

GREEK AND ROMAN NOTICES OF SRI LANKA AND THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the study of the ancient history of Sri Lanka, foreign notices are considered a valuable supplement to indigenous literature, inscriptions, coins and other archaeological finds. The Pali chronicles and Sinhala literature provide copious information concerning the political and religious history of the land; but they have very little to say on its economic history and foreign relations. Accordingly, European writers, especially during the last century, made use of foreign notices together with indigenous literature to reconstruct the ancient history of the island.¹ The Indians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs, Chinese, Venetians and Genoese were all called upon to bear testimony to the flourishing trade and economic prosperity enjoyed by ancient Sri Lanka as the great entrepot between east and west.

More recently, a large number of Sinhala inscriptions have been published in the volumes of the *Epigraphia Zeylanica* as well as in various other publications. These are, for the most part, inscriptions on stone recording royal proclamations and donations, by members of the royal family as well as other wealthy citizens, to the clergy and other religious establishments. From these inscriptions some information can be gleaned concerning economic organization; but even here references to foreign trade and diplomatic relations are very scanty. Hence the foreign notices still continue of necessity to be utilized as source material for the study of the island's history.

Sri Lanka's outstanding significance for international trade has been recognized through the ages, and has been attributed to its central position in relation to the countries of the East and the West. Cosmas Indicopleustes, who realized this fact as early as the sixth century A.D., called the island the "mediatrix" between the countries of eastern and western Asia². His observations, however, are only the climax of the long series of notices of the island by Greek and Roman authors, most of whom show some awareness of the commercial significance of Sri Lanka's natural resources.

Greek and Roman notices of Sri Lanka are spread over a period of more than eight hundred years, ranging in date from the end of the fourth century B.C. to the middle of the sixth century A.D. Though often scrappy, derivative and lacking in precision, they are among the earliest foreign reports of the island and constitute an important witness to the prominence of the island with regard to the international maritime trade of those days. As historical sources, these notices supplement other writings, both local and foreign, as well as archaeological, epigraphical and numismatic evidence. They thus constitute without doubt a valuable complement to our picture of

¹. E.g., J.E. Tennent, C. Lassen, J.B. Paquier.

². Cosmas Indicopleustes: *Topographia Christiana* xi. 16 [ed. W. Wolska-Conus, Paris (1973)].

the island during the early Anuradhapura period.

The period covered by these sources is perhaps the most important in the political, cultural and social history of ancient Sri Lanka. It saw the introduction of Buddhism from India and its establishment as the religion of the land, the evolution of urban centres, the formation and consolidation of a centralized state, the domestication and optimization of technology (in particular of irrigation and monumental architecture) and the development of doctrinal, exegetical, narrative and historical literature.

The passages cited as Greek and Roman notices of Sri Lanka are usually those which refer to an island in the Erythraean or Indian sea designated by the name Taprobane. In addition, the Greek writers mention other names which were also applied in antiquity to the island, such as Palaisimoundou or Simoundou, Salike, and Sielediba³, and derivations for these names have also been proposed. However, references to certain other names denoting places in the east have been taken by various modern writers to refer to this same island, and ancient descriptions under such names have been quoted as evidence for conditions in ancient Sri Lanka. I have dealt with these *falsa et dubia* elsewhere⁴, in our studies of the passages in Greek and Latin authors which explicitly mention the island of Taprobane. We shall attempt to find out how far these notices reflect conditions contemporary with their authors and to what extent one is justified in using such descriptions as source material for the study of ancient history.

In view of the copiousness of some of these notices, it might be asked how much direct contact there was between Sri Lanka and the Graeco-Roman world. On this point our sources have little to say. In the time of Onesicritus (late fourth century B.C.) as well as of Strabo (late first century B.C.) Greek knowledge of the island was the indirect result of Indian communication with it and western communication with India. Even in later times, when the Romans or their Graeco-Egyptian subjects attempted to reach the island, the success of their ventures appears to have depended to some extent on the amount of latitude allowed them by monopolizing intermediaries. The journey of the Theban lawyer is a case in point⁵. Moreover, "None of the archaeological materials specially indicates Red Sea contact rather than a more northerly route from the Mediterranean through the Sasanian Persian ports in the pre-A.D. 600 period. The Mediterranean (Roman) ceramics, coins and glass may have come either along the Red

³. Cf. Ptolemy: *Geogr.* vii. 4. 1; *Periplus Maris Erythraei*: 61; Cosmas Indicopleustes: *Topographia Christiana*, xi. 13. 445 B.

⁴. D.P.M. Weerakkody: "Falsa et Dubia: on some Alleged References to Sri Lanka in Greek and Latin Texts." *J.R.A.S. (S.L.B.) n.s. XXXV (1990/1991) pp. 73-90.*

⁵. Palladius: *De Gentibus Indiae et Bragmanibus* I. 1-10 [ed. W. Berghoff].

Sea or through the Persian Gulf trade networks"⁶

Surprise has sometimes been expressed that the Romans, who had dared to endure the rigours and perils of a long voyage to South India, should not have continued their voyages to Sri Lanka. The usual explanation has been that the South Indian kingdoms effectively prevented and prohibited western merchants from trading directly with the island⁷. In support of this it has been pointed out that Sri Lanka's contacts with North India stopped abruptly after the reign of Devanampiya Tissa, and that this interruption corresponds to the earliest period of South Indian invasions. These invasions may have been undertaken with a view to controlling the ports of Sri Lanka in order to prevent the island from trading with the Romans and Persians. The preponderant Hindu influence at the main ports of the island, and such late evidence as the problems encountered by the Theban lawyer, to which reference has already been made, lend some support to this view.

It must however be remembered that the above mentioned interruption of relations between Sri Lanka and North India may equally be due to the decline of the Maurya empire which was the main inspiration for these contacts. In fact, when in the fourth century A.D. a new empire did come into prominence in North India under the powerful Guptas, Sri Lanka's relations with North India resumed; and this time too, as before, the emphasis appears to have been on religious matters.

The real explanation may be that the Romans, and their Greek subjects, did not feel the need to go all the way to Sri Lanka as long as its products could be obtained easily and abundantly at Indian ports. That such was in fact the case is evident from Strabo who tells us that "there are brought from thence (i.e. from Taprobane) to the Indian markets ivory, tortoise-shell and other wares in large quantities"⁸. However, this situation must have changed during the latter part of the first century A.D. when increasing demand for eastern luxuries would have forced the Romans to explore fresh supplies. Thus, like many other coincidences of history, the rediscovery of Sri Lanka by the western world appears to have come about at the right moment.

