

# DILIGENTIOR NOTITIA

## THE OLD AND THE NEW IN PLINY'S DESCRIPTION OF SRI LANKA

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Pliny's account of Taprobane is the most comprehensive description of Sri Lanka by a western writer of the first century A.D. that has come down to us<sup>1</sup>. In fact it is the fullest western account we have from the first century A.D. As well as relying on earlier writers, Pliny also claims to have drawn on the more recent narratives of the delegates from the island who arrived during the reign of Claudius<sup>2</sup>.

An examination of the arrangement of his material reveals that Pliny, ever alert to new developments in the affairs of the world<sup>3</sup>, wished to update earlier knowledge of the island with this lately acquired information<sup>4</sup>. His earlier sources, among whom he names Onesicritus, Megasthenes and Eratosthenes, also included reports with a predominantly nautical interest which reveal more or less direct familiarity with the conditions of the locality, and provide an excellent indication of the state of knowledge about the island in the Hellenistic period. But the narratives of the delegates with which Pliny goes on to update his description present many problems. For, in the majority of instances, Pliny's information does not seem to square with what we know of ancient Sri Lanka.

Understandably, this has led some scholars to wonder whether in fact the description does belong to Sri Lanka, or even to cast doubt on the authenticity of the report itself as well as of the embassy from which it claims to derive. In the words of a recent writer, "the information which Pliny derived directly or indirectly from these envoys has long aroused suspicion. Neither the size of Ceylon nor the astronomical observations quoted in the N.H. are accurate. Such inaccuracies pose a far more severe

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<sup>1</sup> Pliny: *Natural History* vi. 81-91; for text cf. J.Andre and J.Filliozat: *Pline l'Ancien: Histoire Naturelle. livre vi. 2e partie* Paris (1980)

<sup>2</sup> D.P.M.Weerakkody: "Sri Lanka's Diplomatic Mission to Rome, First Century A.D." *Palma II: Classical Association of Ceylon Golden Jubilee Commemoration Volume* (1935 - 1985) pp. 67-80.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. Pliny vi. 100-106.

<sup>4</sup> Cp.Pliny vi. 82-83 with 85 ff.

credibility problem than any chronological difficulties involved in this sailor's yarn"<sup>5</sup>.

This is all the more surprising since the earlier part of the account had reflected a progressive growth in western knowledge of the island, not only in its relative freedom from the fabulous but also in its being corroborated by independent sources both local and foreign. The absurdities in the latter part ( i.e. what is derived from the delegates) has sometimes been attributed to misinterpretation or misunderstanding by the Romans of the words of the ambassadors, whose language was not known to them.<sup>6</sup> A more likely explanation, I think, is that the distortions arise from the fact that, like the political and social information, the physical details of the narratives were also tailored to agree with the accounts of earlier Greek writers on the East whose works had by this time acquired the status of standard "classics" on the subject; any divergence from these authors was noted, corrected or rejected.

After tracing the growth of knowledge about the island (from the long-held notion of its being the land of the Antichthones down through Onesicritus and Megasthenes to Eratosthenes<sup>7</sup>) Pliny goes on to say that the island begins at the eastern sea and extends along the side of India from east to west<sup>8</sup>. Later Pliny speaks of the island as being "banished by nature to the confines of the world"<sup>9</sup>; and the same notion is implied when he says that it begins at the Eastern Sea. It was only five centuries later that Cosmas emphasized the central position of Sri Lanka with reference to the trade of

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<sup>5</sup> M.G.Raschke: "New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East" *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Romischen Welt*. vol. II: *Principat* IX.2 (1978) p. 692. In note 1319 Raschke prudently observes: "The consistent desire by scholars working on oriental commerce to credit every piece of information Pliny retails has been the most continuous source of error in this field of endeavour." I also wish to observe that in note 1315 Raschke has misrepresented information from E.Pieris ("Greek and Roman contacts with Ceylon" *The Ceylon Historical Journal* vol. X (1960-61) p.18). The commentary on the *Mahavamsa* does not say that King Bhatikabhaya "sent a present of a coral net to Romanukha across the sea." What it says is that he sent (someone) to the Romanukha country and had fine red coral brought (to him) with which he caused a net to be made and cast over the shrine. Cf. *Vamsathapakasini* vol. II. p. 60 [ed. Malalasekera, London P.T.S. (1935) ].

<sup>6</sup> E.Pieris : *op.cit.* p.17.

<sup>7</sup> Pliny vi. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Pliny vi. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Pliny vi. 89.

the east<sup>10</sup>. The east-west alignment of the island, which appears to have originated with Eratosthenes<sup>11</sup>, was, however, soon superseded by Ptolemy's more accurate orientation.

According to Pliny, the island was at one time believed to be twenty days' sailing distance from the Prasian nation (i.e. *Pracya* or eastern people, a term used by the Greeks to denote the people of the Magadha kingdom, whose capital was Pataliputra, modern Patna), the vessels then in use being, as he puts it, constructed with reeds and ill-equipped with Nile rigging. But the distance was later reduced to seven days "according to the course of our (i.e. Roman) ships."

Why Pliny should refer to these crafts as "reed boats" (*papyraceis navibus*) is not easy to explain. Although some have believed that the ancient Egyptians employed them for sea voyages, reed boats are, and generally have been, confined to rivers and lakes, and are not known to have been used for voyages between Sri Lanka and the Ganges<sup>12</sup>. The associated idea of Nile rigging may have been prompted by the reference to reed boats. Possibly, Pliny may have intended to describe these ships, using an analogy familiar to his Roman readers: i.e. their rigging was like that of Nile boats. In that case, it is just possible that Pliny was referring specifically to the use of sails.

