast was well known to the west and even the two emporia mentioned by him are both located there.²⁵ That ships sailed from Bengal and Lankapattana (Illankanturai) in the Trincomalee district has been documented in indigenous literary sources²⁶ and a landing site at Tiriyay is supported by an inscription of the eighth century A.D. However neither the literary nor the archaeological information matches the evidence available for the dominant position enjoyed by Mahatittha at least until the 11th century A.D. when both commercially and politically the east coast began to attract greater attention. This is an issue to which we will return later. Suffice to say that although the north-eastern ports could trap the trade that flowed in from the northern and eastern coasts of the Bay of Bengal, they had necessarily to link up with Mahatittha as long as western traders came to or through that port.

One could argue that ships coming in from the Arabian sea could go round the southern coast of the country and negotiate with the north-eastern trading centres avoiding Mahatittha altogether. As mentioned already, by the second century A.D. the entire Sri

²³ R.A.L.H. Gunawardana : "Seaways to Silediba : Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and their Impact on Pre-colonial Sri Lanka" *Kalyani* Vols. V & VI (1987), pp.6- 7.

²⁴ Ponnampalam Ragupathy : *Early Settlements in Jaffna : An Archaeological Survey*, Madras (1987), pp.50-53.

²⁵ Weerakkody : *op.cit.*, p.31.

²⁶ *Mhv.* LVIII, vv. 23-4.

Lankan littoral was known to the sailors of the west and there is evidence for coastal trade centres in the southern part of the country. Weerakkody concludes from the evidence of Ptolemy that the south of Sri Lanka although frequented was less well known to the west than the north and once again we are faced with the issue of the relative importance of these ports. Foreign ships are known to have docked in the southern ports from very early times. Sakkarasobbha is an yet unidentified port which is said to have been functional in the first century A.D.²⁷ Godapavata in the Hambantota district was a port town which yielded customs dues to the state in the second century A.D.²⁸ A number of Roman coin-hoards reported in coastal towns in both southern and south-western Sri Lanka are thought to reflect trade with the west during the fourth to the seventh century A.D. period.²⁹ This view has been since challenged for most of the late Roman coins found in Sri Lanka are largely local imitations and coin hoards cannot in any case be regarded as evidence for trade relations.³⁰ In fact some of these coin hoards have been found in south-west Sri Lanka but this was a region which became important for trade only after the political centres shifted to these parts.³¹

In terms of their geographical location as well as the pattern of winds and ocean currents, the southern ports would appear to be convenient meeting places for the east-west trade.³² This has been disputed as the sea to the south-east of the island is known to be treacherous for the east-west sailing ship, due to hidden rock out-crops.³³ Even more pertinent is that such a trade linkage would miss out a great deal of the Indian connection. Therefore despite the hassles of the Mannar channel, Mahatittha seems to have been the best place to take advantage of the triangular trade routes which converge

²⁷ *Mhv.* XXXV, v.27.

²⁸ S. Paranavitana : *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, Vol. II (1983), p.101.

²⁹ H.W. Codrington : *Ceylon Coins and Currency*, Colombo (1924), pp.31-80 and 249-50.

³⁰ David W. Macdowall "Finds of Roman Coins in South Asia : Problems of Interpretation", *Ancient Ceylon*, No.9, 1990, p.60.

³¹ Sirima Kiribamune : "Trade Patterns in the Indian Ocean and their Impact on the Politics of Medieval Sri Lanka" in *K. W. Goonewardena Felicitation Volume*, edited by C.R. de Silva and Sirima Kiribamune, Peradeniya (1989), pp.67-78.

³² R.A.L.H. Gunawardana : *op.cit.*, p.21.

³³ Roland Silva " *op.cit.*, p.3.

on it, an advantage which other ports of Sri Lanka lacked. These ports did capture a part of the trade but until the decline of Mahatittha, they do not seem to have been in competition with the main trade entrepot but played a more or less complementary and sometimes supplementary role.

The rise of Mahatittha was a direct response to the growth of western trade in the Indian Ocean. The growth of Roman maritime commerce in Asia and the discovery of the monsoon winds in the first century A.D. led to the rise of numerous trade centres along the western and south-western coast of India. Mahatittha appears to have provided a convenient link between the two Indian coasts. During the initial stages of this trade overland routes are known to have been favoured, but they were gradually replaced by the all sea route round the southern tip of India.³⁴ The initial response of Sri Lanka was to link up with the maritime centres of the east coast, evidence for which is seen in the rouletted ware found among the earliest material excavated at Mantota.³⁵ The excavations done so far at this site have not yielded material remains beyond the early historic period (second century B.C. to the second century A.D.). Although the possibility has not been ruled out that future excavations may reveal an early period of occupation, the evidence so far at least indicates the expansion of Mantota if not its rise to a period just prior to the Christian era. The rapid spread of the Mediterranean trade into Indian waters provided the main incentive for this.

