

ANCIENT SRI LANKA AS DESCRIBED BY COSMAS

I propose to deal with an ancient notice of Sri Lanka written in Greek during the sixth century A.D. It is found in the work known as the *Christian Topography* of Cosmas¹, and its significance lies in the fact that the author not only stressed the importance of the island in the international commerce of the time, but also explicitly points to the reason for this importance, the central position which the island occupied in relation to the eastern trade route.

Sri Lanka, of course, had been known to the Greeks and the Romans for several centuries. It was first made known to the West in the time of Alexander the Great (4th century B.C.) when his admiral Onesicritus described it.² He was soon followed by Megasthenes,³ whom Seleucus Nicator sent as ambassador to the court of Candragupta Maurya (3rd Century B.C.). In the first century A.D., during the reign of the emperor Claudius, Sri Lanka sent an embassy to Rome, and the account given by them is preserved by Pliny the Elder.⁴ In the next century the geographer Claudius Ptolemy was able to give an account, the comprehensiveness and general accuracy of which can only be the result of direct acquaintance in the past of western mariners and merchants.⁵ Yet, after his time, knowledge concerning Sri Lanka had diminished owing largely to the decline of eastern contacts under the later Roman empire. With the establishment of the Eastern Roman Empire at Byzantium, Graeco - Roman trade with the east enjoyed a revival, and

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1. ed. Wanda Wolska - Conus, *Cosmas Indicopleustes : Topographic Chretienne*, 3 vols., Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 1973. trans. - J.W. McCrindle: *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian monk*, Hakluyt Society, vol. 98, London 1897.
 2. Strabo XV, I, 15 (Jacoby, F.Gr.H., II, B i, No. 134, Fr. 12) Ed. H. Rackham Pliny, *Natural History* (N.H.) VI, 81 (Ibid., fr. 13), 1938 - 1952.
 3. N.H. VI, 81 (Ibid., III C, No. 715, fr. 26)
 4. N.H. VI, 81 ff.
 5. Ptolemy: *Geography* VII, 4.

it is the renewed acquaintance with the island under this revival that we find reflected in Cosmas.

Cosmas was surnamed Indicopleustes, i.e. "Indian Navigator." He was probably an Egyptian Greek. After a long career in overseas trade he became a monk and devoted the rest of his life to writing theological works. The one work of his that has come down to us is the *Christian Topography*, in twelve books. This was written in order to refute the pagan view that the earth was spherical, and to demonstrate that the world was shaped like the tabernacle which Moses built for the Arch of the Covenant.

The eleventh book is devoted to Indian plants and animals and to the island of Taprobane, which is what the Greeks and Romans called Sri Lanka. This book, as well as the twelfth, are not found in the best manuscript, the Vaticanus, and some have suggested that they have been put together from other works of Cosmas. Thus it is said that the description of Taprobane comes from a geographical work now lost.⁶ But we know from internal evidence that Cosmas made frequent additions and alterations to his work, and it is not impossible that the last two books were added towards the end of his life. They contain much that conforms in thought and detail to what is said in the earlier books. In fact, the account of Taprobane, which makes up a large portion of the eleventh book, is anticipated in two brief notices in the earlier books. I shall first deal with these notices, before coming to the main account in Book XI.

In book II (chs. 45-6) Taprobane is noticed in the course of a description of the silk route. The point he wishes to make is that Paradise is not on this earth, for if it were, he argues, men would not have failed to get there at whatever cost, since they are prepared to undergo

6. Wanda Wolska - Conus, *op. cit.* pp. 36 and 141.

J.W. McCrindle, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas* (*op. cit.*) Introduction, p. VIII.

D.T. Devendra, "The Date of the Anuradhapura Cross".

JRASCB n.s. V(I) 1957, pp. 85-89.

Fraz Ferdinand Schwarz, "Kosmas and Sieldiba" *Ziva Antika (Antiquite Vivant)* XXV (1-2), 1975, pp. 479-490, cf. p. 475.

all hardships in order to obtain silk from the silk country. He calls this Land Tzinista which is doubtless from Skt. *Cīnasthāna* through the intermediate Persian form Chinistan, i.e. China.

Cosmas says that this silk Country is situated in the remotest of all Indian lands, and lies to the left of those who went to the Indian Sea beyond the Persian Gulf and the island called by the Indians Sieleidiba and by the Greeks Taprobane. Again he says that the silk route by land is much shorter than the one by sea. For the distance from Taprobane to the silk country is much greater than the distance to that island from the head of the Persian Gulf.

The important point to note here is that Taprobane, and not India, is thought of as the intermediate point of the journey, which is thus made to break into two distinct parts. Cosmas is doubtless talking in terms of the actual experience of navigators to the east. In the eleventh book, the countries beyond Taprobane are referred to as "The Inner Countries". This division also appears to have been made in relation to the central position of Taprobane.

