

A STUDY OF THE EARLY IRON AGE BURIAL SITES IN THE INTERMEDIARY TRANSITIONAL ECO SYSTEM: LOWER MONTANE REGION OF NORTH-CENTRAL SRI LANKA

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Introduction

The term Early Iron Age in the context of Sri Lanka denotes that period which succeeds the Stone Age. The Early Iron Age Culture (from 10/9th century BCE) is mainly represented by the burial monuments and it formed the earliest socio-economic base of the formative period of Sri Lanka.

At the macro spatial level, the present research area is located in the lower montane region (Intermediary Transitional Eco System) that is found between the central montane region and the north-central plains of Sri Lanka.

The main objective of the present research is to undertake a detailed analysis of all the available data of the Early Iron Age burial sites in the lower montane region of north central Sri Lanka and to compare this region with the burial sites located in the other regions of Sri Lanka.

Methodology

In the research methodology followed in the study there is a survey of relevant Early Iron Age archaeological research and visits to important Early Iron Age burial sites in the present research area as well as burial sites located in the other regions of Sri Lanka.

It is evident that by the Early Iron Age period the lower montane region

(Intermediary Transitional Eco Systems) acquired strategic importance in terms of resource movement between the agricultural plains (north-central) and the upper montane region (Seneviratne, 1996). This concept also provides a basis to investigate the role of the lower montane region among the other regions during the Early Iron Age period of Sri Lanka.

Discussion

The history of the study area extends from prehistoric times to the 17th and 18th centuries CE. The earliest evidence of human habitation within the study area is in the Aligala rock-shelter, which lies immediately to the east of Sigiriya rock. This is a major prehistoric site with an occupational sequence starting nearly 5000 years ago and extending up to early historic times (Karunaratne, 1994).

During the Early Iron Age period significant developments took place in the study area. The earliest phase (protohistoric) of the Early Iron Age involved a fundamental change from itinerant food gathering and hunting to agriculture, animal domestication, village settlements, the burial ritual, ceramic industry, production and use of iron during the period between about 1000 and 300 BCE.

The earliest phase (protohistoric) of the Early Iron Age mainly represented

by the burial monuments and investigations now reveal the existence of seven burial sites (Ibbankatuwa, Yatigalpotta, Anakatava, Havanewela, Unalugala, Digampatha and Rotawewa) in the study area.

Apart from burial sites two protohistoric habitation sites are also found from Aligala (998-848 BCE) and Ibbankatuwa (4th century BCE) in the study area. Several important factors related to the study area were observed. Three periods of occupation, ranging from the prehistoric to the historic period were noted in the study area.

The Early Iron Age communities established their settlements in the study area because of several favourable locational factors at the macro and micro levels. The most important conclusion that can be drawn from the cultural materials of the burial sites in the study area is that the Early Iron Age communities exploited local resources as well as non-local resources during this period. There are few Early Iron Age habitation sites (02) in comparison with numerous burial sites (07) found in the study area.

Also there are a very few Early Iron Age sites which reveal the co-relation between the burials and habitation sites in the study area. However, some Early Iron Age sites like Ibbankatuwa have revealed a relationship between burials and habitation through archaeological materials in the site.

The cist burial type is identified as the most widespread burial group in the study area.

Another interesting feature is that secondary and multiple burial practice seems to be more common among the Early Iron Age people in the Sigiriya-Dambulla region.

Ibbankatuwa is one of the sites that enables us to give a very early date (6th century BCE) for the beginning of the Early Iron Age burial tradition of Sri Lanka.

The study area has a strategic importance as it is located in the lower montane region that is found between the central mountain region and the north-central plain of Sri Lanka. Besides its strategic location on the internal routes the study area was also a point of foreign contact by sea through the north-west region as indicated by some non-Sri Lankan carnelian beads from Ibbankatuwa and the Yatigalpotta burial sites in the study area.

Conclusion

The study has revealed the inter-regional connections as well as the nature of burial systems in the study area during the Early Iron Age period.

References

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