The response of the Sri Lankan entrepreneur to the new opportunities would be to supply the demands of this trade with whatever resources the country had and establish contact with the trade marts of South India. Logistically the easiest area of communication would be the eastern coast of India. Given the proximity of the two countries, close contact between India and Sri Lanka was a perennial phenomenon although the nature, intensity and direction of this contact varied from time to time. For the cultural relations with Mauryan India, as noted already, Jambukola had become the principal gateway but the new demands made this port less attractive, paving the way for Mahatittha.

A port city derives its status not only from its position in the trade networks of the sea but also from its ability to command internal commercial resources. The pearl fishery of the island was practically on site and this is a commodity mentioned by early western writers as something very special to Sri Lanka. Megasthenes the Greek envoy in the Maurya court and the unknown author of the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, a

³⁴ Himanshu P. Ray : *Monastery and Guild under the Satavahanas*, Oxford University Press (1986), p.145.

³⁵ Carswell and Prickett : *op.cit.*, p.57.

work attributed to the first century A.D., attested to the fact that the island's pearls did have a western market. Bangles cut out from chanks and half worked chank shells show a thriving industry along the north western coast,³⁶ once again an item of trade readily available in the vicinity. Much more crucial were Mahatittha's links with Anuradhapura, the capital city, situated on the banks of the Malvatu oya further inland. Today the Malvatu Oya flows into the sea some 17 km south of Mantota, but traces of an earlier river bed suggests that the port may have been founded at the mouth of the river. Thus convenient access to the political centre was a decided advantage. No site other than Mantota had this advantage and the growth of the port and the capital city could have followed a complementary course.

Excavations at the Anuradhapura citadel have clearly demonstrated that the middle early historic period (250 B.C. - 100 A.D.) coincides with the earliest cultural levels reached so far at Mantota.³⁷ At this point of time, Anuradhapura is seen to be a full blown city with a centralized administration, and a capacity to control peripheral resource areas.³⁸ What has been particularly recognized in the early historic period is a more developed exchange mechanism between the gem producing regions of the centre and the coastal towns, for at this level, which spans the 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. period archaeologists have noted a profusion of beads made of semi-precious stones at sites such as the Gedige at Anuradhapura, Kantarodai, Mantota and Tissamaharama.³⁹ Precious stones figure very prominently among Sri Lankan trade goods mentioned by western writers of the first century A.D. like Pliny and the author of the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Also pertinent to this period are the references to the beryl and the hyacinth in the second century A.D. by Ptolemy.⁴⁰

Gems and pearls continued to be important almost throughout Sri Lanka's commercial history. That they were considered to be among the country's distinctive resources is borne out from the nature of gifts said to have been sent by Vijaya to the

³⁶ Carswell and Prickett : *op. cit.*, p.52.

³⁷ S.U. Deraniyagala : "The Proto- and Early-Historic Radio- carbon Chronology of Sri Lanka" *Ancient Ceylon*, no.12 (1990), pp.257-8.

³⁸ Deraniyagala : *op. cit.*, p.257.

³⁹ Sudharshan Seneviratne : "The Archaeology of the Megalithic Black and Red Ware Complex in Sri Lanka", *Ancient Ceylon*, no.5 (1984), pp.276-277.

⁴⁰ K.A. Nilakanta Sastri : *Foreign Notices of South India from Megasthenes to Ma-Huan*, Madras (1939), p.88 ff.

king of Madura and by Devanampiyatissa to the emperor Asoka. Listed prominently in the chronicles in this connection are exotic varieties of gems and pearls which the rulers received from various parts of the country.⁴¹ An organized political capital no doubt offered facilities to the foreign trade. The *Mahavamsa* would have us believe that an extremely well planned city had evolved at Anuradhapura by the fifth century B.C. with a quarter for the *Yonas* thought to be Ionian or west Asian traders. That the city was of some considerable size by this time is confirmed by archaeological research,⁴² although its more sophisticated evolution seems to have taken place a little later. One is perhaps justified in assuming that infrastructural facilities were available at Anuradhapura for foreign traders by the early historic period. These arrangements seem to have been very substantial by the fifth century A.D. as seen from the statement of Fa-hsien that there was a very opulent community of merchants living in attractive houses in the inner city.

Quite apart from the advantage Mantota derived from its convenient access to the capital city, and through Anuradhapura to regional resource centres, the area around Mantota too had a viable economic base for a growing commercial city. The soil consists of red and yellow latosols, alluvial clays and grumusols and sands. The latosols lend themselves to highland cultivation and the alluvial clays and grumusols are extremely fertile and under irrigated conditions register very high paddy yields. Served by a major reservoir, the Giant's Tank (7.75 sq. km in extent) which is dated in the sixth century A.D., the Mannar region also depends on a number of smaller tanks. A tank named Kohala is said to have been built by King Vasabha (67-111 A.D.) and the *Mahavamsa commentary* says that it was located near Mahatitthapattana.⁴³ This interest of Sri Lankan rulers at the turn of the first century A.D. reveals an attempt to improve the agricultural base of the hinterland of the port in order to meet the needs of an expanding population. It is also noteworthy that Mannar has ample ground water resources, and a number of ring-wells discovered by archaeologists⁴⁴ show clearly that this was an asset that was exploited. Rice was the principle crop grown as well as the staple food of the people. Palaeoethnobotanical investigations bear testimony to the fact that rice was widely

⁴¹ *Dipavamsa* II, 18, *Mhv.* VIII, 49-50 and 73.