Cosmas calls the island Sieleidiba. The name is obviously derived from Sanskrit. *Siṃhaladvīpa*, Pali : *Siṃhala-dīpa*. He says that this is the Indian name for the island which the Greeks call Taprobane. He has nothing to say about other names, such as Palaesimudu and Salice, which are given to the island in the Ptolemaic tradition.⁷ However, like Ptolemy Cosmas uses "Taprobane" as the ordinary Greek name for the island. This was the name which had held its ground from the time of Onesicritus, the first Greek to write about the island. From what Cosmas says, it is evident that in his time the island was known to the Indians as *Siṃhaladvīpa*. This is borne out by the fact that, during the several preceding centuries, the term *Siṃhala* is used in literary and epigraphical sources from India, such as the *Mahābhārata*, the Alahabad Inscription of Samudragupta, and a copper plate grant of the Western Calukya King, Pulakesin I, dated Saka 411, which corresponds

7. Ptolemy VII, 4.1.

to A.D. 489 - 90.⁸

At an earlier date (3rd century B.C.), Asoka had referred to the island as *Tambapanni*,⁹ while in the *Īmāyana* it was known as Lanka.¹⁰ The Chinese monk Fa-hien, who wrote in the early fifth century A.D., also called the island "The Kingdom of the Lion", and the *Mahāvamsa* preserves the aetiological myth connecting the race with the lion according to the indigenous tradition. It is clear that, following the conversion of the island to Buddhism in the third century B.C., increased contacts with India had induced the standard usage of this name, and this fact is here echoed by Cosmas.

The other incidental notice occurs in book III (ch. 65). Discussing the spread of Christianity, Cosmas says that in Taprobane there was a church of Christians consisting of both clergy and the faithful. On this subject Taprobane is the furthest eastern limit of his knowledge, and from there Cosmas works in a northerly and westerly direction, naming the places where Christian churches are found. The Christian church in Taprobane is noticed again in the main discussion in book XI (ch. 14), a presbyter ordained from Persia and a deacon and a complete ecclesiastical ritual. But the natives and their kings were heathens, as he expressly says.

This, by the way, is the only authentic record of the existence of Christianity in ancient Sri Lanka prior to the arrival of the Portuguese. However, legendary claims are sometimes made, but they cannot be substantiated. There was, for instance, a curious tradition that the island was visited and converted by a eunuch of Candace, the Queen of

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8. *Mahābhārata* - trans, Pratap Chandra Roy, Calcutta 1889, pp. 614 ff (1883-1894).
Chandra D. Jatis: "Life in Eastern Asia during the Fourth Fifth and Sixth Centuries A.D. with Special Reference to Ceylon". *JRASC* XXXII (84), 1931, pp. 55-63.
9. Ed. E. Hultzsch, *Inscriptions of Asoka, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* vol. I, London 1925, Rock Edicts II and XIII.
10. This identification is controversial. See Keith: *JRAS* (1915) p.324. Ananda Guruge - *The Society of the Īmāyana*, 1960.

Ethiopia, and he, along with St. Thomas the Apostle, were put forward in the time of the Portuguese rule as rival claimants to the sacred footprint on Adam's Peak.¹¹ It is also sometimes alleged that there was a monastery of St. Thomas on the island in the middle of the fourth century.¹² So far, it has not been possible to establish the truth of any of these stories. There are, of course, traditions regarding the existence of Christianity in India centuries before the time of Cosmas. St. Thomas is believed to have visited Parthia and India in the time of King Gondophares, and to have suffered martyrdom near Madras after founding seven churches in Malabar.¹³

The apostle Bartholomew is also supposed to have visited India. Pantaenus, the friend of Clement and Origen, is said to have gone to South India towards the end of the second century and found that the people were acquainted with the Gospel of St. Matthew in Hebrew, which had been brought thither by St. Bartholomew.¹⁴ However, the Christian church which Cosmas found well established by his time in Sri Lanka and throughout India, was of the Persian Christians of the Nestorian sect, and he expressly says that the presbyter in Taprobane was ordained in Persia, as was also the bishop of India.¹⁵ In fact, some of the Nestorian tomb - inscriptions from India have been dated as early as A.D. 547, around which time Cosmas was writing.¹⁶

Cosmas tells us in the eleventh book that the natives and their kings were heathens. This leads us to conclude that the Christian church set up in Sri Lanka primarily met the religious needs of the Persian community settled there. Moreover, in subsequent centuries, when the missionary activities of the Nestorians spread far and wide in the east, they do not even then appear to have introduced the faith to the indigenous population of Sri Lanka. Even if there had been converts, Christianity did not

11. Ed. E.O. Winstedt, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes*, Cambridge University Press, 1909, cf. note to p. 332, i. 9.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. *Cosmas* XI, 14.

16. Winstedt., loc. cit.

settle down permanently in the island until the coming of the Portuguese. The ninth century Arab travellers, Ibn Wahab and Abou-Zeyd, do not refer to Christians in the island, though they mention Jews and Manicheans in the service of the king, who was tolerant to all religions. Marco Polo, who is particular to mention the existence of Christians in other eastern lands, calls the Sinhala people idolators. Thus, Cosmas is the only writer who testifies to the existence of a Christian church on the island and, as far as he knew, its members were foreigners.