⁶. Martha Prickett: "Sri Lanka's Foreign Trade Before A.D. 600: Archaeological Evidence" *Asian Panorama: Essays in Asian History, Past and Present* edited by K.M. de Silva, Sirima Kiribamune, C.R. de Silva. Delhi (1990) pp. 151-180; cf. P. 171.

⁷. B.J. Perera: 'The Foreign Trade and Commerce of Ancient Ceylon' *The Ceylon Historical Journal* I (1951) p. 301.

⁸. Strabo: ii.1.14; E.H. Warmington: *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India* Cambridge (1928) p. 10.

The opening-up of Sri Lanka to the Romans was an outcome of the general economic expansion made possible by the establishment of the Roman Principate under Augustus, and the peace it gave to the strife-torn ancient world. The commercial supremacy of Rome and Italy and the Impetus given to free trade had far-reaching consequences. The period of the Julio-Claudian emperors saw an unprecedented growth in commerce with the East, for which Hippalus' revelation of the use of monsoons for periodic navigation and the destruction of Aden (whoever was responsible for it) were essential prerequisites⁹. But the first recorded Roman encounter with Sri Lanka appears to have been the result of a happy accident, the arrival of a freedman of Annius Plocamus, which occurred during the reign of the emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54).¹⁰

As for actual visits of Roman citizens to the island, our sources record only two instances, that of this freedman of Annius Plocamus in the first century A.D., and of Sopatros, the acquaintance of Cosmas, probably during the fifth century A.D. The first of these visits resulted in the sending of a delegation from Sri Lanka to Rome, which appears to have opened a new era in Rome's relations with the island: witness the comprehensive information available to Ptolemy almost a century later. Little was added to this knowledge until the vivid account of Cosmas Indicopleustes who, writing in the sixth century, probably relied on Sopatros and others who had travelled to the island from Adoulis.

The central position of Sri Lanka and its economic advantages constitute one of the main interests of Cosmas' eleventh book. There, the countries beyond the island are referred to as the "inner countries" while those west of it are called "outer countries"¹⁰. Commenting on this passage, Wolska-Conus has observed that whereas Cosmas applies the term "inner India" to Asiatic India, the practice of other Greek and Syrian writers was to apply it to the inhabitants on the shores of the Red Sea - a practice probably going back to the days when that region furnished an exchange for merchandise between Rome and India, and was therefore inhabited by many immigrant Indians. According to Wolska-Conus, the way Cosmas arranges the countries in relation to Taprobane shows that his informants came from that island, perhaps Nestorian sailors and merchants of Syrian origin. We cannot however rule out the above-mentioned possibility that much of his information came from other Egyptian Greeks such as his friend Sopatros and his party, whose encounter with the king of Taprobane is vividly narrated in the same book¹¹.

The comprehensive foreign contacts which Cosmas attributes to the island are supported with regard to the Far East by the numerous reports of diplomatic and

⁹. *Periplus Maris Erythraei*: 57; *ibid.* 26.

¹⁰. Cosmas: xi. 15.

¹¹. Cosmas: xi. 17-19.

religious missions exchanged between Sri Lanka and China during the fifth and succeeding centuries, and with regard to the West by the prolific discoveries of Roman coins of the period. According to Cosmas, the importance of the island lay in its favourable geographical situation. But there can be no doubt that religious factors were also involved. By this time Sri Lanka was well known as the stronghold of orthodox Buddhism and it may not be irrelevant to point out that in the fifth century Buddhaghosa and others began the translation into Pali of Sinhala commentaries on Buddhist canonical texts in order to make them useful to Buddhists abroad. Thus the learning of Sri Lanka became available to the rest of the world. It is important to realize that this internationalization of learning coincided with the rise of Sri Lanka as the centrepot of eastern trade.

This intermediary role, however important it may have been at certain periods, was not the only reason why Sri Lanka was important in the eastern trade of the hellenistic and Roman world. There can be no doubt that the island itself provided some of the luxury commodities that reached the west. According to Cosmas¹², not only did foreign ships and products pass through the ports of the island, but it also sent out its own ships and products. What these products were, Cosmas does not tell us other than what he calls the hyacinth stone. Other Greek and Roman writers mention precious stones and metals, pearls, muslins, ivory and tortoise-shell¹³. Ptolemy adds rice, ginger and honey¹⁴; but none of these writers specifically says that they were exported. A Chinese work mentions cinnabar, mercury, something called "sun-lu", turmeric, storax, costus and such perfumes¹⁵. More than a millennium later, in the 13th century, King Buvanekabahu I (1272-84) in his letter to the Sultan of Egypt says: "I possess a prodigious quantity of pearls and precious stones of every kind. I have vessels, elephants, muslin and other stuffs, brazil wood, cinnamon and other objects of commerce which are brought to you by the Banian merchants. My kingdom produces trees, the wood of which is fit for making ships.¹⁶ As these lists may include items that formed part of the transit trade, it is difficult to determine what was locally produced other than ginger, turmeric, ivory, pearls and precious stones for which we have supporting evidence from other indigenous sources.

¹². Cosmas: xi. 15-16.

¹³. Cf. for instance, Strabo: ii. 1. 14; Periplus M.E.: 61; Pliny: *N.H.* vi. 81, 89.

¹⁴. Ptolemy: vii. 4. 1.

¹⁵. *Tai-Ping-Yu-Lan* 982, 4347 B, quoted by Wolters: *op. cit.* p. 80.

¹⁶. H.W. Codrington: "A Sinhalese Embassy to Egypt" *J.R.A.S. C.B.* XXVIII no. 72 pp. 82-85.

There is hardly any mention of cinnamon in the Greek and Roman notices of Sri Lanka, and the suggestion has been made that the cinnamon of Sri Lanka was a well kept secret jealously guarded from the west by the Indian or Arabian intermediaries. However, in as much as none of the better informed Chinese authors, nor even the earliest indigenous sources, make any mention of cinnamon, it is more likely that it was not produced on the island at the time to an extent significant enough to attract attention. This plant grows best in the south-west of the island, which was not densely populated prior to the 12th century, and it may not have received sufficient attention as a "cash crop". Its first mention in Sinhala literature is thought to be in the *Sikhavalanda*, a work of the 10th century, where it is mentioned as a cosmetic used in bathing. The *Aja Ib Al Hind* or "the Wonders of India" is perhaps the earliest foreign reference to Sri Lanka's cinnamon. It is also mentioned among letters of 12th century Jewish merchants found in Cairo Jeniza. It is subsequently noticed by such foreign writers as John of Montecorvino (13th century), Ibn Batuta (14th century) and Nicola de Conti¹⁷.

