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THE HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY
OF
THE PALM LEAF MANUSCRIPT ART IN
SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The Historical Archaeology of the Palm-Leaf Manuscript Art in Sri Lanka – 2004

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This thesis is an archaeological study of the Palm-Leaf Manuscripts of historical value and the art of writing of the Palm-Leaf Manuscripts which form a part of the traditional Sri Lankan textual heritage. The general assumption was that the use of letters spread from the 3rd century B.C. According to the views of modern researchers, chronicles, religious books and the archaeological evidence we can decide that Brahmi scripts originated and spread from about the 8th century B.C. in India and 6th century B.C. in Sri Lanka. The Palm-Leaf writing continued in a large scale by the writers of literary works from 6th Century B.C. till the 20th century A. C. The Palm-Leaf was used for writing because of its availability, durability and lack of other alternatives. The monks and learned laymen were the pioneers of this art and craft.

There were traditional scientific and technological methods and skills for the making of Palm-Leaf manuscripts, darkening, polishing, drawing, making covers and preparing preservative material. Writers and craftsmen with knowledge and training engaged on that work. Besides Palm-Leaf manuscripts, horoscopes, letters, talismans and deeds etc. were written on Palm-Leaves. These books and documents were composed of Sinhala, Sanskrit, Tamil, Secret Languages and also foreign Languages.

There is also a number of medicinal material obtained from trees used often for this art of writing. Botanical and Agricultural studies have indicated that these plants contain medicinal and chemical matter, used for Palm-Leaf production, writing and preservation. There are number of artistic and aesthetic aspects of writing and drawing Palm-Leaf manuscripts. Outstanding are the carvings of ivory and wooden book covers, lacquer designs and the paintings on book covers. The pictures, figures, diagrams and illustration that are to be seen on the covers also important aspects for a study of Palm-Leaf manuscripts.

The Palm-Leaf manuscripts belonging to the 13th century A.C. preserved in Sri Lanka could be considered as the most ancient copies. Since then there are number of manuscripts belonging to different period in this history of Sri Lanka. These manuscripts have subjected to a few scientific methods, both traditional and new, for their dating. Considerable section of the Manuscripts have already damaged beyond treatment. With the development of printing, the production and use of Palm-Leaf manuscripts have declined. There are several scientific and traditional methods for rehabilitation, preservation and conservation of the Palm-Leaf Manuscripts. If we could preserve them in such a way it would be beneficial our society as well as useful for our development activities.