The ancient Sinhala coasters, according to Hornell, carried a square sail laced to a bamboo yard on each of their two pole masts<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, the boats of the Nile, as well as those of ancient Greece, carried square sails<sup>14</sup>. However, by the middle of the first century A.D. a top-sail had come into use in Graeco-Roman ships, which helped to improve their speed. According to Cecil Torr, a full rigged ship of this period must have had a main mast with a yard that carried a square sail below and a triangular sail above the foremast or bowsprit with the yard and square sail only and also a mizzen with perhaps a similar yard and sail<sup>15</sup>. Torr believes that the rigging had been developed to this point by about A.D. 50 at the latest. Pliny's statement probably refers to a recalculation of sailing distances (originally recorded in terms of the speed of earlier

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<sup>10</sup> Cosmas xi. 17 [Wolska-Conus].

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Strabo xv. 1. 14.

<sup>12</sup> J.Hornell: *Water Transport*, Cambridge (1946) pp. 46 ff.

<sup>13</sup> J.Hornell : "the Fishing and Coastal Craft of Ceylon" *Mariners' Mirror* vol. XXIX (1943) pp. 40-53.

<sup>14</sup> C.Torr: *Ancient Ships*, Cambridge University Press (1895)p.78

<sup>15</sup> Torr. *op.cit.* pp. 90-91.

craft) according to the greater speed that these new ships were able to attain; and it appears that three day's sailing in the older ships was regarded as being equivalent to one day's sailing in the new ships.

Much confusion has arisen in recent times from comparison of this text with a similar passage in Strabo<sup>16</sup>. According to Strabo, Eratosthenes estimated the sailing time between India and Taprobane at seven days, while according to Onesicritus it was twenty days. The latter writer, Strabo adds, also referred to the poor construction of the ships. It is sometimes thought that both Strabo and Pliny are referring to the same matter. Jacoby, for instance, is of the opinion that Eratosthenes was responsible for the reduction of the distance from twenty days to seven, the implication being that the twenty days in Pliny's text also came from Onesicritus<sup>17</sup>.

This attribution is not justified, nor even the comparison. Strabo and Pliny are not referring either to the same coast or to the same point of departure. Eratosthenes gives the distance of seven days from the southern-most point of India "next to the land of the *Ko-niakoi*", while Onesicritus' starting point for the twenty days journey must be sought somewhere in north-western India, probably at the mouth of the Indus. Pliny, on the other hand, is thinking of the distance from the Magadha kingdom, and the similarity of the figures is most probably a coincidence. Moreover, the recalculation is according to Roman ships, for which Eratosthenes could not, in any case, have been responsible.

One other possibility is that the distance of 20 days from the Prasii may have come from Megasthenes. Now, Megasthenes was very much influenced by the writings of the Alexander Historians including Onesicritus, and it may even be that he took the 20 days from that author applying it to a different location. On the other hand, it may equally be an independent record of actual facts. In placing this besides Eratosthenes' figure of seven days, Pliny may have taken the latter as a correction of the former, ignoring the fact that Eratosthenes' seven days were reckoned from the southern extremity of India<sup>18</sup>.

The port of the Magadha kingdom was Tamralipti (Pali: Tamalitti, Greek: Tamalites, modern Tamruk) at the mouth of the Ganges. This was apparently the regular port for communication with Sri Lanka throughout ancient history. Pali chronicles of Sri Lanka refer to several voyages to and from Tamralipti, mainly in connection with the

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<sup>16</sup> Strabo xv. 1. 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> F.Jacoby: *F.Gr.H.* II, vol. 1 no. 134, Onesicritus fr. 12 note.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A.Dihle: in *A.N.R.W.* II. 9.2 (1978) p. 568.



introduction and establishment of Buddhism<sup>19</sup>, and even as late as the fourth century A.D. it was on a merchant vessel from Tamralipti that the Tooth Relic of the Buddha was conveyed to the island<sup>20</sup>. The times recorded for journeys between north-eastern India and Sri Lanka in antiquity range from one day (in the case of Panduvasudeva's bride) to at least twelve, while the merchant ship which brought Fa-hsien from Tamluk to Sri Lanka in early fifth century A.D. made the voyage in fourteen days<sup>21</sup>. Devanampiya Tissa's envoys to emperor Asoka are actually said to have taken seven days for their voyage from Jambukola in northern Sri Lanka to Tamralipti; but this was in the third century B.C. long before the standardization of speed according to Roman ships to which Pliny has referred. All this goes to show that there was no fixed length for the journey in question according to local sources, and that the number of days probably varied according to sailing conditions prevalent at different times of the year. At best, Pliny's figures must therefore represent an average calculated roughly from divergent reports that may have been available to the Romans.

Pliny also adds that the sea in-between is shallow, not more than six fathoms deep, but in certain channels so deep that anchors do not reach the bottom. On this account ships have prows on either end so that they may not need to turn round in the narrows of the sea. These ships are described as having a capacity of 3,000 amphorae, i.e. about 75 tons<sup>22</sup>. The capacity of Graeco-Roman ships was usually indicated in terms of amphorae or wine-jars. In Cicero's time, a ship with a cargo of 2,000 amphorae was considered to be a big one<sup>23</sup>. The traditional Sinhala crafts known as *yatra-dhoni* are said to have had a capacity upwards of fifty tons<sup>24</sup>. Either Pliny had heard of these ships plying between Sri Lanka and the Ganges, and his "in-between" must refer to this journey, or else, (and this appears highly probable), he has conflated with this description another which should really apply to the western coast of India and Sri Lanka. Double-prowed boats are still a feature of the Kerala region.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Mahavamsa* xi. 23, 38; xix. 6 [tr. W.Geiger].

<sup>20</sup> *ibid* xxxvii 92.

<sup>21</sup> Fa-hsien: *Travels* ch..38 [tr. Legge].