⁴² S.U. Deraniyagala " *op. cit.*, p.253.

⁴³ *Vamsatthappakasini*, edited by G.P. Malalasekera, London, P.T.S. (1935), Vol.II, p.653.

⁴⁴ Carswell and Prickett: *op. cit.*, pp.24-45.

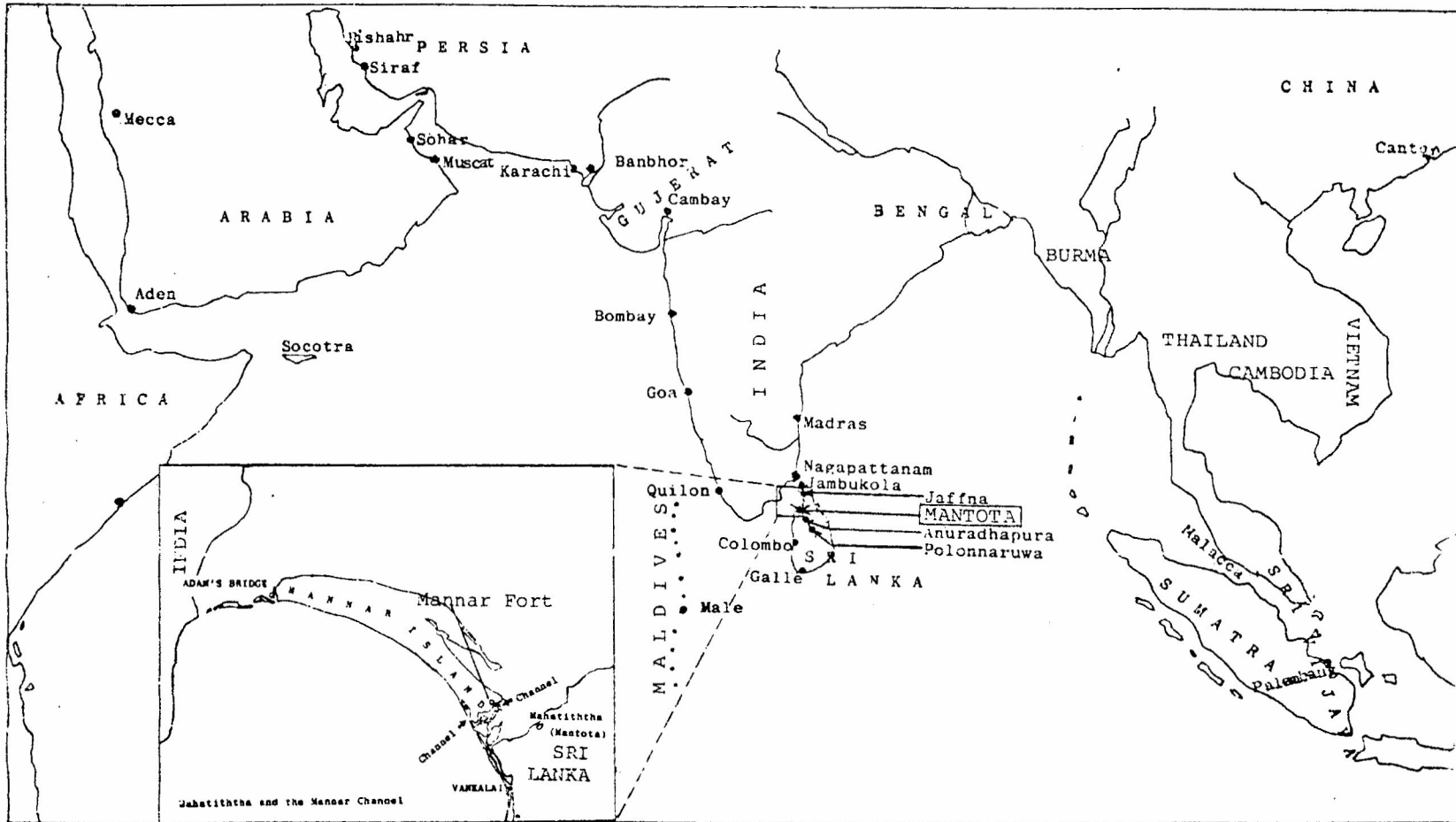
available at all occupational levels at Mantota.⁴⁵

Therefore from the early centuries B.C. there was a convergence of factors such as:

1. The growing demand for luxury goods like pearls and gems by western traders.
2. The commercial growth of the eastern coast of South India and its linking up with the pearl and chank producing north western coast of Sri Lanka.
3. The growing capabilities of Anuradhapura as a resource collecting centre with facilities for traders and
4. A convenient communication link along the Malvatu Oya, to the coast. All this provided the background for the initial development of the port city, Mantota.