Cosmas does not tell us where this church was, and it is probable that he was talking in terms of a body of faithful, rather than a religious building. But it has sometimes been surmised that the church mentioned was in Anuradhapura on the ground that the Persians would have settled in a centre of trade such as Anuradapura was in those days.¹⁷ If indeed they existed at all, it is however possible that the settlement as well as the church were situated near one of the important ports.

The discovery of a Persian - style cross from Anuradhapura in 1912 has also lent support to the view that Christians dwelt in the city. But it must be pointed out that the cross cannot be dated in the time of Cosmas. It is supposed to derive from the crosses found in South India. Of these, the small cross from Koyyayam and the St. Thomas Mount cross have been attributed roughly to the middle of the seventh century, the Kadamuttam cross to the end of the ninth century, and the other big cross from Kottayam with the additional Syriac text is thought to have been elaborated a century later.¹⁸ However, one need not adopt the somewhat extreme views of the late D.T. Devendra, who believed that the Anuradhapura cross was later than A.D. 1547 and placed it in the 17th century.¹⁹

We must not overlook the fact that, apart from the testimony of Cosmas, there is evidence for the existence of Persian contacts during the later Anuradhapura period,

17. A.S. Ramanathan Ayyar, "A New Persian Cross from Travencore" *Ceylon Antiquary and Literacy Register*, IX (4) April 1924, pp. 188-96, cf. p. 193, D.T. Devendra, loc. cit.

18. Ibid.

19. D.T. Devendra, loc. cit.

even though such contacts are not mentioned in the Pali chronicles. An invasion of the island by king Khosroes I, Nushirwan (A.D. 531 - 78), is recorded by Tabari and Hamsa.²⁰ Besides, Persian interest in the island can be traced back to at least a century and a half earlier. For we learn from Chinese sources that as early as A.D. 380 the Persian king asked for the hand of the daughter of the king of Sri Lanka, and sent a gold bracelet as a present.²¹ In the seventh century the Buddhist monk Vajirabodhi found at a port on the island a fleet of thirty five Persian ships which had come to trade in precious stones,²² and Hui-Chao, a pilgrim who travelled to India in A.D. 727, says that the Persians obtained all kinds of precious objects from the island.²³ Thereafter, they seem to have given way before the Arab trade supremacy.

However, even if the Persians were not responsible for the Anuradhapura cross, we must not forget that well before the tenth century A.D. there was a large immigrant population of South Indians, who had settled in and around the capital, not only as traders but also as mercenary soldiers. There may have been a few Christians among them, (although we hear nothing to the effect), and we need not rule out the possibility of a cross of the South Indian type being used by them. Thus, the cross may date to a time before the fall of Anuradhapura in the 11th century A.D. but it cannot serve as evidence for the location of the Christian "church" mentioned by Cosmas.

I shall now pass on to the main account of Taprobane, which Cosmas gives in the eleventh book, beginning at chapter 13. He says that Taprobane is a large island of the ocean, lying in the Indian Sea, located beyond the Pepper Country, (by which he means Malabar), and containing what he calls the "hyacinth stone", (Hyacinth and beryl are mentioned by Ptolemy among the products of the island.²⁴

20. James Emerson Tennent, *Ceylon*, London, Longman Green, Longman and Roberts, 1859, vol. I p. 555.

21. O.W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce*, Ithaca N.Y. Cornell University Press, 1967, p. 81.

22. B.C. Colless, "The Traders of the Pearl," *Abr-Natrrain* IX, 1969 - 70, pp. 17-38.

23. Ibid.

24. *Ptolemy* VII, 4.1.

We do not know whether by this work Cosmas meant the jacinth, the sapphire, or the amethyst: he may even have used the word in a general sense to mean "precious stones".)

Like many other foreign writers who described Sri Lanka, Cosmas also says that there are small islands surrounding it. He says that they have fresh water and coconut trees and that nearly all of them have deep water close to the shore.

He reports that according to the local people, the island has a length of 300 *gaudia* (which he explains as 900 miles), and a like extent in breadth. Sri Alexander Cunningham suggested that the word *gaudia* comes from a Sanskrit measure *gavukos* which corresponds to the distance at which the lowing of an ox could be heard.²⁵ The derivation, however, is probably that proposed by Sir J.E. Tennent, from Sinhala *gavu* (Pali *gāvuta*.)²⁶ But his explanation of the word is inaccurate. He says that it represents the distance a man could walk in an hour, and therefore expresses a somewhat indeterminate length according to the nature of the ground to be traversed. But not only is the hour of sixty minutes foreign to the traditional Sinhala system of measuring time, but also the word *gavu* is used to express a more determinate length. Four *gāvutas* made up a *yojana*. Today, the *yojana* is reckoned at sixteen miles. However, Geiger says that, although a *yojana* usually equalled twelve miles in ancient times, in practice it seems to signify a length of eight miles.²⁷ According to Cosmas, 300 *gaudia* equals 900 miles. Thus it appears that his informants calculated the *gavu* in relation to the more usual twelve - mile *yojana*. This is indicative of the good quality of Cosmas' information about Sri Lanka. Centuries later, in the Polonnaruwa period, king Nissankamalla regularised the measurement and brought into effect a *gavu* of two and a half miles, which became

25. Sir Alexander Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India, the Buddhist Period*, New Edition with Introduction and Notes by Surendranath Majumdar Sastri, Calcutta, 1924, p. 640.