What the island received in return for its exports is also not clear. Coral and textiles are mentioned in connection with specific occasions, while Cosmas mentions Persian horses who were, according to him, exempted from duty¹⁸; but otherwise our sources are almost silent. Foreign coins and artifacts, the discovery of which have so far been intermittently announced, present only a very incomplete picture.

Recent studies of ancient cultures have stressed the need to widen the meaning of "commerce" to encompass more than its modern denotation of a supply and demand market system, to include various other forms of transactions. In particular, the bearing of ritual, religious and social considerations on the production and distribution of property has been stressed by economic anthropologists¹⁹. Regarding the physical evidence for Sri Lanka's foreign contacts, Martha Prickett has observed:

"The specific nature of these contacts remains to be clarified - be they individual merchants, formalized trade networks, state-supported diplomatic missions, souvenir-collecting travellers, gift-bearing pilgrims, returning students and sailors, or other formal or informal modes of exchange (including even the dowries of international

¹⁷. B.J. Perera: "The Foreign Trade and Commerce of Ancient Ceylon" pt. 4 *The Ceylon Historical Journal* II (1953) p. 17. W.I. Siriweera: "Pre-colonial Sri Lanka's Maritime Commerce with Special Reference to its Ports" in S. Bandaranayake et al. ed.: *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea* Colombo (1990) p. 128.

¹⁸. Cosmas XI. 22; cf. B.J. Perera: *op. cit.* p. 14.

¹⁹. Cf. Xinru Liu: *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges A.D. 1-600* Delhi (1988) pp. 1-2.

modes of exchange (including even the dowries of international marriages, more generalized immigration or military expeditions). There are historical records documenting instances of most of these possible formal and informal modes of exchange. Determining which was happening in situations where only a few trade items have been recovered is extremely difficult. More accurate information concerning the volume and the variety of materials 'traded', as well as on the archaeological contexts of their find localities, is necessary before the exchange mechanism can be more than speculatively determined²⁰."

In this connection it should be pointed out that both indigenous and foreign sources contain reports of commodities exchanged as gifts by embassies between Sri Lanka and Buddhist powers in India and China. For instance, the 11th chapter of the *Mahavamsa* refers to gifts exchanged between king Devanampiya Tissa and emperor Asoka Maurya in mid third century B.C. Assuming that these represent the pattern also of commercial exchanges, it could be argued that Sri Lanka in general must have exported its natural wealth of raw material of high value in exchange for manufactured objects priced not so much for their intrinsic material value as for their skillful execution or cultural significance. It should however be pointed out that the *Periplus* mentions muslins among the products of Taprobane, and that the export of textiles from Sri Lanka is also documented in late Sanskrit works such as the *Rajatarangani* and the *Tirthakalpa*, as well as in the geographical work of Idrisi²¹.

Our sources are equally reticent regarding cultural exchanges. Greek doxographers such as Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 160-215) show some knowledge of Buddhism²²; but this knowledge came to them through the activities of rulers such as Asoka Maurya, Milinda and Kanishka. Sri Lanka's contributions in this regard appear to have been directed mainly towards south-eastern Asia and China. It may also be pointed out that whereas over forty Greek and Latin authors mention Taprobane in their writings, the ancient literature of Sri Lanka is practically silent regarding contacts with the West. With the possible but doubtful exception of *mahavamsa* x. 90, the Yonas known to them are the Greek subjects of Asoka and Milinda, and the monks from "Alasanda the city of the Yonas" who, in the time of Dutthagamani, attended the

²⁰. M. Prickett: "Sri Lanka's Foreign Trade before A.D. 600" p. 169.

²¹. B.J. Perera: *op. cit.* p. 21.

²². Clement of Alexandria: *Stromateis* iii. 194 [Dindorff]; Cf. W. Halbfass: "Early Indian References to the Greeks and the First Western References to Buddhism" in Heinz Bechert (ed): *The Dating of the Historical Buddha* Gottingen (1991) pp. 197-208.

foundation of the Mahathupa²³.

Regarding certain details of the Vijaya legend, Merlin Peris, who has carried out comparative studies of Greek and eastern legends, has observed that, while these motifs closely reflect details in the Circe adventure of Odysseus in Homer's epic, they are yet in excess of anything that one could point to as present in Indian history, and must thus argue for Sri Lanka as being to some degree an independent beneficiary of stories originating in Greece. Peris even suspects that a considerable amount of Greek motifs and motif details even common with Indian literature and so far used to argue a second-hand derivation of these for Sri Lanka, may themselves have been part of a shared heritage which made its way to Sri Lanka *via* Greek influence in north-western India:

"Must we not presume that there must have been Greeks among the Buddhist clergy of India that, within less than a century of the Greek advent to India, mass-produced Jatakas with even distinctly Greek story motifs? There would have been at least a few who had found their way to this distant outpost of Aryan Buddhist occupation - Lanka with which northern India maintained continuous intercourse from racial, cultural and religious affinities spanning the first century B.C. when the legend of Vijaya in the most conservative calculation of Mendis had its birth. In the alternative must we not assume the existence of an elite and significant community of scholars among the indigenous monks themselves who, through translation or by their own linguistic achievements, knew fairly intimately classical works from the western civilization permeating the island *via* Greek influence in north-western India in the way that our hero himself got to the island?²⁴".

M. Peris' second alternative is the one that has actually been adopted already by the late S. Paranavitana who, in its support, has produced some strange documentary evidence supposed to have been engraved on already existing inscriptions. In the essay entitled "Classical References in the Interlinear Inscriptions from Sri Lanka" I have given my reasons for not placing credence in them and for not utilizing their evidence in my research. Moreover, many biblical story motifs are also found in the *Mahavamsa*, so that one cannot altogether rule out the possibility of borrowing from a common Middle-Eastern source.

²³. *Mahavamsa*: xxix. 39.

²⁴. M. Peris: "Greek Elements in the Vijaya Legend" *J.R.A.S. S.L.B.* n.s. XXXVI (1982) pp. 43-66; cf. p. 55.

Occasional attempts have been made to trace Greek, Egyptian or Assyrian influence in the architectural and sculptural remains of the island²⁵. However, as far as Greek (or, for that matter, Roman) influence is concerned, such influences, if they are really evident, can only vouch for the impact of Indian art traditions such as that of Gandhara.