Archaeological investigations are not sufficiently comprehensive for one to trace the evolution of the city from the earliest times. Pliny says that previous Greek notices regarding Sri Lanka spoke of 700 villages and no towns. However the Sinhalese envoys who went to Rome are said to have reported that there were 500 towns in the country and that the king's capital was the main town (oppidum). Neither Pliny nor the author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* mentioned any large cities or even trade emporia. The situation is different by the second century A.D. For Ptolemy speaks of a number of cities and two trade emporia. Taking this general scenario and the growth of trade it is possible to assume the gradual urbanization of the port area in its full-blown state, Mantota was a double moated city with a rampart in between. The citadel area is roughly 48 hectares but when exactly the moats and walls came into being is not clear. As the physical expansion of the city in a southerly direction seems to have taken place in and after the third century A.D. according to the archaeological record, the city walls and moats would be posterior to this. The remains at Mantota suggest that the entire citadel area was occupied by the eighth century A.D. This may be an approximate date for the final evolution of the moated city. A number of industries appear to have flourished in the inner city, once again giving Mantota a strong economic base. The large amount of iron slag and the remains of a furnace suggest that there was an iron industry. Large quantities of half-worked stone and glass beads show the large scale manufacture of beads. Attention has already been drawn to the pearl fishery and the chank industry. A

⁴⁵ M.D. Kajale : "Ancient Plant Economy from Excavations at Mantai, District Mannar" *Ancient Ceylon*, no.11, (1990), pp.263-266.



Sri Lanka and her neighbours in the Indian Ocean

potter's village has been identified among the ruins at Mantota.

Although there is some anticipation on the part of archaeologists that evidence may eventually turn up for an early start for the port of Mahatitta, the literary sources do not support such optimism. The growth of a historical tradition in Sri Lanka is associated with the establishment of Buddhism and the earliest stratum of this tradition revolves round this event. As mentioned already Jambukola and not Mahatittha is the port which figures in the early Buddhist contacts with India. The stories regarding relations with India in pre-Buddhist times, are of subsequent growth and it is in them that Mahatittha gets attention. This was the port at which a princess from Madura is said to have disembarked to be the queen of Vijaya.⁴⁶ Panduvasudeva is also probably associated with Mahatittha when the chronicle states that he arrived at the mouth of the Mahakandara river.⁴⁷ From the first century B.C. onwards practically everyone who is said to have come from India disembarked at Mahatittha which is also the point of departure for those who wish to leave for India.

The northern ports of the island continued to be functional and shared with Mahatittha the trade with eastern India. Attention has been drawn to the fact that monks embarked at Jambukola when they were forced to seek refuge in India during a famine in the first century B.C. Rouletted ware dated to the early centuries of the Christian era have been found at Kantarodai as well as at many other sites in the Jaffna peninsula showing a direct maritime link with the western coast of the Bay of Bengal.⁴⁸ This pattern of trade changed rather quickly when Roman trade began to take the all sea route round the tip of South India instead of transporting trade goods over land from one coast to the other.

The feasibility of establishing contact with the Bay of Bengal trade through the ports of Sri Lanka, using the same monsoon winds which bring ships to the west coast of India may have been a chance discovery. In fact the earliest contact between Rome and Sri Lanka was the result of a ship being driven by gale force winds to a Sri Lanka port as recorded by Pliny. This was made the occasion for the sending of an embassy by the ruler to Rome in the reign of Claudius (41-54 A.D.). Pliny emphasizes the remoteness of the island as far as Rome was concerned, when he says that it begins at the eastern sea

⁴⁶ *Mhv.* VII, v.58.

⁴⁷ *Mhv.* VIII, vv. 10-12.

⁴⁸ Ponnampalam Ragupathy : *op.cit.*, p.10.

and is banished by nature.⁴⁹ The usefulness of Sri Lanka to straddle the two Indian coasts is expressed in the statement that the island lies along the side of India from east to west. Calculations regarding the duration of a journey by ship from northeastern India to Taprobane shows that the western trade was looking to Sri Lanka not only as a means of bridging the coastal trade of India but also in terms of tapping the resources of the northern coast of the Bay of Bengal. For the accomplishment of all this as explained earlier the port of Mahatittha (perhaps the Palaesimundu of Pliny) was of crucial importance and by the second century A.D. the stage was set for this regular pattern of trade, a position clearly revealed in the work of Ptolemy as already indicated.

The participation of Mantota in the Roman trade is borne out by the presence of Roman Arretine sherds reported by Chanmugam⁵⁰ in 1954 and rouletted ware.⁵¹ Rouletted ware establishes a direct link between the Sri Lankan port and the east Indian coastal centres involved with the Roman trade. There is no diagnostic material which suggests that Mantota was connected to the centres of Roman trade on the west coast of India during this period. However, this situation changes in around the third century A.D. with western traders deciding to negotiate the two coasts of India, using the all sea route which gave Mantota unprecedented importance.