26. Tennent, Op. Cit. p. 543.

27. W. Geiger - *Mahāvamsa* (trans.) P.T.S. London 1934, Appendix D. p. 297.

known as *Nissanka-gavu*.²⁸

Cosmas says that there are two kings on the island, and a little later, that the natives and their kings are heathens. But, apart from these statements, Cosmas speaks of the "king" of Sielediba as a single person in all other references to the ruling authority of the country.

He described the two kings as (Grk. ἐναντίοι ἀλλήλων) "confronting one another". This phrase has been interpreted in two ways, and a case has been made for both. The normal interpretation is that they were antagonistic to one another. This is the more satisfactory, and may be regarded as a reference to the political struggles of the late fifth century, such as Dhatusena's opposition to the South Indian invaders, or, perhaps more appropriately, Moggallana's war with his brother, Kassapa I of Sigiriya. The other and less satisfactory interpretation is that of Tennent, who links this phrase closely with the sentence that follows, which says that one king owns the hyacinth while the other has the rest of the country wherein lies the harbour and the emporium, "for it is a great mart of the people in those parts." Tennent, accordingly, concentrates on the purely geographical location of the two kings, and takes the phrase to mean "ruling at opposite ends of the island."²⁹

The meaning of the phrase (Grk. ἔχων τὸν ὑάκινθον), which translates "possessing the hyacinth" is also disputed. "The hyacinth" is generally taken to mean "the part of the island where the hyacinth is produced." But Tennent takes it as a reference to the famous precious stone of immense size, which Cosmas describes a little later. But it must be pointed out that, according to Cosmas, this gem in his time belonged to a temple and not to the king, and he is supported in this by the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang, who wrote a century later.³⁰ Moreover, if Cosmas' own usage is anything to go by, it is very probable that he meant "the hyacinth-producing region", since, in a later pas-

28. Ed. S. Paranavitana, *University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon (UCHC)*, vol. I, Pt. I, Colombo 1959 p. 15.

29. Tennent, loc. cit.

30. Beal - *Chinese Accounts of India*, p. 48.

sage³¹ he uses the phrase "the clove" (Grk. τὸ καρυσόφυλλον) unambiguously to designate the clove-producing land.

Tennent is also mistaken in identifying the port and emporium of Cosmas with Galle. For there is not enough evidence to prove that in Cosmas' time it had risen to the position of prominence which Cosmas attributes to the port of Taprobane. The earliest notice of Galle in Sinhala literature come from the *Sandesa* or "message" poems of the 14th and 15th centuries. I prefer to follow the majority of writers and identify the port with Mahatittha near Mannar. It is not far from the old capital, Anuradhapura, and was directly connected with it by the ancient road system. The sum total of literary and archaeological evidence goes to show that Mahatittha served as the regular port for foreign trade and travel from as early as the fifth century B.C. to the 12th century A.D. and beyond.³²

According to Cosmas, there are many temples on the island and in one of them, which stands on an eminence, there is a hyacinth as large as a pine-cone and fiery red, brilliant beyond description especially when the sun's rays are playing on it, a matchless sight.³³ This may be an early notice of the famous great ruby which figures so prominently in many early accounts of the island. Hiuen-Tsang, for instance, relates that at Anuradhapura, on a spire surmounting one of its temples, there was elevated a ruby whose transcendent lustre illuminated the whole heavens; it was visible night and day for a long distance, and from far off it appeared like a bright star. Marco Polo, again, relates, that the king of Sri Lanka was reputed to have possessed the grandest ruby that was ever seen - one that was flawless and brilliant beyond description. He says that it was as long as one's hand and as wide as a man's arm, spotless, shining like fire and not to be bought for money. He further says that the great Kublai Khan wished to purchase it at a very high price. But the king of Sri Lanka refused to part with it for all the wealth in the world as it was handed down to him as an heirloom.³⁴ The

31. XI, 16.

32. B.J. Perera - "The foreign trade and commerce of Ceylon" *Ceylon Historical Journal* I, 1951-2 pp. 109-113.

33. *Cosmas* XI, 16.

34. Yule and Cordier: *Travels of Marco Polo* III, 14.

gem is also mentioned by Jordan de Severac (A.D. 1323).³⁵ We do not know the ultimate fate of this gem, if indeed the same one is meant by all the writers, (the later notices speak of it as being in the king's private possession) but we do hear of a carbuncle of unusual lustre, "the Red Palace Illuminator", being purchased for the emperor of China early in the 14th century. Cosmas says that the precious stone was placed on a temple. Hiuen - Tsang says it was at Anuradhapura. Tennent, however, thinks it was at Mihintale.³⁶

Cosmas now goes on to demonstrate the important place Sri Lanka held in international commerce. Due to its central position, he says, the island is much frequented by ships from all parts of India and from Persia and Ethiopia and likewise sends out many ships of its own. He also tells us that from China and other places east of Cape Comorian, (the "inner countries"), the island received silk, aloes, clove-wood, sandal-wood and other products, and these were again passed on to the western marts such as Male, Kalliana, and Sindhu, as well as to Persia, the Homerite Country, and Adoulis. The island receives imports from all these and passes them to the ports in the east, and at the same time exports its own produce in both directions.