II

One problem that needs further investigation is the commercial context of the Graeco-Roman objects found at various sites in northern Sri Lanka²⁶. Three sites appear to have been of primary importance: Mantai the ancient port and site of the famous temple of Tiruketisvaram, Kantarodai the ancient settlement in the Jaffna peninsula and Anuradhapura which served as the capital of the island for more than a millennium²⁷. The occurrence of imported pottery at these sites may reflect the island's contact with southern India whereby it participated in the international trade of the ancient world. Of special significance in this respect are the sherds of Roman amphorae, Arretine ware and the rouletted ware of the Arikamedu type, probably of Indian origin²⁸. Their occurrence in northern Sri Lanka serve to date these contacts to the

²⁵. e.g. C.M. Enriquez: *Ceylon Past and Present* London (n.d.) p. 103.

²⁶. W. Begley: 'Archaeological Exploration in Northern Ceylon' *Expedition: Bulletin of the University Museum of Pennsylvania* IX.4 (Summer 1976) pp. 21-29); W. Wijayapala and M.E. Prickett: *Sri Lanka and the International Trade: an Exhibition of Ancient Imported Ceramics Found in Sri Lanka's Archaeological Sites* (1986) nos. 2 and 3; H. Ratnayake: "The Jetavana Treasure" in S. Bandaranayake et al: *op. cit.* pp. 45-61; M. Prickett-Fernando: "Durable goods: The Archaeological Evidence of Sri Lanka's Role in the Indian Ocean Trade" *ibid.* pp. 61-85, esp. pp. 81-82; R. Silva and J. Bouzek: "Mantai - A Second Arikamedu: A Note on Roman finds" *ibid.* pp. 123-124.

²⁷. Other explored sites bearing on the period are Sigiriya, Kucchaveli and Tissamaharama. For a discussion of all these sites and objects recovered from them, cf. Martha Prickett: "Sri Lanka's Foreign Trade before A.D. 600: Archaeological Evidence" *Asian Panorama: Essays in Asian History, Past and Present* (1990) pp. 151-180.

²⁸. The observations of Wijayapala and Prickett (*op. cit.* introduction) regarding storage jars of foreign origin found in Sri Lanka may appropriately be applied to the sherds of Roman amphorae as well: "These larger vessels were undoubtedly shipped as the containers for more precious materials that have not survived, or served as water-storage containers on the ships during their long journeys. Thus these large jars show the international trade in perishable products that we will never find archaeologically. In this way these large jars inform us of the scale

early centuries of the Christian era, or even a couple of centuries earlier, when Arikamedu was flourishing as a trading station on the eastern coast of India.

The presence of amphorae and arretine sherds points to the conclusion that foreign articles were already arriving on the island during the early part of the first century A.D. On the other hand S.U. Deraniyagala has recently published four radio-carbon dates from Anuradhapura which point to a commencement date for rouletted ware during the second century B.C.; while Wimala Begley, in a reanalysis of the Arikamedu excavations of Wheeler and Casal has proposed seven phases for that site, the second of which, when rouletted ware (which Begley assigns to a Hellenistic origin) first appears, is dated to the late second century B.C.²⁹ All this is by no means inconsistent with the evidence of the local chronicles which represent the island under South Indian influence, and sometimes under South Indian rule, during the first centuries B.C. and A.D., nor with the testimony of Strabo who asserts that much cargo is brought from Taprobane to the Indian markets³⁰.

However, as Martha Prickett has pointed out, "Most of the identified 'Hellenistic' pottery appears to be from the Greek East - from somewhere in the greater northwestern India to Bactria. Only three sherds have been identified as being of more western origin, either Pergamene or Selucid of c. 250 to 150 B.C. Such long-distance western contacts probably moved through links with the Persian Gulf, along commercial routes that were still uniting the former empire of Alexander³¹."

It is worth observing that these sites in northern Sri Lanka where foreign articles are found, are those with religious as well as commercial significance, being associated with shrines, Hindu or Buddhist. In this connection we may also note that what is perhaps the only known instance of the arrival of western commodities reported in the Pali literature of Sri Lanka is connected with the homage paid to a Buddhist shrine by a king of the land: Bhatikabhaya's offering of a coral net to the Mahathupa³². Religion

of the international commodity trade far more accurately than do the more lovely fine vessels that were traded for their own beauty."

²⁹. S.U. Deraniyagala: "Excavations in the Citadel of Anuradhapura Gedige 1984: a Preliminary Report" *Ancient Ceylon* no. 6 (1986) pp. 39-47; W. Begley: "Arikamedu reconsidered" *American Journal of Archaeology* LXXXVII (1983) pp. 461-481; cf. I.W. Aridika and Peter Belwood: "Sembiran: the Beginnings of Indian Contact with Bali" *Antiquity* LXV. 247 (1991) pp. 221-232; cf. p. 228.

³⁰. Cf. Strabo: II. i. 14.

³¹. M. Prickett: *op. cit.* p. 170.

³². *Vamsathappakasini* vol. 2 p. 60 l. 30 [ed. Malalasekera].

seems to have played an important part in determining the demand for foreign articles. Archaeology is thus in agreement with the chronicles which constantly stress the importance of religion in the political and cultural life of the people of Sri Lanka.

R.E.M. Wheeler has suggested that the purpose of the settlements of Arikamedu was to consolidate the trade with Sri Lanka and South-east Asia³³. At Arikamedu, apart from glass and clay, the substances most used for the manufacture of beads are chalcedonic crystal and crystalline quartz in their many varieties. They are found in many districts throughout India, but they also occur in Sri Lanka whose gems and pearls are of ancient renown. Some of the gem producing regions of the Deccan have also yielded Graeco-Roman artifacts. Many of the Roman coins found in South India come from the Beryl producing Coimbatore district, while Arikamedu type rouletted ware has turned up at Chandravalli and Brahmagiri in the Chitaldrug district of northern Mysore, at Amaravati and in the Nellore district of South India: all these lie close to regions producing precious stones. Roman artifacts in northern Sri Lanka may likewise indicate the early exploitation of the island's natural wealth.

On the other hand, Roman red ware, rouletted ware, beads and other articles of Graeco-Roman origin have turned up at many ports on the West Indian coast as well as in the interior³⁴. Red polished ware and Graeco-Roman antiquities are reported from a number of places in and around Kathiawar and the Gujarat province in general. This was one of the areas producing semi-precious stones. Rouletted ware from Nasik and Godavari are said to be similar to those from Arikamedu. Among the finds at Broach (Bharukaccha, the Barygaza of the Greek writers) were beads in large quantities in all stages of manufacture indicating a local industry, and similar observations have been made regarding Mantai in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, Indian rouletted ware has been reported from illicit diggings around Kobal, Mendal, and Kibutal in North-western Java, as well as from excavations at Sembiran in Bali³⁵; and early Indian contact with Thailand is indicated by beads and bronze objects from the cemetery of Ban Don Ta-phet

³³. R.E.M. Wheeler: "Arikamedu: An Indo-Roman Trading Station on the East Coast of India" *Ancient India* no. 2 (1946) p. 121.