Rouletted ware stops abruptly at Mantota at the end of the early historic period around the second century A.D. and in the early levels of the next occupation phase which is termed the intermediate period (3rd to the 8th century A.D.) one finds a highly diagnostic product of Gujerat known as Indian Red Polished Ware which is found in great profusion in Saurashtra and Kathiawar. This ceramic dated between the second and fourth centuries A.D. has been detected at the Iranian ports of Siraf and Rishahr⁵², clearly indicating the maritime communications extending from the Persian Gulf ports through Western India to Mantota and beyond. With the already established trade connections with the east Indian ports, the stage was set for Mantota to emerge as a trade emporium where merchants from different lands met to exchange their wares.

Although the growth of Mahatittha cannot be documented in all its details for the next few hundred years, by the sixth century A.D., it had become one of the most

⁴⁹ Weerakkody : this volume. p.142.

⁵⁰ P.K. Chanmugam : *Ceylon Journal of Science* section G, Vol. II, (June 1954).

⁵¹ Carswell and Prickett : *op. cit.*, p.57.

⁵² David Whitehouse and Andrew Williamson : "Sassanian Maritime Trade" *Iran* Vol. XI, (1973), pp.29-49.

important centres if not the most important centre for the east west entrepot trade. Cosmas surnamed Indicopleustes i.e. "Indian Navigator" has left for posterity a detailed account of the Indian Ocean trade from his personal experience of this region.⁵³ Although he does not mention the port of Mahatittha by name, there seems to be no doubt that this was the Sri Lankan harbour he was describing as the central point in the Indian Ocean maritime networks.

The build up towards the achievement described by Cosmas is somewhat strongly indicated in a few scattered pieces of evidence in the historical record. The increasing tempo of the trade with the west is indicated in the large quantities of Roman coins of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. found in various parts of the country. Although many of these have been found to be copies,⁵⁴ nevertheless the adoption of Roman coins as prototypes indicates the high esteem in which the tools of western trade were held. Complementing the growing attractiveness of Mahatittha to the western trader was the drawing in of the eastern trade as well and Sri Lanka becomes a popular landing place for ships plying on the eastern seas. Pliny's report that Sri Lanka traded with China regularly according to the Sinhalese envoys to Rome suggests that this contact went as far back as the first century A.D. But frequent references to the Sri Lanka-China run are seen from a little later period. In the fifth century A.D. the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien boarded a regular merchant ship in Sri Lanka in order to journey back to China and as he was returning after a sojourn in Anuradhapura the port of embarkation was obviously Mahatittha.

Also around the same time Gunavarman, a Kashmiri monk breaks journey in Sri Lanka before proceeding to Java. Another important event in Sri Lanka's eastern contacts of the fifth century A.D. is the introduction of the female Buddhist order to China. The transport was arranged by a Sinhalese ship captain named Nandi who did the trip twice because the number of nuns taken the first time was not sufficient.⁵⁵ Gunawardene's identification of this mariner with a certain merchant Nandi mentioned in a Pali text, the *Sahassavatthupakarana* seems justifiable.⁵⁶ Although the text is dated in about the seventh century A.D. the events described in it reflect earlier periods. Nandi here is a

⁵³ J.W. McCrindle : *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk*, Haklyt Society, Vol.98, London (1897), p.102.

⁵⁴ David W. MacDowall (1990), *op.cit.*, pp.49-74.

⁵⁵ Nilakanta Sastri : *op.cit.*, p.13.

⁵⁶ *Sahassavatthupakarana* edited by A.P. Buddhdatta, Colombo (1959), p.145; Gunawardana : *op.cit.*, p.15.

trader who resides in Mahatittha and undertakes trade expeditions lasting for periods as long as three years. His house is described as a pasada, a mansion or palace which shows that those involved in the long distance trade were exceptionally wealthy. Yet, another merchant of Mahatittha referred to in the *Sahassavaththupakarana* is called a Vanija Kumara, "a merchant prince" again indicating the elite status of the leading traders of this time. These references with Fa-hsien's statement that there were in the inner city of Anuradhapura attractive mansions belonging to wealthy foreign merchants show the lucrative nature of Sri Lanka's foreign trade around the fifth century A.D.

Not only private entrepreneurs, but the state too was no doubt a beneficiary of this trade. Customs dues at ports were an important item of revenue and Asian rulers vied with each other to attract as much of the international commerce of their times. Port facilities in terms of supplies, efficient administrative arrangements and a coastal neighbourhood free of pirates were among the attractions rulers could provide the foreign trader. Moves in this direction are noticed in about the fifth and the sixth centuries A.D. in Sri Lanka to cater to the increasing demands of her overseas trade. As suggested by Gunawardena the institution of "a watch of the sea" by Moggallana I (495-512 A.D.) and Silakala's (522-535 A.D.) appointment of his son to protect the sea were perhaps aimed at guarding the coast from piracy. The *Sahassavaththupakarana* refers to a minister Siva who lived at Mahatittha.⁵⁷ He was probably among those officials in charge of administrative arrangements. The building of the Giants Tank around the fifth or sixth century A.D. was no doubt a recognition of the expanding consumer needs of a busy trade entrepot as well as of a growing population.

