

HISTORY OF MEDICINE IN PREMODERN SRI LANKA AS DEPICTED IN LITERARY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

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Although chronicles and commentaries to Pali Buddhist texts contain information relating to the Early Historic Period (i.e. c 6 BC), accurate data for the Formative Period of Sri Lankan history is only available from c 3 BC onwards. Archaeological evidence unearthed in a number of places prove that people had occupied the island in the Prehistoric Period i.e. 28000 BP. Although available evidence does not indicate precise signs of existence of healing practices during the Prehistoric period, epigraphic evidence i.e. from c 2 BC period onwards and literary records maintained in the historic period i.e. c 5 AD onwards purport that there were therapeutic activities and associated processes going on in Sri Lanka during the Formative Period.

The objective of this study is to identify the nature and evolution of the field of therapeutics in Sri Lanka broadly covering the Middle and Late Historic phases (c 5 to 13 AD). For the sources, original textual materials available in Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit were used together with epigraphic and archaeological evidence. Judging by the literary sources, it is evident that the Buddhist monastic establishment had played a decisive role in the practice of therapy. This practice was performed by the monks either as groups or individuals but at the same time giving rise to certain problems or controversies in the process. In this presentation, however, I do not discuss the nature and the problems associated with the monastic practice of therapy. Rather, I will focus on the institutional aspect of the practice namely the physical structure, and the organization required for the purpose.

When epigraphic, architectural as well as artifactual remains are studied in conjunction with literary sources, it is seen that a number of monasteries were equipped with hospitals, sanitary homes and other healing establishments, especially in the Late Historic Period. In one such monastery, a hospital housing stone objects such as a medicinal trough, metal objects such as surgical instruments, and ceramics such as medicinal containers have been unearthed. Interestingly, all the five archaeological sites suggestive of two hospitals and three structures (probably hospitals) containing equipment such as medical troughs were unearthed in association with Buddhist monasteries. However, this does not preclude the existence of hospitals or/and other places of caring built for the laity in the contemporary period. The present study, while tempting us to make further investigations into the prevalence of establishments intended for caring of the sick monks, help reveal several important aspects of the history of medicine in pre-modern Sri Lanka.