³⁴. C. Margabandhu: "Trade Contacts Between Western India and the Graeco-Roman World in the Early Centuries of the Christian Era - an Archaeological Restatement" *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* VIII (1965) pp. 316-322.

³⁵. M.I.S. Walker and S. Santoso: "Romano-Indian Rouletted Pottery in Indonesia" *Mankiul* XI (1977) pp. 39-47 and *Asian Perspectives* XX (1977) pp. 228-235; Aridika and Bellwood: *loc. cit.*

in Central Thailand³⁶. The Roman lamp from P'ong-tuk in Southern Thailand and the Antonian bracelet from Oc-Eo in Vietnam are already well known. X-ray diffraction analysis of rouletted sherds from Sembiran, Anuradhapura and Arikamedu conclusively support an Indian origin, while neutron activity analysis of sherds from these and other sites indicate that all the rouletted ware is so close in composition as to suggest the definite possibility of a single manufacturing source for all the samples³⁷.

The occurrence of Graeco-Roman objects and a bead industry in western and central Deccan as well as on the east coast of India and South-east Asia may indicate the existence of overland caravan traffic and sea trade during the early centuries of the Christian era. The provenance of similar material at several sites in northern Sri Lanka suggests that the island was somehow drawn into the network of Indo-Roman trade. But whether the role of mediatrix between East and West, which Cosmas in the sixth century A.D. assigned to Sri Lanka, was already being taken at this early date cannot be asserted confidently in the present state of our knowledge.

From the archaeological material at Arikamedu, Wheeler has concluded that within the first two decades of the first century A.D., Roman factories were already being established in certain major east Indian ports for the dual purpose of exploiting local traffic with Sri Lanka and of prospecting the east Indian coast towards the Ganges and Indonesia³⁸. However, Wheeler believes that until the third quarter of the first century A.D. there was no regular direct communication between Rome and Sri Lanka: hence the importance of the overland route from west to east through the Coimbatore gap in the early years of the principate; hence too the absence in Sri Lanka of Roman coins from the first half of the first century A.D. Wheeler refers to the remark of Strabo that only stray individuals had in his day sailed round India towards the Ganges, and that no useful information was forthcoming from them³⁹. He also points out that with the author of the *Periplus*, first-hand knowledge stops at Nelcynda on the Malabar coast. Wheeler, however, does not appear to have considered Pliny's account of the sailing

³⁶. I.C. Glover: *Early Trade Between India and Southeast Asia* Hull (1989) [2nd edition 1990] pp. 12ff.

³⁷. Aridika and Bellwood: *op. cit.* p. 224. These writers also allude to rouletted black ware in contexts of the first and second centuries A.D. from Beikghano in Burma, and to a sherd of apparent Arikamedu type 18 C from Bukit Tengku Lembu in Northern Malaya. *ibid.* p. 229.

³⁸. R.E.M. Wheeler: "Roman Trade with India and Pakistan" *Aspects of Archaeology in Britain and Beyond* ed. W.F. Grimes, pp. 370 ff.

³⁹. Cf. Strabo: xv. 1. 4.

time from Sri Lanka to the Ganges⁴⁰; and although Pliny claims that some of the information he got from the delegates from Sri Lanka was confirmed by reports of Roman prospectors⁴¹, Wheeler thinks that they had not yet visited the island but must have received some account of it through trade channels; "otherwise the Roman castaway would not have been such a novelty to the local king."

A similar view is also expressed by Charlesworth who thinks that the Arretine ware could not have been brought to Arikamedu in western ships which may not have rounded Cape Comorin until the end of the first century. He too points to the lack of knowledge in the *Periplus* beyond Cape Comorin and says that the pottery was brought by Indian and not Roman ships, or else, perhaps, conveyed overland through the Coimbatore gap. In other words, not more than an occasional Graeco-Roman ship got through to the eastern side of the Indian Peninsula until after the end of the first century A.D. Charlesworth questions the capacity of the average Graeco-Roman ship to surmount the formidable barrier of Adam's Bridge between India and Sri Lanka, and suggests that the rarity of Roman coins of the first three centuries A.D. in Sri Lanka shows that the alternative, i.e. the circumnavigation of the island, was not yet in use.

However, it now appears that these views need to be modified in view of the earlier dating of the rouletted ware from Arikamedu. The occurrence of Arretine ware in northern Sri Lanka in association with other pottery types also found at Arikamedu makes it very likely that the Palk Strait was in use, no doubt concurrently with the overland route, for transporting merchandise between the eastern and western ports of India and further afield. The fact that so many coin hoards were lost in the Coimbatore gap may be an indication that it was not the safest route for Roman wares. The sea route on the other hand would have been safer, particularly once the Romans, with their archers on board and garrison at Cape Comorin⁴² and other similar measures, were able to keep in check the menaces of the pirate coast. Moreover, it would have been the cheaper route by far. It is therefore possible that the sea route was also in use from a very early time and that it may even have come to be preferred, leading eventually to the abandonment of the overland route as deduced by Wheeler from the cessation of Roman coins in the second century.

However, as Martha Prickett, field director of the Mantai excavations, has pointed out, any ship sailing between the east and the west coasts of India, or points beyond either, must pass through one of the channels across Adam's Bridge, where shoals and tricky currents produce serious risks, or must entirely circumnavigate Sri Lanka. "The only other possibility open to the larger ships was to off-load their cargo

⁴⁰. Pliny: vi. 82-83.

⁴¹. *ibid.* vi. 88.

⁴². *Periplus* 59.

on to lighters or to land-transport for the journey across Adam's Bridge.⁴³

It has been observed that one cannot sail in a vessel of any size between India and Sri Lanka: "The channel is blocked about sixty miles south of Jaffna by the island of Ramesvaram on the Indian side and by the island of Mannar on the Sinhalese side; and between them is a chain of sand banks [Adam's Bridge] affording only three to four foot draft. ... The Palk Strait, which lies to the north and east of Adam's Bridge, is therefore virtually enclosed, constituting a huge bay which must have been attractive to ships which did not wish to make the journey round the south of the island to reach India or the Maldives. They could unload their cargo there in calm waters, to be transported either overland or in lighters to the other side of the island of Mannar, there to be reloaded on other ships for the next stage of the voyage."⁴⁴

On the other hand, it has been pointed out that, while the Mannar Straits retained the hazards of shallowness which ultimately caused its abandonment, the alternative route to the south of Sri Lanka was uninviting due to the hidden crops of rock that still lay to the south-east of the island. The risks of this alternative route are attested by the many wrecks under the sea, and the "lodestone legend" which is "clear evidence that the sailors shunned the southern route round Sri Lanka specially during the south-west monsoon when the sails were raised in a north-easterly navigation"⁴⁵.