The situation of Sri Lanka vis-a-vis the east west trade networks of the Indian Ocean as described by Cosmas in the sixth century A.D. is a high point reached by the port of Mahatittha. Although Mahatittha is not mentioned by name, there seems to be no doubt that it was the great commercial emporium described by Cosmas. He says that ships from all parts of India and from Persia and Ethiopia frequented Sri Lanka. She also received silk, aloes, clove-wood, sandal-wood and other commodities from the east and passed them on to the ports of eastern India, Persia, and Adulis. The island is said to have had its own shipping. Also important is the statement that the Christian church was established in the country. This obviously served the large influx of Persian traders here, for Cosmas very clearly states that the king and his people are heathens. The Sassanian connection is confirmed by a baked clay bulle, typical of the sixth-seventh century A.D., found at Mantota. On it are found impressions of a two-humped Bactrian camel & a

⁵⁷ *Sahassavaththupakarana*, p.145.

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⁵⁷ *Sahassavattthupakarana*, p. 145.

Persian inscription and a Nestorian cross.⁵⁸ By the sixth century A.D. Mantota was no doubt a very cosmopolitan city with people of many different faiths. The Indian connection would also mean a strong Hindu presence as well, and by this time the Siva temple of Tiruketisvaram at Mantota had become one of the most sacred shrines of the Hindus. A sixth century A.D. poem written by Suntaramurti Nayanar in praise of Siva, the deity at Tiruketisvaram, describes the coast of Mantota as a place frequented by many ships and abounding in pearls.⁵⁹ That the Buddhists had their own places of worship is demonstrated by many archaeological finds. Dated to about the sixth-seventh century A.D. is a sherd with a burnished impression of a Jataka, with some lettering.⁶⁰ Fragments of Buddha images and a Bodhisatva image house are among the undated remains at Mantota from where two Tara images have also been reported. It is reasonable to assume that the Buddhist trader relied on the Bodhisatva Avalokitesvara and his consort, Tara, for protection, this being one of the specific roles attributed to them.

The rise of Islam in the seventh century A.D. and the expansion of the Arab empire brought about far reaching changes in Asian commerce. The Islamization of the Egyptian, Persian and Arab trade brought together vast resources which led to improvements in maritime communications, and Muslim trade began to play a crucial role in the sea-ways of the Indian Ocean.⁶¹ The east-west trade had always been a segmented trade and as noted already, by the sixth century A.D. Mahatittha had emerged as a mid-point of commercial exchange. This was not the only entrepot. The products of the east and west changed hands at some of the west Indian and Persian Gulf ports as well. Segmented or sectoral trade enabled wider inter-state participation and greater distribution of the profits of trade. Contrary to this the entry of the Muslim maritime traders saw ships sailing from the ports of West Asia right up to Canton with no change of craft or crew at intermediary points. How did these changes affect Mahatittha?

⁵⁸ John Carswell : "The Excavation of Mantota" *Ancient Ceylon* no.7 (1990), pp.17-28.

⁵⁹ W.J.S. Boake : "Tiruketisvaram, Mahatirtha, Matoddam or Mantoddai", *J.R.A.S.C.B.*, Vol.X, no.35 (1887), pp.107-117.

⁶⁰ John Carswell : *op.cit.*, p.26.

⁶¹ Sirima Kiribamune : "The Muslims and the trade of the Arabian Sea with special reference to Sri Lanka from the Birth of Islam to the 15th Century" in *Muslims of Sri Lanka : Avenues to Antiquity* edited by M.A.M. Shukri, Beruvala (1985), pp.89- 108.

By going to China and the countries of Southeast Asia, the Muslim trader was collecting his goods at the sources of supply. Despite this change Mahatittha continued to be a crucial point on the east-west route and the evidence does not seem to indicate that there was a stoppage of the entrepot trade. Baobab trees (*Adansonia Digitata*) which grow along the coast of Mannar are thought to be tell tale evidence of the presence of Arab traders here. This particular tree is indigenous to East Africa and would have been introduced in the wake of Arab trade. Mahatittha continued to be a port of call for Arab and Persian ships of the post-seventh century A.D. Sailing through from West Asia to Canton, is known from Chinese sources. The story of the monk Vajrabodhi is important in this regard. From Kanci he came to the Sri Lankan port of Po-tchi-li about the beginning of the eighth century A.D. where he saw 35 Persian vessels docked. He left for Canton with this Persian convoy, making it quite clear that ships coming in from the west sailed direct to China with a stop over in Sri Lanka. It is recorded that the Persians were there to buy precious stones. Obviously further eastern wares did not interest them at this point. A similar impression is created by Ibn Khurdadbeh (844-8 A.D.) who speaks of the pearl fishery along its coast and the products of the country as pepper, perfumes, gems, diamonds, musk and coconut. The port of Mahatittha offered many attractions to the Muslim traders who would have been compelled to stop either in southwest India or Sri Lanka for the change of wind to proceed further east. In addition to the much sought after exotic goods such as gems, and pearls, the availability of food and fresh water and hard wood and cordage for the repair of ships were no doubt important considerations.