From this account it is evident that the island took an active part in international trade at this time. Not only did foreign ships and products pass through Taprobane, but the island sent out its own products as well as ships of its own. Cosmas does not tell us what the products were, apart from the precious stone which he calls the hyacinth. Other Greek writers mention precious stones and metals, pearls, ivory, tortoise-shell, and muslins.³⁷ Ptolemy adds rice, ginger and honey.³⁸ The Chinese work *Tai-Ping-Yu-Lan* mentions cinnabar, mercury, "sun-li", turmeric, storax, costus and such perfumes.³⁹ All the above lists appear to include items that formed part of the transit

35. Tennent loc. cit.

36. E.O. Winstedt, Op.cit., Cf. Note to pp. 332, i.9.
Tennent, Op.cit. pp. 543-4.

37. *Periplus Maris Erythraei* 61.
Strabo, Op.cit. II, 1, 14.

38. *Ptolemy*, loc.cit.

39. O.W. Wolters, Op.cit., p. 80.

trade. It is difficult to determine what was generally produced for export other than ginger, turmeric, ivory, pearls and precious stones, for which items we have the authority of the Pali chronicles as well.⁴⁰

As for the ships of the island, it has sometimes been thought that these ships must have been manned by Malabars, Arabs, Persians and other foreigners, as the Sinhalese themselves had no shipping worth speaking of, and were notoriously averse to trade and seafaring.⁴¹ But we must remember that ships were certainly used in warfare and, shortly before the time of Cosmas, King Moggallana I had turned his attention to strengthening the fleet. It is true that indigenous literature has very few references to sea-faring by the local people, but then this literature is basically religious in character and, in general, does not reflect directly the economic life of the country. Moreover, most of this literature dates from later times when the prosperity which the island enjoyed under the Anuradhapura kings had waned as a result of internal turmoils and constant foreign invasions. The *Saddharmālaṅkāraya*⁴² has several references to Sinhala traders who went abroad on business purposes, and classical Sinhala writers sometimes display considerable knowledge of navigation.⁴³ We hear of traders from the island putting in at foreign ports and of others residing abroad. The *Mahāvamsa* records voyages to India.⁴⁴ The Chinese writer Kien Chang found people from Sri Lanka at Canton,⁴⁵ and the inscriptions of Airlanga, a Javanese king of the 11th century, mention Sinhala merchants among the foreigners who put in at his ports.⁴⁶ For Cosmas's own time, the *Cūlavamsa*⁴⁷ mentions a merchant who had returned from a trip to Kasi (early 6th century), and we hear of two brothers Buddhmitra, and Buddharakṣita, residing at Bharukaccha, which was an important emporium on the west coast of India.⁴⁸

40. B.J. Perera, Op. cit. vol. II pp. 14-22.

41. Tennent, Op.cit. vol. I, p. 546.

42. Ed. Gnanavimala, Colombo 1948.

43. B.J. Perera, Op.cit. vol. I, p. 109.

44. *Mahāvamsa* VIII, 7 XVIII, 8 etc.

45. B.J. Perera, vol. I, No. 4, p. 314.

46. Ibid., p. 315.

47. Ed. W. Geiger, *Cūlavamsa*, P.T.S. London 1925 XLI, 38.

48. B.J. Perera, Op.cit. pp. 313 ff.

The cumulative evidence suggests that here too Cosmas, the one time commercial venturer, had a more realistic appreciation of the maritime activities of the island in his time than modern sceptics would allow. The exports of the island were royal monopolies, so that individuals could not have taken an interest in trade on their own initiative. But the kings, especially when they were strong enough to keep their kingdom united, prosperous and free from foreign invasions, probably paid attention to foreign trade on an organized basis. They may have used the services of Tamil and Arab sea-farers but, on the whole, our evidence suggests that there was a considerable amount of trade and sea-faring in the hands of the people of Sri Lanka and Cosmas, whose accuracy in other matters is well demonstrated, was probably right when he said that the island dispatched ships of her own, adding her own products to the transit goods that were carried to the east and the west.⁴⁹

Cosmas now gives a description of the Indian coast, beginning at the Indus and working southwards to Taprobane and then northeast to China. Compared with his copious account of Taprobane his information on India is very scanty. This is especially true of the region east of Taprobane, where he names only four places (Marallo, Kaber, Clovecountry, and then China). In the first century A.D. the author of the work known as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* could describe this region in greater detail,⁵⁰ and in the second century A.D. the geographer Ptolemy devoted two whole chapters⁵¹ to eastern Asia, displaying a comprehensive knowledge of the East Indian Coast. Cosmas knows nothing of this coast and of its famous river, the Ganges. Nor does he mention the Malay Peninsula, which was known to earlier Greek writers as the Golden Khersones. The suggestion has been made that, being a Nestorian Christian interested more in the religious than the commercial aspect of geography, Cosmas has given us a lop-sided picture.⁵² However, Cosmas' interest in commercial matters, of which he had first-hand experience, is evident in all his writings and especially in the eleventh book, in which

49. *Cosmas* XI, 15-16.