C.W. Nicholas has argued that in and prior to the 12th century, and very probably also prior to 1549, there was no navigable Pamban passage, and that the isthmus now called "the Great Dam" was continuous from Pamban island to the mainland. The only navigable seaway between the gulf of Mannar and the Palk Strait was the Mannar passage which, Nicholas argues, must have been much deeper in antiquity than it has been in recent times. "Mantai stood at the northern end of this single, sheltered and vital sea route, and it was this commanding position which conferred on it its importance as a seaport"⁴⁶; in addition, it was close to the rich pearl

⁴³. Mantha Prickett: *Excavations at Mantai 1980: Preliminary Report of the Field Director* Cambridge. <assl. (10,17,1980) ms. p. 1.

⁴⁴. John de Silva: "Ceylon and Chinese Porcelain Before 1500" *Asian Affairs* October 1979, pp. 260-271; cf. pp. 268-9.

⁴⁵. Roland Silva: "Mantai - the Great Emporium of Cosmas Indicopleustes" (paper delivered to participants of the Maritime International Silk-route Seminar, Colombo, 12th-14th Dec. 1990) p. 3.

⁴⁶. As Nicholas points out, this is in spite of the fact that there is no natural harbour at Mantai.

bank to south of Mannar island⁴⁷."

Mantai was thus situated in an advantageous position which determined its preeminence in the ancient trade of South Asia.

"It lies athward the maritime trade route between the Near and Far East. It is also strategically placed on a north-south axis, at the point of any incursions from mainland India. This importance is further reinforced by the fact that it is situated at the southern extremity of Adam's Bridge, the string of under-water passage of shipping of any size between India and Sri Lanka. This means that it became a point of contact and interchange for ships both from the Near and Far enough in design to sail the notoriously dangerous waters of the south coast of Sri Lanka"⁴⁸

Martha Prickett, speaking before the First National Archaeological Congress in 1986, explained the significance of this port thus:

"Mantai was superbly positioned for control of resoures and maritime trade routes. In serving as the principal port of Anuradhapura, Mantai was a pivotal centre in the long-distance trade between the Middle East, South Asia and the orient until the 11th century A.D. The extent of this trade, which was largely in perishable goods, such as spices, textiles and precious woods, is demonstrated archaeologically by more prosaic items such as ceramic and stones - although these clearly support the historical reports of Mantai"s far-flung trade networks."

According to Prickett, "the near equal quantities of Near-Eastern and Far-Eastern ceramics clearly confirms that during its heyday Mantai served as a pivotal entrepot and trans-shipment centre in the maritime commercial networks of the early medieval period."⁴⁹ Prickett is however careful to point out that, "although the sample of Early Historic Period is still minuscule, there is, as yet, no ceramic evidence from our excavations of direct Roman contact, although there are several pieces of Arretine ceramics reputedly found during the 1952 excavations and as surface finds. Despite this paucity, the provenance of rouletted ware, with a coastal distribution from Central India

⁴⁷. C.W. Nicholas: "The North-west Passage between Ceylon and India" in: S. Bandaranayake et. al. (edd.): *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea* pp. 271-276.

⁴⁸. John Carswell: "The Excavation of Mantai" *Ancient Ceylon* no. 7 (1990) pp. 17-28; cf. p. 20.

⁴⁹. Prickett: *Excavations at Mantai 1980* p. 28.

to Sri Lanka, eastward to Indonesia, shows participation in at least some of the international trading routes of the period.⁵⁰ As Prickett points out, "there seems little question that Mantai was already playing its later role as a major port during the development of Roman commerce in the Indian Ocean in the first and second centuries A.D. Precisely how early this role began is yet to be discovered."⁵¹

The significance of Mantai, however, was not confined to its role as an entrepot. As Carswell has observed, "the sheer number of half-sawn conches and other workshop debris is evidence for Mantai being a major manufacturing site. The industrial character of the site is further amplified by significant remains of glass cullet of various colours and glass beads in different shades of manufacture. There are also masses of iron and other slag. Over two thousand beads have been recovered of a wide variety, with imports from as far afield as India, Afghanistan and the Mediterranean. ... Mantai was also a major stone bead manufacturing site, and many drilled and polished specimens never completed or fractured in manufacture have been found."⁵²

The early use of the route through the Palk strait is confirmed not only by Pliny's excellent description of navigation along the east Indian coast⁵³, (which does, by the way, include a note on the shallowness of the sea in-between), but also from the statements of the *Periplus* regarding the marts and anchorages on the east Indian coast, among which Kamara, Podouka and Sopatma are mentioned by name⁵⁴. The *Periplus* says that the merchants from Limurike and the north arrive in these ports, that the local coasting vessels from there proceed as far as Limurike, that there are other vessels called *sangara* and *kolandiophonta*, the latter employed for voyages to Chryse⁵⁵ and the Ganges, and that these marts import all the commodities which reach Limurike, absorbing likewise nearly every species of goods brought from Egypt and most exports

⁵⁰. Prickett: "Mantai-Mahatittha: the Great Port and Entrepot in Indian Trade" in: S. Bandaranayake et. al. (edd): *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea* pp. 115-122; cf. also Roland Silva and Jan Bouzek: "Mantai - a Second Arikamedu: a Note on Roman Finds" *ibid* pp. 123-124.

⁵¹. Prickett: *Excavations at Mantai 1980* pp. 29-30.

⁵². Carswell: *op. cit.* p. 27.

⁵³. Pliny: vi. 82-83.

⁵⁴. *Periplus* 60.

⁵⁵. Chryse [Chersonesos] i.e. the Golden Chersonese, somewhere in South-east Asia; compare *Suvannabhumi* of the Pali texts.

from Limurike⁵⁶. Significantly enough, the author then goes out of his way to mention the products of Taprobane before resuming the description of the east coast of India, showing thereby that the island had been drawn into this brisk commerce. The mid-first century date now accepted for the *Periplus* would make this information more or less contemporary with the evidence from Arretine pottery. The cumulative evidence therefore suggests some form of navigation through the Palk Strait at least as early as the mid first century A.D.