Port facilities at Mahatittha could have been an additional incentive for traders to continue calling there. Sri Lankan rulers were alive to the fact that the port had to be competitive and secure in the changing commercial environment that was unfolding in the post-seventh century A.D. period. This is perhaps why Aggabodhi VII (744-777 A.D.) gave such high priority to the administration of Mahatittha. By placing a royal prince, who was in the line of succession to the throne, in charge of the sea coast with his head quarters at Mahatittha, Aggabodhi VII was not only ensuring control of the port but also the safety of the sea lanes to attract maritime traffic. Muslim sources indicate that some Arab ships by-passed Sri Lanka on their way to the east. Therefore a sustained interest by the state was perhaps necessary for commercial ports to remain competitive. This ruler is said to have fortified the port-city to protect it from invaders. At a later period a ninth century A.D. inscription speaks of an official designated "Mahaputuladda" who was in charge of the port area.

The archaeological evidence seems to come out very strongly in favour of Mahatittha continuing to function as a trade emporium.⁶² The presence of Chinese, West

⁶² Moira Tampoe : "Tracing the silk Road of the Sea : Ceramic and Other Evidence from the Partner Ports of the Western Indian Ocean - 8th to 10th

Asian and Indian ceramics at Mantota datable in the eight, ninth and tenth centuries A.D. show the continuing confluence of the three-way maritime trade despite the fact that the more enterprising mariners traversed the entire length of the east-west ocean route. The West Asian ceramics noticed at Mantota included Abbasid white ware which are mostly imitations of Chinese prototypes. From the far-eastern end there are various types of T'ang ware. It is important to note that similar finds have been reported from Siraf on the Persian Gulf, Aqaba on the Red Sea, in Sind, Mesopotamia, India and Egypt. Certain Islamic wares found at Mantota are said to have been found in dated tombs in China.⁶³ This evidence gives one a fairly good idea of maritime networks of the port of Mantota at least up to about the end of the ninth century A.D. That Sri Lankan ships and merchants were active participants in this trade can be deduced from the statement in a T'ang period document which states that of the ships arriving in the Chinese ports, those from Sri Lanka were the largest.⁶⁴

Despite the seeming prosperity and intense activity of the port of Mahatittha, the early political rumblings, which had a strangulating effect on the city later, had already begun by the ninth century A.D. Tension between Sri Lanka and the Pandyan kingdom resulted in troop movements through the port, a situation which would not have been looked on with favour by its international clientele. Yet another factor which diverted attention away from Sri Lanka's northwest coast was the growing importance of Sri Vijaya as a trade emporium. The focus was on the east coast of Sri Lanka. This is particularly evident in the visible growth of Mahayana Buddhist centres along the east coast of the island and somewhat to the interior too. This brings to mind the trade network which linked Bengal of the Palas with Southeast Asia. Eastern Sri Lanka too appears to have come within the ambit of these connections. A common cultural element in all three areas seems to be Mahayana Buddhism. The rise of the eastern Buddhist centres in Sri Lanka has been dated from about the eighth century A.D.⁶⁵ The growth of alternative commercial centres would have affected Mantota adversely. By the tenth century A.D. the Colas of South India began to take an interest in the Bay of Bengal

centuries A.D." in Senaka Bandaranayake et al edited, *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea*, Colombo (1990).

⁶³ John Carswell : *op.cit.*, p.27.

⁶⁴ R.A.L.H. Gunawardana and Y. Sakurai : "Sri Lankan Ships in China : A Note on a Passage in a Chinese Literary Work from the Period of the T'ang Empire" *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, Vol.VII, (1981), pp.147-152.

⁶⁵ Diran K. Dohanian : *The Mahayana Buddhist Sculpture of Ceylon*, New York (1977),

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⁶⁵ Diran K. Dohanian : *The Mahayana Buddhist Sculpture of Ceylon*, New York (1977),

trade and it was their entry into the scene which led to the eclipse of Mantota as a commercial city. The growing focus on the eastern centres was strengthened even more, the Colas contributing decisively towards this end by changing the capital of the country from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruva in the east when they occupied Sri Lanka at the end of the tenth century A.D.