<sup>22</sup> Torr *op. cit.* p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Cicero *Ad Fam.* xii. 15. 2; cf. also *Digest* xiv. 10. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Hornell: "The Fishing and Coastal Craft of Ceylon"  
pp.43-46

On the other hand, the journey which is described so vividly by the delegates<sup>25</sup> refers to the nearest point in southern India, which is called Coliacum, which one may perhaps compare with the *Koniakoi* of Eratosthenes, the *Colis* of Mela and Cape *Koru* of Ptolemy<sup>26</sup>. This journey is said to have taken four days, the Island of the Sun being midway. This island had generally been identified with Ramesvaram<sup>27</sup>. The sea in this area is said to be very green and full of thickets, the crests of which used to be broken by the rudders of ships. These remarks are generally taken to refer to coral reefs or mangroves. Theophrastus had already referred to mangroves in the neighbourhood of India<sup>28</sup>, but Pliny's information may have come from the more recent source that he claims to be quoting. Ptolemy mentions a "Leek-green Bay" (*Prasodes Kolpos*) on the southwest coast of Sri Lanka, in terms very reminiscent of Pliny's *mare id colore perviridi*.

To come back to the earlier description; we are told that stars are not observed in navigation, the Great Bear in fact being invisible, and that sailors find land by means of birds which they take along with them and release in mid-water. The use of shore-sighting birds (an idea as old as Noah's ark<sup>29</sup>, if not older) is also described in Buddhist canonical texts, but only as a thing of the past:

"Long ago, ocean-going merchants were wont to plunge forth upon the sea on board a ship taking with them a shore-sighting bird. When the ship was out of sight of land they would set the shore-sighting bird free. If on the horizon it caught sight of land, thither it would go. But if not, it would come back to the ship again."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Pliny vi. 87-88.

<sup>26</sup> Eratosthenes in Strabo xv. 1. 11 and 14; Mela iii. 67-68; Ptol. vii. 1, 11 and vii.4. 1.

<sup>27</sup> A fabulous journey of a certain lambulus to an island (or islands) of the Sun, located somewhere in the Indian Ocean, is reported by Diodorus Siculus (ii. 55-60). It is often thought that the narrative has been suggested by familiarity with Sri Lanka. However, I wish to emphasize the fictitious, utopian, and even satirical nature of this account.

<sup>28</sup> Theophrastus: *History of Plants* iv. 7. 3-6; cf. iv. 6, 2, 7, and Pliny xiii. 135.

<sup>29</sup> *Gen.* viii. 7-12.

<sup>30</sup> *Digha Nikaya, Kevadda Sutta* i. 222 [tr. Rhys Davids].

There is no suggestion in the Buddhist text that the practice was necessitated by the invisibility of stars. The motif of finding one's way with the help of stars was by no means unknown to Buddhist writers, and the *Jatakas* even mention land-pilots who guided caravans through the desert at night with the help of stars<sup>31</sup>. Pliny, however, has made this tendentious connection by explaining the use of shore-sighting birds as being due to the invisibility of certain stars in this region, an idea handed down by earlier Greek writers who wrote about the East.

Onesicritus and Nearchus had already reported that the Great Bear could not be seen beyond Carmania, and Greek astronomers had proposed various explanations as to why this was so. Eratosthenes had rejected these details quoting Deimachus in support and observing that the Little Bear was always visible along the Cinnamon coast. He had however assumed that Meroe was on the same latitude as the southernmost part of India. A few decades before Pliny wrote, Strabo had asserted that the Cinnamon People (i.e. the people of Somalia) were the first to see the Great Bear for the whole year. Pliny himself cites Baeton, a companion of Alexander the Great on his eastern expedition, to the effect that at Mt. Maleus the Great Bear is seen only for a fortnight each year. Philostratus, who wrote later than Pliny, also says that in the Indian Ocean one does not see the Great Bear and the North Star<sup>32</sup>.

This notion, and others associated with it, go back ultimately to Herodotus and his account of the Phoenician voyage round Africa; and it has been demonstrated that Hellenistic writers such as Nearchus and Megasthenes consciously emulated this "father of history"<sup>33</sup>. The association of these ideas with Sri Lanka was a result of the erroneous opinion that the island (which, according to Pliny, was for a long time known as the land of the Antichthones<sup>34</sup>) lay much to the south, and that it (or at least its southern parts) was actually south of the equator: an error which even Ptolemy has

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<sup>31</sup> T.W. Rhys Davids: *Buddhist India*, London (1911) p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> Jacoby: *op. cit.* no. 334, Onesicritus fr. 10-11; no. 319 Baeton fr. 4 = Pliny vi. 69; no. 715, Megasthenes fr. 7.B; Nearchus in Arr. Ind. 25 4-6 and fr. 16B = Strabo ii. 1. 20; Eratosthenes in Strabo *loc. cit.*; Strabo ii. 5.35 and 38; Philostratus, *Vita Apoll.* ii. 53.

<sup>33</sup> L. Pearson: *The Lost Histories of Alexander the Great* American Philological Assn. (1960) pp. 102-149; O. Murray: "Herodotus and Hellenistic culture" *C. Q.* n.s. Vol. XXII (1972) pp. 200-213.

<sup>34</sup> Pliny vi. 81.

adopted<sup>35</sup>. How were these poor sailors to get their bearings without seeing such vital path-indicating stars? Pliny found the answer in the story of the shore-sighting birds.

These preconceived notions have left their mark equally on Pliny's description of how the ambassadors reacted to their new environment in Rome. We are told that they admired the Great Bear and the Pleiades at Rome as if they were in a new sky. They said that the moon is not visible above the earth except from the 8th to the 16th (*ne luna quidem apud ipsos nisi ab octava in xvi supra terram aspici fatentes*). Canopus, a large bright star, illuminated their sky. But the greatest marvel for them was that their shadows fell into the Roman sky and not into theirs, and that the sun rose on the left and set on the right rather than the other way round<sup>36</sup>.