50. *Periplus* 62 ff.

51. VII. 2 and 3.

52. B.C. Colless, loc.cit.

religious matters are very much off-stage. It is more likely that Cosmas' silence on the Far East reflects the lack of acquaintance on the part of western navigators, whom he knew, with the regions beyond Taprobane. For the island now became the terminus of western navigation in the Indian Ocean. Here it was possible to exchange their wares with the cargoes brought from further east. O.W. Wolters argues that the Persian shipping went no further than Sri Lanka in the fifth and sixth centuries and that in that period the Malay shippers monopolised the trade in western luxury goods with China.⁵³ In the seventh and eight centuries one hears of Persians sailing beyond Sri Lanka, but there is no evidence to show that this took place in the time of Cosmas. If Persian ships had been sailing beyond Sri Lanka, the island would not have been so famous an entrepot at that time. As for their rivals, the Axumites, their influence in Indian waters had declined by the sixth century. Thus the middlemen of the Red Sea area did not penetrate beyond Sri Lanka. Far less likely is it that Byzantine Greeks had any direct acquaintance with the Far East at this time, and this lack of direct acquaintance is probably reflected in Cosmas' silence concerning those regions.

Perhaps there may be another reason. The real purpose of this description is not to enlighten us on the geography of India or importance of Taprobane. The point that Cosmas wishes to drive home to his readers is that Taprobane is the "mediatrix" in the great eastern trade route by sea. Up to now the Greeks and the Romans had thought of Taprobane as the distant island at the eastern end of the inhabited world; (Ptolemy was the only notable exception). Even Pliny, who had better information than his predecessors, spoke of Taprobane as being "banished by Nature to the confines of the world".⁵⁴ But Cosmas knew from the experience of his own time that the situation was very different. "This Sieldiba, then," he repeats, "placed, as one may say, in the centre with regard to India, and possessing the hyacinth - producing region, receives imports from all the seats of commerce and in turn exports to them, and is thus itself a great seat of commerce."⁵⁵ Consistent with this view is the

53. O.W. Wolters op.cit. p. 74.

54. N.H., VI, 89.

55. *Cosmas* XI, 16.

fact that, like Ptolemy and the author of the *Periplus*, Cosmas excludes all fanciful descriptions of fabulous monsters and utopian living conditions which affect most classical accounts of Taprobane, and are not altogether absent even from Pliny.

Cosmas now narrates, with vividness and enthusiasm, the adventures of his friend Sopatros who, having gone to the island on business, and having been granted audience with the king at the same time as the Persian ambassador, convinced the king of the superiority of the Romans (i.e. the Byzantine empire) over the Persians by affecting a comparison of the coins of the two nations. This is how he reports the incident:

"Anyway, one of the business people from here, named Sopatros, who has been dead for the last 35 years, to my knowledge, once reached the island of Taprobane on a business venture, when a ship from Persia had just cast anchor. So the people from Adoulis, and Sopatros with them, disembarked, as did the people from Persia, with whom there was a Persian envoy also. Then, as was the custom, the local magistrates and the tax collectors welcomed them and took them off to the king. The king welcomed them, received their salutations, and told them to sit down, and then he asked, 'How are your countries, and how are things getting on there?' 'Nicely,' they replied. Then, in the general conversation the king put the question, 'Which of your kings is the greater and the more powerful?'

"The Persian got his word in first and said, 'Our king is the more powerful, and greater and richer, and he is the king of kings. And whatever he wills, he is able to put into effect.' Sopatros kept quiet, and then the king said, 'What about you, Roman? Haven't you anything to say?' And Sopatros replied, 'What can I say after these statements of his? If you want to know the truth, you have got both kings here. Have a look at each of them, and you can see which is the more glorious and powerful.' On hearing this, he was astonished, and said, 'How have I got both the kings here?' He replied, 'You have the coins of them both, the *nomisma* of the one, and the *drachma* (i.e. the *miliarision*) of the other. Look at the image on each of them and you will see the truth.'

"The king praised and commended the idea and ordered both coins to be produced. Well, the *nomisma* was of gold, brilliant and of fine shape, for the coins which are exported there are specially selected, whereas the *miliarsion*, to put it in a nutshell, was of silver, and that is enough to rule out any comparison with the gold coin. The king turned both coins over and over and inspected them, and, full of praise for the *nomisma*, he said, 'Truly, the Romans are glorious, powerful and wise.' So he ordered Sopatros to be highly honoured, and he mounted him on an elephant, and to the beating of drums paraded him round the town in great honour. That is the story that Sopatros and his companions, who went to the island from Adoulis, told me. At this, so they said, the Persian went away in shame and disgrace."⁵⁶

The businessman's expertise is clearly revealed here. The factual details about the coinage (best quality gold, the implication that its export was conducted in some quality) and the commercial rivalries in these eastern markets are cases in point.