The interdependence of the capital city of Anuradhapura and the port city of Mahatittha was mutually advantageous. It was inevitable that the fall of one would have disastrous consequences on the other. Anuradhapura remained a cultural centre and a centre of pilgrimage even after the capital shifted to Polonnaruva and Mahatittha continued to be a port of entry and exit. It would seem that soldiers more than merchants were among its users. After the Cola occupation of northern Sri Lanka, it was through Mahatittha that the political link with India was maintained. A Cola officer is said to have built the Rajarajesvara temple at Mantota. He no doubt administered the city. The control of the port was a vital security need because the constant movement of troops from South India was necessary for the retention of Cola power in Sri Lanka. The extensive empire of the Colas in Southern India and the eastern littoral of the Deccan afforded them havens other than Mahatittha for participation in the Indian Ocean trade. Also the constant military operations in the area would have dissuaded foreign ships calling at the port. Even after the expulsion of the Colas in the early part of the eleventh century A.D. Vijayabahu I continued to use Mahatittha as a military outpost and protected the harbour so that south Indian troops would not use it to gain entry into the country. In terms of trade however Mahatittha lost ground to the eastern ports.

As seen from the archaeological remains near Vankalai and in the island of Kayts, trading vessels with both eastern and western wares continued to visit the northwestern shores of Sri Lanka during the 12th century. At the former spot, not very far south of the Mannar channel, a large amount of Chinese and West Asian ceramics of the 12th century A.D. have been found. It seems to have been a temporary site occupied by a group of people who were able to procure foreign wares coming into the region although not through Mantota.⁶⁶ At Kayts north of the port city again have been found 12th century A.D. Chinese ceramics. The nature of these finds indicate something like a sudden shipwreck with a large consignment of eastern wares. That the port of Uratturai/Uratota in Kayts was a popular landing site for south Indian traders in the 12th century A.D. is shown by the Nayinativu inscription of Parakramabahu I.⁶⁷ In this document the king is addressing the south Indian traders regarding concessions available

⁶⁶ John Carswell : (1979), *op. cit.*, pp.129-137.

⁶⁷ K. Indrapala : "The Nayinativu Tamil Inscription of Parakramabahu I" *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. XXI, no.1 (1963), pp.63-70.

to ships bringing in horses and elephants. The evidence from Kayts and Vankalai appears to suggest that overseas merchants were avoiding the port of Mahatittha. That Chinese ceramics of the 12th and 13th centuries were regularly imported to the eastern ports can be seen from recent archaeological finds at Polonnaruva.⁶⁸ At a particular point in time during the 14th century there seems to have been a feeling of general aversion for Mahatittha. The *Daladasirita* written during this time states that it is a place where happy people do not disembark and where evil, foul and loathsome people live.⁶⁹ Obviously the constant presence of invading forces inimical to the country would have prompted these remarks.

The continued use of Mahatittha for communications with south India is seen from finds of 13th and 14th century Pandyan coins. A parallel development at Mahatittha was its emergence as a religious centre. During the heyday of Persian trade it was a centre of Nestorian Christianity and epigraphic as well as other archaeological evidence testify to its Mahayana Buddhist associations. However, the close and uninterrupted contact with South India appears to have given the Hindu temples at Mahatittha special support. That it had become a centre of Hindu pilgrimage has been noted already and this was enhanced by the Coals in the 10th century A.D. Among the places at which Nissankamalla (1187-96 A.D.) erected alms houses was Mahaputupa, the contemporary name for Mahatittha. This is an indication of the large influx of pilgrims to the city. Two Sinhalese literary text of the 13th and 15th centuries, *Saddharmalankaraya* and *Kokila Sandesaya*, extol the splendour of the area around the port city with lavish descriptions of its buildings and gardens.⁷⁰ This opulence probably related to the city's religious associations.

The changing fortunes of the port city of Mahatittha had much to do with the political forces unleashed on the country during the period of Cola occupation. The shifting of the capital away from Anuradhapura was a fatal blow to the commercial transactions of Mahatittha and this again was linked to the political situation of the time. The growth of the Bay of Bengal trade with its focus on the trade emporia of Southeast Asia also helped to divert attention to the eastern coast of Sri Lanka, a strong reason for the choice of Polonnaruva as the new capital.

⁶⁸ W. Wijayapala and M.V. Prickett : *Sri Lanka and the International Trade* - Souvenir Catalogue, National Archaeological Congress, Colombo, 1986, pp.45-53.

⁶⁹ *Daladasirita* ed. Vajira Ratnasuriya, Colombo (1949), p.35.

⁷⁰ *Kokila Sandesaya* edited by P.S. Perera (1906), vv 200-205; *Saddharmalankaraya* edited by Gnanavimala (1960), p.706.

The decline of the port of Siraf in the 11th century has also been linked to the decline of Mahatittha⁷¹ although one cannot see a direct connection here for other Persian Gulf ports took its place soon after. The possibility that the gradual silting of the port area and that a change in the course of the Malvatu Oya were coincidental with the political tensions that emerged in the post 10th century A.D. are matters which need further investigation.

The port of Mahatittha has not yielded all its secrets. Only a very small fraction of the site has been archaeologically investigated. A more definitive reconstruction of the rise, growth and decline of Mahatittha awaits the wielding of the archaeologist's spade.

⁷¹ Carswell and Prickett : *op. cit.*, pp. 59-61.