The wonder of the delegates at the sight of the Great Bear and the Pleiades is often taken to mean (as was probably by Pliny himself) that they were surprised to see these stars for the first time. But their surprise was really at seeing them in the Italian sky in a way they had never seen them in their own country. In fact all constellations are visible in Sri Lanka, although it may be only during part of the year. But in Italy these stars of the northern hemisphere would have appeared to them higher and more clearly than in their homeland. In view of the sailing time of their journey, which must have corresponded to the period of the northeast monsoon, there is good reason for assuming that the envoys were in Rome at mid-summer, which was also the usual time of the year when the Roman emperor received foreign missions. Is it not then just possible that the envoys were comparing their observations in Italy with what would have been observed in their own country during the same time of the year? In that case, the details about the sun and the shadows also gain some coherence, however, obscurely they may have been expressed by Pliny. People living north of the Tropic of Cancer always have the sun to the south, and, consequently, their shadows fall to the north. But those within the tropics would have the sun to the north (and shadows to the south) for a certain part of the year, and the reverse for the rest, while twice each year the sun would be directly above them and the noon shadow would be almost completely eliminated. In Rome, shadows would fall to the north at midsummer, whereas in Sri Lanka, the sun being at the northern tropic, the shadows would fall to the south. As for the sun rising and setting the other way round, this again must be taken as relative to the position of a man facing the sun at mid-day: in Rome he would have the rising sun on the left while in Sri Lanka this would be on the right; and the same would be true of the setting sun. Nearchus, either from firsthand knowledge or going by what he heard from Indian mariners, had correctly stated that one had to sail into the sea well towards the south to see the mid-day shadow

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<sup>35</sup> Ptol. *Geogr.* vii. 4. 1 ff. *passim*.

<sup>36</sup> Pliny vi. 87.

falling in the opposite direction and familiar stars disappearing<sup>37</sup>. Megasthenes also, while referring to the disappearance of the Great and Little Bears, had added that shadows fell toward the south at noon in the southernmost parts of India<sup>38</sup>. Moreover, Manilius had mentioned certain people, beyond the southern tropic, whose shadows fell the other way and who had the stars setting on their left and rising on their right<sup>39</sup>. Pliny may have thought that Taprobane extended beyond the equator and would have thought that he had found confirmation of this opinion in the words of the ambassadors.

However, the contrast effected between Canopus and the moon is so garbled as to be incapable of resolution. Here, perhaps, we may once again detect the influence of earlier opinions. The Roman astronomical poet Manilius, for instance, had already mentioned that those who are illuminated by Canopus cannot see the Great Bear<sup>40</sup>. When Pliny says that the moon is visible above the earth only from the 8th to the 16th, the temptation is to take this as referring to days, i.e. from the 8th to the 16th day of the month, as was indeed done by editors as different as those of the Delphin and Loeb editions, anticipated by one manuscript of Solinus in the corresponding passage<sup>41</sup>. This interpretation does not make sense and the feminine gender would normally demand that the reference should be to hours. In that case, there are at least three possibilities of computation, two Roman and one from Sri Lanka: (1) the Roman sacerdotal reckoning which starts from midnight; (2) the vulgar reckoning which starts from dawn; (3) the classical Sinhala system where day or night each comprises thirty hours.

It is also possible that the reference is to the 16 digits (*kala*) of the moon. Or else, there is possible some misconception by Pliny or his immediate sources of a statement made in terms of the Sinhala lunar calendar with its religious connotations. The *uposatha*, i.e. the full and new moons and the eighth day after each of these, are significant days for Buddhists. The last two are referred to as the eighth of the dark half

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<sup>37</sup> Nearchus in Arrian: *Indika* xxv. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Jacoby: *op. cit.* no. 715 Megasthenes fr. 4=Diodorus iii. 35. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Manilius i. 373-381; cf. also Mela iii. 61.

<sup>40</sup> Manilius i. 215-220. Manilius locates these people in the Nile region.

<sup>41</sup> Solinus 53. 6.

and the eighth of the bright half<sup>42</sup>. In this usage, perhaps, we should find the background to Pliny's statement. But the information remains garbled and incomprehensible at present. Somewhere in the communication of this item from the envoys to Pliny, some necessary element has been lost or misrepresented, so that no obvious interpretation is possible.

If, however, the observations did in fact come from the envoys, they reflect their interest in the constellations and stars. The Sinhala monarchs are known to have maintained Brahmin chaplains in whose duties astrology must have played an important part. It may not be totally irrelevant to mention here that both a Brahmin chaplain and an astrologer took part in Devanampiya Tissa's mission to Asoka Maurya<sup>43</sup>. Perhaps the delegation to Rome also included someone with astrological skills, who would have seen to it that this important mission was conducted under favourable auspices. However, their observations, when recorded by the Romans, became distorted under the influence of Hellenistic literature on India.

Perhaps we may find a clue to the persistence of these distortions, at least within the geographical context of Sri Lanka, by examining Pliny's remarks on local navigation in that area which according to him, are based on sources earlier than the arrival of the embassy from the island. We are told that the local crafts do not sail for more than four months in the year, and that they especially avoid the hundred days after the solstice, when those seas are wintry<sup>44</sup>. The sea around Sri Lanka is rough for part of the year, and the rough periods coincide more or less with the monsoons. In the south and the west, the period is from May to September, while in the north and the east it is December to February. We thus have a choice between the summer and winter solstices,

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. *Mahavamsa* tr. W.Geiger, Appendix D, p.296, s.v."Uposatha". Andre and Filliozat (*op. cit.* p.164) think that the reference is to days, but point out that it is not to the days of the lunar month but to the *tithi* which are the 1/30th parts of that month.

<sup>43</sup> *Dipavamsa* xi. 29.