Charlesworth's suggestion that the goods were conveyed in local ships is supported by the express testimony of the *Periplus*, and by Pliny's description of the special reversible craft peculiar to this area, with their tonnage of about 3,000 amphorae. But it does not follow from this that the trade was entirely in the hands of local people, as Filliozat appears to believe⁵⁷. According to Filliozat, the Romans took no active part in organizing the Indian trade. He points out that since according to Pliny's timetable the Roman ships stayed in India only for a couple of months, the merchandise was collected beforehand at those designated ports described in the *Periplus*. While some Yavanas may have penetrated into Indian towns and even dwelt there as just one more caste, the actual organization of the commerce was, he says, in the hands of the Indians who had much to gain from it. Filliozat refers to Pliny's remark that pepper was brought to Bacare in local monoxulae and points out that the Indian merchandise was brought to the Mediterranean world by various intermediaries across a number of routes, well before the establishment of Roman power. In other words, the Romans could obtain eastern merchandise without having to go and look for it.

This hypothesis completely ignores our evidence: the hoards of Roman coins in India, the increasing references to Indian goods and other exotic products in Roman literature from the time of Augustus onwards, and the references to western commerce in early Tamil literature leave no doubt that, once the use of the monsoons for navigation was discovered and peace was restored under Augustus and Aden, the entrepot of the middlemen was subdued, direct commerce between east and west grew more and more intense. The sending of embassies to the Roman emperors, the sophisticated customs organization in Egypt and the very existence of works like the *Periplus*, all lead us to believe that the role of the Roman merchants in eastern trade was not simply that of passive clients. They may not have gathered the products personally, but one cannot think of them as leaving the whole concern in the hands of local people. There were Roman factories on the east coast of India, and it is very probable that there were resident Romans in those regions. It is in this context that we should read the accounts of the Tamil poets concerning the dwellings of the Yavanas at Puhar on the Kaveri river.

⁵⁶. Limurike may be the same as the Damirike of Ptolemy or the Dimirike of later Latin writers, i.e. "the Tamil Country".

⁵⁷. J. Filliozat: "Les échanges entre L'Empire Romain et L'Inde aux premiers siècles de L'Ere Chrétienne" *Revue Historique* CCL (1949) p. 10.

Although their presence in Sri Lanka is not positively documented. The people of this island must have been aware of Roman enterprise on the Indian mainland. King Bhatikabhaya, in any case, knew enough about the Romans to send to them for coral, rather than buy it in Indian markets, when he needed this commodity for a special religious occasion.

Two ancient references referring to widely different dates are often cited as attesting the existence of a foreign quarter at Anuradhapura; but their value is not unquestioned. The first is the statement in the *Mahavamsa* according to which, as early as the fourth century B.C. king Pandukabhaya laid out a quarter for the Yonas near the Western gate of the city⁵⁸. Apart from the historical difficulties concerning the presence of Yonas (be they Greeks or Persians) on the island before the time of Alexander the Great, it has been pointed out that the reading *Yonasabthagavatthu* is not supported by the best manuscripts in Sri Lanka which read "*So Tam sabthagavattham*" referring to the laying of the "common ground"⁵⁹. The other is a supposed reference to the dwellings of the Sabaeans in Fa-hsien's description of the island written in the early fifth century A.D. But Fa-hsien's term "*Sap-pho*" is now generally interpreted as referring to the *sarthavahas* or chiefs of the trading class who figure prominently in Buddhist literature. Moreover, it has been shown that Arabians could not have been known to Fa-hsien as Sabaeans, since the ruling dynasty at the time was Himyarite⁶⁰. However, we know from Cosmas that the Persians had settled on the island by his time, and that they had their own Christian community consisting of clergy, faithful and a presbyter and deacon ordained from Persia, with complete ecclesiastical ritual⁶¹.

III

We maintain that the Taprobane of the Graeco-Roman writers is Sri Lanka not only because of its resemblance to the ancient name Tambapanni, but also because the particulars of the Greek and Roman notices agree on the whole with what is revealed in indigenous sources. This is specially true of the accounts of Pliny, Ptolemy, and Cosmas, all of whom were able to obtain reliable accounts from people who had firsthand experience of the island. Where they differ from local records, the explanation

⁵⁸. *Mahavamsa* x. 90 [Geiger].

⁵⁹. A.M. Gunasekara: "Sabaeans and Yavanas" *JRASCB* N & Q pt. 4 (July 1914) n. 26.

⁶⁰. G.R. Tibbetts: "Pre-Islamic Arabia and South-east Asia" *J.M.B.R.A.S* XXIX (3) (1956) pp. 182-208; cf. p. 203.

⁶¹. Cosmas iii. 65 and xi. 14.

is not that they describe different parts of the island, as A. Herrmann believes⁶², but that their reports represent different points of view. The chronicles are primarily interested in the religious development of the island, and for them a good government was one that patronized Buddhism. Agricultural achievements of rulers are, of course, duly noted and praised, inasmuch as it was the irrigation works that largely provided the revenue for the maintenance and well-being of the Buddhist clergy. The foreign sources, on the other hand, reflect Graeco-Roman achievements in navigation, exploration, and commerce, and the resulting growth of descriptive and mathematical geography that was characteristic of the period in which the best of them were written. Hence, their observations represent a necessarily secular point of view, although some writers did not ignore altogether the religious life of Taprobane.

It is strange that foreign writers, who must have derived most of their knowledge of the island from merchant mariners, have little to say about its ports. Pliny mentions the port of Hippuros (generally identified with Kudiramalai) where the freedman of Annius Plocamus landed, and a harbour adjoining the city of Palaesimundu⁶³. Cosmas also speaks of a port and emporium but fails to give its name⁶⁴. Ptolemy however mentions five harbours and two emporia by name⁶⁵, but the identifications proposed by modern writers have not always proved satisfactory.

However, both local and foreign sources do tell us something about the organization of ancient ports. Cosmas mentions the controllers and custom officers⁶⁶. The Existence of such officials at Mantai is attested by an inscription from the site as well as by a reference in the Nandiya Vasthu of the *Saddharmalankaraya*⁶⁷. Collection of revenues at several other ports is documented in inscriptions discovered in their surroundings. Godavaya is a particularly interesting example. The major ports were cosmopolitan in character with resident communities of various nationalities, so that, in addition to the collection of duties, the officers may have been entrusted with the welfare of foreign merchants at the ports. That the activities of these merchants pervaded through almost every port on the island is evident from the numerous finds of

⁶². A. Herrmann: *P.W.* s.v. "Taprobane".