Tennent thought that the king in question was Kumardasa (515-542)⁵⁷ but his arguments are not convincing. Cosmas, writing before A.D. 547, says that Sopatros had been dead the last 35 years, as far as he knew. We need not assume that Sopatros made this voyage in the last year of his life. The vivid narrative has all the marks of an elderly man reminiscing on the achievements of his youth. The incident may have taken place sometime during the second half of the fifth century A.D., The journey probably took place after 460 A.D. the year in which king Dhatusena liberated the island from the Pandyan invaders. Prof. Schwarz suggests the reign of King Moggallana I (A.D. 495 - 512)⁵⁸ and this is very plausible in view of the importance assigned by Cosmas to the maritime affairs of the island, since Moggallana is known to have directed his attention in this direction.

Tennent also doubts the historicity of the incident. "The story, however," he says, "would appear to be tradi-

56. Ibid. XI, 17 19.

57. Tennent. op.cit. I p. 542, f.n. 2.

58. Schwarz, op.cit. p. 484.

tional, as Pliny relates a similar anecdote of the ambassadors from Ceylon in the reign of Claudius and of the profound respect exciting their minds by the sight of the Roman denarii." The event Tennent is thinking of is the dispatch of four envoys from Taprobane to Rome as a result of the accidental arrival in the island of the freedman of Annius Plocamus. But there is no record in Pliny that the envoys were impressed by the Roman denarii. It was the king of Taprobane who was convinced of Roman justice by the integrity of their coins. There was no question of gold coins here. The silver denarii were taken from the ship, and there is no suggestion that the freedman deliberately impressed the king by showing the coins in the manner that Sopatros did. The account of Cosmas, however, does resemble anecdotes told to illustrate the superiority of Greek over barbarian (such as we find in Herodotus), as well as oriental judgement-stories told of wise men. But the event which Cosmas describes could well have occurred in real life and, in fact, some of the details can be recognized as historical. For instance, the visitors were met by the local officials and the customs-house officers. Now, an inscription from Mahatittha refers to the king's officers in charge of the collection of taxes at this port,⁵⁹ and this fact is corroborated by the "Story of Nandiya" in the *Saddharmālaṅkāraya*.⁶⁰

The Persian is referred to as a *presbutes*. McCrindle translates this as "an old man."⁶¹ The correct interpretation, however, is that of Montfaucon, namely, that he was an ambassador.⁶² It cannot be the case that all foreigners were conducted to the presence of the king, but envoys obviously would be. Sopatros and his party had gone thither on business and were lucky enough to have arrived at the right moment to be received on the same terms.

This turned out for the worse, as far as the Persians were concerned, and makes the point of the sailor's yarn. Behind the story of the coins there is perhaps a fact, namely, that the king considered the relative merits of the two rival nations with regards to trade, and decided in favour

59. *UHC*, I, p. 363.

60. *Saddharmālaṅkāraya* - op.cit. p. 675.

61. McCrindle, op.cit. BK XI.

62. *Cosmas*, Ed. Montfaucon in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*.

of the Romans. The state honours accorded to Sopatros amounted to a sign of this recognition.

There is one final notice of Sieldiba and its king, which is important for the information it contains regarding the traffic in elephants and horses.⁶³ We are told that the king of Sieldiba buys both the elephants and the horses that he has. The elephants he pays for by cubit measure. For, the height is measured from the ground and the price is reckoned as so many coins for each cubit. Horses he buys from Persia, exempting the importers of them from paying custom dues. According to Cosmas, the practice of the king of Sri Lanka with regard to elephants is different from that of the Indian kings, who catch their elephants wild and tame them, training them for war.

The statement of Cosmas is generally interpreted to mean that elephants and horses were both imported to the island, and surprise has sometimes been expressed that he should refer to the importing of elephants when the island itself was known as the home of these animals and even exported them. The passage, however, does not expressly say that elephants were imported from abroad, and all that Cosmas meant was probably that the king bought them locally from those who caught and tamed them for him. The sale of elephants was a royal monopoly, but their capture may have been allowed to individuals on occasion, although we cannot be certain about this. The Maharatmale inscription of king Vasabha, which belongs to the second century A.D., refers to an elephant-tax, which was probably a general tax on the possession of elephants for sale.⁶⁴

The practice of valuing elephants by height appears to have been in vogue among the kings of India and China in mediaeval times, as we learn from the Arab geographer Edrisi⁶⁵ and the testimony of Nikitin and Francesco Rodriguez indicates that it survived in Sri Lanka as late as the 15th and 16th centuries.⁶⁶

63. *Cosmas* XI, 23.

64. B.J. Perera, op.cit. Vol. II (1 & 2) p. 19.

65. *Edrisi* I. 07.