<sup>44</sup> Pliny vi.83. Along the western coast of southern India and Sri Lanka, the monsoon actually begins to be rough before the summer solstice, although it is true that the really stormy and dangerous period is after the solstice. On the other hand, at the mouth of the Indus, the rough period begins with the summer solstice, so that some scholars have preferred to recognize in this passage a possible echo of information from Nearchus and Onesicritus, all the more because, in the next paragraph (vi.84), all this information is attributed to ancient authors. Cf. Andre and Filliozat: *op.cit.* p.150.

and the corresponding allocation of Pliny's description to the appropriate region. Here, I think, the remark about the invisibility of the Great Bear is relevant. For, the Great Bear is actually visible in Sri Lanka, as it is in all regions as far as the southern tropic, but only from April to August.

Lionell Casson has drawn our attention to the dangerous sailing conditions on India's west coast, the southwest coast in particular, leading to the practical halt of all maritime activity. "At present in this area the marine insurance rates, which vary between 1% and 1-3/4% during the northeast monsoon, rise to 20% by the end of May when the southwest monsoon has set in, and during June, July and August, marine insurance is simply not available at any price. By September it is again offered at the fairly reasonable rate of 2-1/2%<sup>45</sup>.

The sixth book of the *Natural History*, wherein we get the description of Taprobane, also contains a detailed account of the commercial voyages between Egypt and India<sup>46</sup>. Pliny says that after the discovery of the shorter route the whole voyage to and from India could be made within a year. It took about thirty days to sail from Berenice to Cella or Carne, and from thence to Muziris (usually identified with Cranganore on the southwest coast of India) it was another forty days' voyage. Thus India could be reached from Egypt in about seventy days.

Casson has observed that the forty days from Ocelis (Bab-el-Mandeb) to Muziris (Cranganore), a distance in round numbers of 6,000 nautical miles, works out to an average speed of two knots. As ancient sailing crafts were capable of doing between four and six knots with a favourable wind in the Mediterranean, they would have done at least as well on the run to India under the southwest monsoon at a time when it was blowing at its hardest. The crossing must therefore, have been made in twenty days, and Casson thinks that Pliny's figure of forty is probably a slip, and that we should read xx (or even xv following vi. 84) instead of xl<sup>47</sup>. This would reduce the journey to around fifty days.

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<sup>45</sup> L.Casson: "Rome's Trade with the East: the Sea Voyage to Africa and India" *T.A.Ph.A.* CX (1980) pp. 21-36, esp. pp.31-34, citing R.Bowen: "The Dhow Sailor" *The American Neptune* II (1951) pp. 5-46.

<sup>46</sup> Pliny vi. 100-106.

<sup>47</sup> Casson: *loc. cit.*

Pliny tells us that travelling by sea began at mid-summer before the Dog-star rose, or immediately after its rising<sup>48</sup>, and also that travellers set sail from India on the return journey at the beginning of the Egyptian month Tibis (which is our December), or, at all events, before the sixth day of the Egyptian month Mekir, which is sometime around January 13th according to the Roman Calendar - thus making it possible to return home in the same year<sup>49</sup>. Thus the Graeco-Roman mariners would be in southern India, and possibly in Sri Lanka too, between September and December, when the Great Bear would not be visible, and the local craft of the south and west would be coming back into action after the annual overhauling<sup>50</sup>; and they would normally not be in a position to observe local conditions for the rest of the year. However, their reports (which seemed to agree with what Nearchus, Onesicritus and others had written) were accepted as valid evidence for the entire year.

Pliny also heard from the delegates that the side of their island which faced India and lay southeast of it had an extent of ten thousand stades - a figure greater than the greatest length ever attributed to the island by a Greek or Roman writer. They also told him about the Seres beyond the Hemodi (Himalaya) mountains with whom they used to engage in commerce: the father of Rachia (i.e. of the leader of the delegation) had gone there frequently (*patrem Rachiae comeasse eo*). The Seres are described as tall, red-haired, blue-eyed, harsh-voiced and using silent barter. This last detail, says Pliny, is corroborated by Roman merchants (*nostrī negotiatores*)<sup>51</sup>.

The mention of the Seres has been viewed with much suspicion. Hardouin even suggested reading "*advenas ibi feras occursare*" (that they met savage strangers there) instead of "*advenas sibi Seras occursare*", thus eliminating the Seres altogether. Warmington has favoured the identification of the Seres with the Ceras of southern India rather than the northern Chinese, of whom the term has been used by Greek and Latin

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<sup>48</sup> Pliny vi. 104.

<sup>49</sup> Pliny vi. 106.

<sup>50</sup> Hornell: *loc. cit.* According to Casson (*op. cit.* p. 33) these vessels had to reach India no earlier than September, when the southwest monsoon was approaching its end and beginning to quiet down, and not later than the same month, as it would have exposed them to the contrary winds of the northeast monsoon.

<sup>51</sup> Pliny vi. 88.



authors of the Roman imperial period<sup>52</sup>. He argues that Pliny's Hemodi mountains cannot be the Himalayas, which are more than two thousand miles distant from the island, but rather the mountains which terminate the plains of the Carnatic. Andre and Filliozat also insist that ancient authors have evidently confused two nations with close or identical names: the Ceras (or Cheras) of Kerala on the southwest coast of India, who were in constant touch with Sri Lanka, and the Seres beyond the Himalayas, whom Pliny elsewhere describes as producers of silk<sup>53</sup>, and who, according to these scholars, could be the Chinese<sup>54</sup>. They also point out that the Tamil form *Cimayam* can mean the Himalaya, Mt. Meru, or Potiyamalai, the mountain in the far south of the Indian peninsula famous as the abode of the sage Agastya<sup>55</sup>. the practice of conflating from different sources, which was common among ancient authors, did sometimes lead to the transfer of descriptions originally intended for different localities. But could Pliny have mistaken the Seres for the Ceras of southern India, seeing that he knew about the latter nation, about their port Muziris and their king Cerobothras (i.e. Ceraputra)<sup>56</sup>?