⁶³. Pliny: vi. 84 and 86.

⁶⁴. Cosmas: xi. 14 and 17.

⁶⁵. Ptol. vii. 4. 7.

⁶⁶. Cosmas: xi. 17.

⁶⁷. *Epigraphia Zeylanica* vol. III pt. 1 London (1928-33) p. 105; *Saddharmalankaraya* p. 706 [ed. Gnanawimala Thero]; cf. B.J. Perera: *op. cit.* pt. 1 *C.H.J.* I (1952) p. 119.

late Roman bronze coins at many of them. Coins of more precious metals must have reached the island in abundance, but their very value doubtless caused their early disappearance. Both Pliny and Cosmas have recorded the impression they made on the rulers of the island⁶⁸.

The extent of the influence of foreign trade on the life of the people in general is not easy to estimate. The prevalent view, until recently, has been that this trade could not have affected to any significant extent the majority of the citizens, who were content to pursue their normal means of livelihood, agricultural or otherwise. They were largely self-sufficient, and whatever they lacked or had in excess was taken care of by one aspect or other of internal trade. The exports of the island were royal monopolies, so that private individuals could not have taken interest in foreign trade on their own initiative⁶⁹. But the kings, especially when they were strong enough to keep the island united, prosperous and safe from invasions, must have paid attention to foreign trade on an organized basis. But whether they followed a consistent economic policy with regard to this trade in the early period is not clear from our sources. However, this trade must have played its part in determining the nature of political decisions; and it was probably the vast revenue from foreign ships and trade, rather than any voluntary or forced labour, that enabled the construction of the monumental works of religious architecture and irrigation⁷⁰.

Although written from different points of view, one is often struck by the remarkable extent to which local and foreign sources not only complement, but even corroborate each other. For instance, the chronicles concentrate their attention chiefly on the king and his officers, and have little to say regarding ordinary people. Now, in those Graeco-Roman sources derived from first-hand experience, i.e. Pliny, Ptolemy, Palladius and Cosmas, the only individuals mentioned are, again, the king and his officers. Hence, for these writers too, just as for the chroniclers, the most important man of the island was the king; although both Pliny and the chronicles reveal that his powers were not altogether unlimited. Even with regard to details considered fabulous or idealized, there is sometimes agreement between local and foreign sources. Thus the

⁶⁸. Pliny: vi. 84; Cosmas: xi. 17-19.

⁶⁹. This view is the inevitable corollary to the equally long-established one which holds that the Sinhala people have shown a singular lack of interest in seafaring. Both views have been successfully contested in recent times. Cf. Somasiri Devendra et al.: "The Search for the Maritime Heritage" *Ancient Ceylon* no. 10 (1990) pp. 323-337; R.A.L.H. Gunawardena: "Seaways to Siedidiba: Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and their Impact on Pre-colonial Sri Lanka" in: S. Bandaranayaka et al. (edd): *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea* pp. 25-45.

⁷⁰. Cf. Roland Silva: *op. cit.* pt. 1 *C.H.J.* 1 (1952) p. 119.

long life attributed by western writers to the people of Taprobane is not only repeated by Chinese authors⁷¹, but also finds a parallel in the extreme lengths of reign which the chronicles attribute to certain kings of Sri Lanka. Again, the marvels told about the monstrous creatures that infest the waters around Taprobane are also found in eastern legends, specially in the Jataka stories.

One feature common to most foreign notices of Taprobene is that they invariably exaggerate the size of the island⁷². Apart from certain farfetched mathematical explanations which are on the whole inadequate, the three best known explanations are, (1) that the exaggerations are a vestige of the belief held at one time that Taprobane was the southern continent or the beginning thereof, (2) that they represent a confusion on the part of Greeks, between two local measurements of different lengths both of which bore the same name, i.e. the Indian word "yojana", and (3) that they reflect the extraordinary significance of the island for early western mariners both as one of the furthest points of navigational and economic interest, and as the home of some well-known exotic products. All these explanations have been supported in the past, but it is also possible that when distances were recorded by the number of days' sail involved, figures given in terms of local ships were calculated in stades of degrees, without making allowance for the greater speeds attained by western ships. That the ancients themselves were not totally unaware of this problem is seen from Pliny where he says that the given distance of twenty days between Taprobane and the Prasian nation was adjusted to seven in terms of the speed of Roman ships⁷³. However, it has not been possible to find a general explanation that would cover all cases of exaggeration, although one particular case can be satisfactorily explained; the extremely great and unprecedented dimensions given by Marcian of Heraclea follow from the inclusion of the islands which Ptolemy had represented as encircling Taprobane⁷⁴.

⁷¹. Tennent: *Ceylon* I, p. 587.

⁷². The author of the *Dipavamsa* appears to have had a fairly good idea of the island's true size. Cf. *Dipavamsa* xvii. 1-2: "The excellent island of Lanka is thirty-two yojanas long, eighteen yojanas broad, its circuit is 100 yojanas, and is surrounded by the sea and one great mine of treasures. It possesses rivers and lakes, mountains and forests". Fa-hsien (ch. 37) however gives the dimensions as fifty yojanas from east to west and thirty yojanas from north to south. Perhaps Fa-hsien's figures are given in terms of a shorter *yojana* than those of the *Dipavamsa*.

⁷³. Pliny: vi, 82.

⁷⁴. D.P.M. Weerakkody: "Sri Lanka in the Post-Ptolemaic Greek Geographical Tradition", due to be published in the forthcoming issue of the *Ceylon Geographer*.

Tennent has observed with regard to the Chinese notices on Sri Lanka that, unlike other foreigners acquainted only with the seacoast and mercantile communities established there, the Chinese provide notices on the manners of the Sinhalese, and even minute particulars of their domestic habits, which attest to a continuous intercourse and an intimate familiarity between the people of the two countries⁷⁵. "The explanation", he says, "is to be found in the identity of the national worship, attracting as it did the people of China to the sacred island, which had become the great metropolis of their common faith, and to the sympathy and hospitality with which the Sinhalese welcomed the frequent visits of their distant co-religionists".

It is true that the Greek and Latin notices in general do not reflect an intimacy of this kind. None of them can claim to a deep understanding of Sri Lanka's life and thought as revealed in a Chinese writer such as Fa-hsien. Yet these writers, in describing the island from a secular point of view, and supplying us with certain details not recorded in the indigenous tradition, provide a valuable complement which, when used critically and systematically, helps to further our knowledge concerning Sri Lanka in antiquity.

D.P.M. WEERAKKODY

⁷⁵. Tennent: *Ceylon* 1. p. 593.