66. B.J. Perera op.cit. Passim & Henry Yule, *Cathay & the Way Thither*, London, Hakluyt Society, 1915, Vol. I Preliminary Essay, p. 339.

The importing of horses, on the other hand, is well documented. They were among the earliest imports to the island, and indigenous literature contains many references to them. They are, however, always referred to as coming from South India. It is possible that they came ultimately from the Indus Valley, since horses are often called Saindava, i.e. coming from Sindhu.⁶⁷ The South Indian traders perhaps acted as dealers in Sri Lanka for horses which came from further west. These South Indian horse dealers seem to have been of considerable political consequence. Sena and Guttika, who usurped the throne of Anuradhapura in the second century B.C., are described as sons of a "horse-shipman", *āssanāvika*.⁶⁸ The Cola invasion, which terminated the Anuradhapura rule, is said to have been brought about by a certain horse-dealer from South India, who informed the Cola king regarding the chaotic condition then prevailing in Sri Lanka.⁶⁹ Cosmas says that the dealers were exempt from duty, but he is the only writer who says that the horses came from Persia.

Thus, the description which Cosmas gives of Taprobane corresponds in many details with what we know of contemporary conditions in Sri Lanka. So remarkable is the correspondence that some have thought that he actually visited the island. But the reality seems to be that he was dependent on Sopatros and others, who had personal experience of the land. Copious as his information is, one cannot help noticing that he does not mention a single city on the island by name. Regarding his information in the 11th book, he writes: "All these matters I have described and explained partly from personal observation and partly from accurate inquiries which I made then in the neighbourhood of different places."⁷⁰ This remark is meant to apply to Africa as well as India, and Cosmas himself tells us which of these parts he visited personally. He also tells us which plants and animals he has seen, and which he has not. He is a writer of remarkable honesty, and if he does not tell us that he has been to India or Taprobane, then the chances are that he did not visit these regions, even though ancient tradition calls him "the Indian Navigator."

67. cf. *Mahāvamsa*, XXIII, 71 ff.

68. *Ibid.* XXI, 10.

69. *Cūlavamsa* LV, v. 13.

70. *Cosmas* XI, 21.

One fact that emerges from Cosmas' account is that Taprobane had by his time taken over from the West India markets the role of transmitting merchandise between east and west. Contrary to the popular belief that the island was the great emporium of the east from time immemorial, all our information, including numismatic evidence, indicates that this commercial prominence was a rather recent phenomenon in the time of Cosmas. This prominence was the result of the increasing importance acquired by the sea route to India during the latter part of the fourth century A.D., owing to disturbances on the land route and the loss of Roman influence in the regions of the Caspian and the Persian Gulf. Of course, the overland route was still important for the Persians, who imported silk from China. Cosmas himself tells us that much silk was brought through this route, which he reckoned to be the quicker by far.⁷¹ But the sea route gained in importance with the increasing prosperity of Southern China, which now began to demand western goods more and more. Another fact which became increasingly relevant from the second half of the fifth century was the expansion of the Hephthalites or White Huns. Having become powerful in Western Turkestan they established themselves in the commercial centres of Sogdiana and Bactria. In 484 they defeated and killed the Sassanid ruler, Firoz, and by the end of the century they were in occupation of Gandhara, possessing thereby the gateway to India. Cosmas tells us that they oppressed the people, and Theophanes says that they deprived the Persians of the trading centres used by the Seres (i.e. Southern Chinese).⁷² Sri Henry Yule thinks that these ports were in Sind. Some of the favoured West India ports appear to have become difficult of access at this time. Cosmas makes no mention of Barygaza (Bharukaccha) and Muiiri (Muciri), which were described by earlier Greek writers as ports of tremendous commercial activity.⁷⁴ Significantly, Barygaza was at this time in the hands of the Gurjaras, a tribe associated with the Huns.⁷⁵ These circumstances might help

71. Ibid II, 45.

72. Muller, *Fragments of Greek Historians*, IV, p. 27.

73. Yule, loc.cit.

74. *Periplus & Ptolemy*

75. Yule op.cit, p. 204

V.A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, Oxford 1958, p. 177.

to explain why the centre of eastern trade shifted to Sri Lanka during the fifth century and why the Persians maintained so much interest in the island. But perhaps the main reason was that the Pandya rulers of South India, who lost their outlets to the west, diverted the attention of their customers to Sri Lanka, which they invaded and ruled in the first half of the fifth century.

We must not forget that, contemporary with this commercial significance, and perhaps as a corollary to it, Sri Lanka acquired cultural importance on an international level. Early in the fifth century learned Buddhist monks from India and China, such as Buddhaghosa and Fa-hien, visited the island and made the Buddhist learning, preserved here, available to the world at large by reproducing it in Pali and Chinese. This was also a period of active diplomatic and cultural exchanges between Sri Lanka and China. Cosmas was not aware of this aspect of the situation, but there is no doubt that what he describes is an early instance of how Sri Lanka's history was shaped under the influence of events on the international scene, and this, as he himself explicitly asserts, was due to its central position in relation to the eastern trade route.

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