Pierre Paris has observed that the Seres are portrayed as perfect Indo-Germans who can only be the Yueh-chi i.e. the Kushans. He points out that at this time (the middle of the first century A.D.) there was no longer any need to cross the Hemodi (i.e. Himalaya) mountains to see the Kushans. One only had to go up the Indus<sup>57</sup>.

Liebermann has argued that the reference is to the dwellers of Western Turkistan, Bactria and North India belonging to the Saka tribe which was a part of the

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<sup>52</sup> E.H. Warmington: *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India*, Cambridge (1928) p. 123.

<sup>53</sup> Pliny vi. 54.

<sup>54</sup> Andre and Filliozat: *op. cit.* vi. 88 note 2. However, they also observe that the people described in the present passage are Indo-Europeans.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 151.

<sup>56</sup> Pliny vi. 104.

<sup>57</sup> Pierre Paris: "Note on Two Passages of Strabo and Pliny Relating to Taprobane" (English translation) *C.H.J.* 1.4 (1951) p. 296.

Chinese empire from the 2nd century B.C. to the middle of the 2nd century A.D.<sup>58</sup>. In this connection, Andre and Filliozat have drawn our attention to a passage of the historian Orosius concerning the distribution of provinces by Alexander the Great, which says that Taxiles held the Seres who were established between the Hydaspes and the Indus<sup>59</sup>.

I am inclined to accept the view that the description was intended for a people living further north than India. The silent barter described here cannot have been one practised by a civilized nation, and would not apply to the Ceras, the Sakas or the Kushans of India. On the other hand the reference to Roman merchants (*nostrī negotiatores*) precludes the Seres from being the Chinese, with whom the Romans were not in direct contact at this time<sup>60</sup>. It has been proposed that the Seres should be localized somewhere in the Tarim Basin. Hennig thought they were the Tokari<sup>61</sup>, while Herrmann and Tarn identified them with the Wu-Sung, or that section of the Tokari, the Yueh-chi, who had remained behind in the Wu-Sung country. Well before Pliny's time, the Seres are mentioned by Apollodorus; and as his work is rather too early for this term to be used for the Chinese, Herrmann and Tarn have preferred to regard them as middlemen of the Chinese trade who dwelt near Isik-Kol. Accordingly, Narain has suggested that the name Seres, which was first given to the people of Kashgar, was later applied to the northern Chinese<sup>62</sup>.

According to Pliny, the envoys located the scene of the silent barter away from their island. Martianus Capella, in his paraphrase of this passage, transferred the description to the people of the island itself<sup>63</sup>. On the other hand, Fa-hsien, in the early fifth century A.D., associates Sri Lanka with the silent barter, but relegates it to prehistoric times, saying that it was the demons who originally inhabited the island that

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<sup>58</sup> S.Liebermann: "Who were Pliny's Blue-eyed Chinese?" *Cl.Phil.* LII (1957) pp. 174-179.

<sup>59</sup> Orosius iii. 23. 11; Andre and Filliozat: *op. cit.* vi. 88. note 2.

<sup>60</sup> Andre and Filliozat: *op. cit.* vi. 88 note 4.

<sup>61</sup> Hennig: *Terrae Incognitae* vol. I, p. 294; see also P.Pelliot: *Notes on Marco Polo* Paris (1959) vol. I, p.244, ff.

<sup>62</sup> A.K.Narain: *The Indo-Greeks* Oxford (1957) pp. 170-171.

<sup>63</sup> Capella vi. 697.

carried on this trade with foreign merchants<sup>64</sup>. In the 11th century Al-Birouni also refers to this custom in connection with Sri Lanka, and records the belief of the Arab mariners that these inhabitants were either demons or savages<sup>65</sup>. The practice has been associated with the Veddas of Sri Lanka by European writers and by Chinese authors subsequent to Fa-hsien<sup>66</sup>.

However, allusions to this method of trading are not unknown elsewhere in Greek literature. Both Herodotus (fifth century B.C.) and Cosmas (sixth century A.D.) record the practice as existing at their respective dates in different parts of Africa<sup>67</sup>; and in the fourth century A.D. we find the Stone Tower, the meeting-place of so many nations, itself associated with the silent mode of trade<sup>68</sup>. The idea was no doubt as familiar to the West as it was to the ambassadors from Sri Lanka; and, like the story of the shore-sighting birds, this prehistoric motif also fired Pliny's imagination, even inspiring him to a vehement denunciation of luxury: *non aliter odio iustiore luxuria quam si perducta mens illuc usque cogitet quid et quo petatur et quare*<sup>69</sup>.

The trans-Himalayan trade of Sri Lanka may have been an extension of the already established contacts with northern India, and its origins may well go back to the third century B.C. when the Maurya Empire could have provided the link, as it probably did in the case of the Greek kingdoms<sup>70</sup>. Alternatively, it may have been an extension of the general overland trade between the West and the peoples of central and eastern

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<sup>64</sup> Fa-hien *loc. cit.*

<sup>65</sup> J.E.Tennent: *Ceylon, 4th ed. London (1860) vol. I p. 569.*

<sup>66</sup> Tennent: *loc. cit.*

<sup>67</sup> Herodotus iv. 196; Cosmas ii. 52 [Migne]; cf. also Mela iii. 60, and Pliny himself (vi.54).

<sup>68</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus xxiii. 6. 67-68.

<sup>69</sup> Pliny vi. 88.

<sup>70</sup> What is taken to be one of the first references to Chinese silk (*Cinapatta*) comes from the *Arthashastra*, the origin of which has been ascribed to the time of Candragupta Maurya.

Asia in which northwestern India played an important intermediary role<sup>71</sup>. This trade was still flourishing when Marinus of Tyre compiled his geographical work. Ptolemy, who drew extensively on it, suggests that at the Stone Tower the Greeks found not only Parthians, Kushans, and Indians, but also the Chinese and their middlemen (both classed as Seres) who dealt in silk<sup>72</sup>. Traders from Sri Lanka were probably among this international gathering. They may even have attended fairs, such as those which the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* describe so vividly<sup>73</sup> as taking place on the borderlands of China, and whose trading was also based on the silent method. According to Pliny, Rachia's father was said to have gone frequently (*comeasse*) beyond the Himalayas.

It is apparent that, at the time of the embassy, the Seres (whether by this term we understand the Chinese or, more probably for this time, their middlemen) were known to the people of Sri Lanka only through the land route. It was, however, about this same time that the Chinese themselves, according to some authorities, began to traverse the Indian Ocean in their ships<sup>74</sup>; and it is probable that Chinese communications with the island by sea began not long afterwards<sup>75</sup>. Numerous

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<sup>71</sup> R.E.M.Wheeler: "Roman Trade with India and Pakistan" *Aspects of Archaeology* ed. Grimes, London (1951) p. 357.

<sup>72</sup> M.Cary and E.H.Warmington: *The Ancient Explorers* p. 196.

<sup>73</sup> *Peripl. M.E.* 65.

<sup>74</sup> B.J.Perera: "The Foreign Trade and Commerce of Ancient Ceylon" *C.H.J.* I (1951) p. 306.

<sup>75</sup> M.Werake ("A New Date for the Beginning of Sino-Sri Lankan Relations" *S.L.J.H.* IV. 1&2 (1978) pp. 64-73) prefers to date the commencement of China's relations with Sri Lanka to the very beginning of the first century A.D. This preference is based on his acceptance of the identification with Sri Lanka of the Ssu-chen-pu (= Sihadipa or Simhadvipa) which, according to the *Han Shu* (28 B-32 B [ed. Chung-hua Shu-chu]) lay to the south of Huang-chih (identified with Kancipuram, the capital of the Pallavas in southern India), and from which the envoys of Wang Mang returned home after visiting Huang-chih. Werake has successfully contested the claims of two other candidates for Ssu-cheng-pu, namely Ethiopia and Kitur (north-east of the Calicut bay). More recently, however, it has been argued (though, I feel, not on very strong grounds) that Huang-chih may be the Ganges valley, or, more particularly, a kingdom such

embassies from the island to China and Chinese pilgrims to Sri Lanka are recorded during the fifth century and later. In the early sixth century, Cosmas mentions ships which came to the island bearing silk from China. There are many notices of Sri Lanka in Chinese documents, and they have been described as more detailed and more reliable than those of the Greeks, Romans or Arabs<sup>76</sup>. All these facts provide testimony to the close relations between China and Sri Lanka through the centuries: Pliny is the first writer to inform us, vaguely though it may be, of the existence of such relations.

The most problematic part of the ambassadors narrative concerns the geography of the island. According to this narrative, Taprobane contained 500 towns and a harbour facing south, adjacent to the town of Palaesimundu, the most famous of them and the king's residence, with a population of 200,000. Inland there was a lake called Megisba with a circumference of 375 miles and containing islands that only produced pasturage. Out of it flowed two rivers, the one called Palaesimundu running through three channels into the harbour near the town of the same name, half a mile broad at its narrowest point and nearly two miles at the widest; the other, called Cydara, flowing north in the direction of India<sup>77</sup>.

Pliny had earlier quoted Eratosthenes to the effect that the island had no cities (*urbes*) but only 700 villages (*vicos*). The 500 towns (*oppida*) of which the ambassadors spoke may well reflect the growth of urban centres during the interim period which saw the introduction of Buddhism and the consequent development of a higher political, economic, social and cultural organization. Yet it is significant that even at this date there was apparently nothing that Pliny could call *urbis* (which to the Romans signified a city with walls.; even the royal residence is described as a town (*oppidum*))

The interior lake and rivers have aroused much speculation. Tennent took it to

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as Magadha and its capital Pataliputra, and that, accordingly, I-ch'eng-pu (sic) or Chi-ch'eng-pu (sic) may possibly be either Campa further downstream (known in Buddhist literature as a place where merchants assembled to make the voyage to eastern ports), or Kajangala (one of the main trade stations on the route from Pataliputra and Campa to Tamralipti). Cf. Brian Colless: "Han and Shentu: China's Ancient Relations with South Asia" *East and West* n.s. vol. XXX (1980) pp. 157-177, esp. p. 169.

<sup>76</sup> Tennent: *op. cit.* vol. I p. 594. Tennent attributes the intimacy of the two nations to their common religious persuasion.

<sup>77</sup> Pliny, vi. 85-86.

be an exaggerated account of some of the great irrigation tanks<sup>78</sup>. Heeren thought that the port was Trincomalee into which the Mahaveli flowed, and suggested that Palaesimundu could be the town which Bertolacci called Pontjemalee<sup>79</sup>. This would not be correct since Pliny speaks of an interior lake, not a bay on the coast. The lake is thought of as being the source of the rivers rather than receiving them.

Lassen, assuming that the lake was the tank Kalaveva, has identified Cydara with the Malvatu Oya and Palaesimundu river with Marchikatti, which emptied into the sea near Kudiramalai. He has identified Palaesimundu town with Anuradhapura, deriving its name from a hypothetical form *Pali-Simanta* (abode of the sacred doctrine (i.e. of the Buddha))<sup>80</sup>. Lassen quoted the *Mahavamsa* to the effect that the Kalavapi was rebuilt by king Vasabha, implying its existence even earlier. But the Kalavapi was built only in the fifth century A.D. by king Dhatusena<sup>81</sup>. The *Mahavamsa* does mention a "Kali" as one of the twelve tanks attributed to Vasabha, none of which has been identified satisfactorily; and it is obvious that Lassen has confused this with the Kalavapi. When Pliny says that two rivers emerge from the lake, Lassen thought that we ought to understand that the waters of the tank were led into the river by canals. But such an idea is not suggested by Pliny's Latin phrase *ex eo erumpere*.

A. Herrmann had identified the Palaesimundu river with the Kelani-ganga, and the town with Kelaniya, which was the capital of an ancient kingdom<sup>82</sup>. For him, Megisba is not one of the artificial reservoirs near Anuradhapura but a mountain lake in the source region of the Mahaveli and Kelani rivers. But the chronicles have nothing to say about this kingdom after the time of King Dutthagamani, and its existence as an independent state of any consequence thereafter cannot be ascertained.

Schwarz has an interesting suggestion that Megisba is a reflex of *Mahavapi*,

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<sup>78</sup> Tennent: *op. cit.* vol. I, p. 533.

<sup>79</sup> A.H.L.Heeren: *De Ceylone Insula per Viginti fere Saecula Communi Terrarum Mariumque Australium Emporio* Gottingen (1831).

<sup>80</sup> C.Lassen: *Dessertatio de Insula Taprobane Veteribus Cognita* Bonn (1948) p.21.

<sup>81</sup> *Mahavamsa* xxxviii. 42.

<sup>82</sup> A. Herrmann: *P.W.* s.v. "Taprobane".

"large tank", a form attested and given geographical location in Pali literature<sup>83</sup>. The location, however, is in Rohana; but one might compare terms such as our "Giants' Tank". But on the whole, none of these interpretations can claim to be satisfactory, since there is no lake on the island, natural or artificial, to which the description can be applied, unless we assume that, as in the case of the island itself, so here too the dimensions are greatly exaggerated.

Pierre Paris is of the opinion that the description does not apply to Sri Lanka at all<sup>84</sup>. He thinks that we are in Sumatra with its length of 1060 miles, its lake Togo, its peculiar shape; and one might wonder, he adds, if Rachia's capital was not really Sri Vijaya (Palembang) below the equator. Paris even points out that the distance between the mouths of Palembang and Singapore (250 miles) corresponds well to the four days of voyage to Cape Coliacum with, at halfway point, the Archipelago of Linga, which Paris equates with the Island of the Sun.

But this view is not acceptable. Not only does place-names such as Hippuros and Coliacum suggest the surroundings of Sri Lanka, but Taprobane itself is closer to *Tamraparni*, the ancient name for this island, than to any other. Gems and pearls also suggest Sri Lanka, which enjoyed much more renown for these products in antiquity than Sumatra ever appears to have done. If Sumatra ever sent an embassy, there is hardly any evidence to suggest that its relations with Rome improved, or even came into existence, as a result. Roman contacts with Sri Lanka, on the other hand, appear to have improved considerably after this mission, as one may judge from Ptolemy's better knowledge of the island as well as from numismatic evidence. One reason for Paris' choice of Sumatra is his feeling that Pliny's Taprobane is placed beyond the equator. As I have already demonstrated, this need not be the case invariably; in any event, we are dealing with an age in which geographical knowledge had not arrived at anything like exactness. It should also be noted that Sumatra could not have been reached by a Greek or Roman ship from Arabia in fifteen days even with gale force winds, as the freedman of Plocamus is said to have done<sup>85</sup>. Finally, Paris' identification of "Rachia's capital" with Sri Vijaya or Palembang is not supported by what we know about ancient southeast Asia. Not only is the identification of Palembang with the seat of the Sri Vijaya empire hypothetical, but the empire itself is not known to have existed before the last quarter of the 7th century A.D.

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<sup>83</sup> F.F.Schwarz: "Pliny the Elder on Ceylon" *J.A.H.* VIII (1974) p.44; cf. W.Rahula: *History of Buddhism in Ceylon* Colombo (1956) p.269 note.

<sup>84</sup> P.Paris: *op. cit.* p. 295.

<sup>85</sup> Pliny vi. 84.

B.A.Salatore has attempted to prove that the embassy came from the Pandya kingdom of southern India<sup>86</sup>. Flying in the face of both eastern and western traditions and their mutual correspondence, Salatore identifies Taprobane with the Tamraparni river on the southern Indian mainland. But the kingdom of the Pandians was well known to western writers since the time of Megasthenes, including Pliny himself<sup>87</sup>; and it could not have been confused at this time with Taprobane, which Pliny repeatedly calls an island.

Despite the many echoes of earlier writers, Pliny's account of the embassy from Sri Lanka and the information gathered from its members is near in time to the fact, perhaps even contemporary. As such, it demands respect, and requires to be explained rather than to be explained away. "The picture of Pliny questioning the ambassadors from Ceylon and thus obtaining first-hand information can be rejected. Certain details betray the story for what it is, a sailor's yarn." So says Raschke<sup>88</sup>; but, to me at least, Pliny's use of the personal pronoun *nobis* in this context<sup>89</sup> suggests direct interest and involvement on the part of the author. Elsewhere he may speak of the fabulous element which is attached to tales from Taprobane<sup>90</sup>, but here he introduces the narrative as a *diligentior notitia* and, no less insistently, concludes it by saying: *haec de insula Taprobane comperta*<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> B.A.Salatore: *India's Diplomatic Relations with the West*, Bombay (1958) p. 231 ff.

<sup>87</sup> Pliny vi. 104 and elsewhere.

<sup>88</sup> Raschke: *op.cit.* note 1317.

<sup>89</sup> Pliny vi. 84.

<sup>90</sup> Pliny xxii. 146.

<sup>91</sup> Pliny vi. 84, 91.