

TRADE PATTERNS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE POLITICS OF MEDIEVAL SRI LANKA

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Sri Lanka's central situation in the Indian Ocean, astride the East-West maritime trade routes, was bound to have a deep impact on its history. This fact has been heavily underscored in the post-sixteenth century period when the island was successively dominated by the Portuguese, Dutch and the British who were lured to the East for commercial reasons. However, the significance of maritime trade in the history of pre-colonial Sri Lanka has not been adequately recognised. Historians have largely been so pre-occupied with the effects of Sri Lanka's proximity to her giant neighbour, India, (there is of course no denying that Indian influence on Sri Lanka was profoundly felt) that they have overlooked the wider perspective of the impact of the island's geographical situation which exposed her to a wider world and a wider set of events. This paper seeks to explain certain major shifts in the political life of Sri Lanka during the period between the 10th and the 14th centuries in terms of the changing trade patterns of the Indian Ocean.

From as early as the first century A. D. Western writers such as Ptolemy¹ regarded Sri Lanka as a country which occupied an important position in the trade with the East. By the sixth century A. D. Sri Lanka's status in Indian Ocean trade had grown to such large proportions that Cosmas² considered it the most important entrepot in the region. The discovery of Roman coins in the island, the most numerous being those belonging to the third to the sixth century A. D. period, is corroboratory evidence. The last Byzantine coin noticed in Sri Lanka is an issue of Heraclius (613-641).³ After the seventh century A. D. the evidence for trade with the West becomes negligible, a fact which coincides with the rise of a new emporium for the East-West trade, Sri Vijaya in Sumatra. This change had a profound effect on political trends in Sri Lanka, a subject to which we will return later.

Agriculture has always been Sri Lanka's economic base and this was buttressed by a massive hydraulic system built by the early Sinalese rulers. The extant evidence, relating to the vast irrigation structures of early Sri Lanka together with the accounts in the local chronicles,⁴ which concentrate on irrigation works as the only economic activity of rulers, have crowded out facets such as trade in the country's economy. A recent study⁵ has tried to put the record straight at least for the period from the third to the ninth century, where it has been suggested that the most prolific activity in the building of irrigation tanks and canals coincided with the most flourishing period of trade. The explanation for this is that commercial gain provided the resources for hydraulic engineering. Therefore the falling away of trade around the seventh century A. D. was bound to have repercussions on the economic activities of rulers. Gunawardana draws attention to the fact that "only one new major-scale irrigation project was undertaken in the period between the seventh and the ninth centuries in contrast to the intensive activities in the preceding period".⁶ This however was not the only reaction of the Sinhalese rulers to diminishing trade opportunities coming in from the Arabian sea.

The geographical location of Anuradhapura, the capital city was such that it seems to have been closely bound with the maritime and inland trading network of the country. Situated on the banks of the Malvatu river, it has direct access to the main port of the island, Mahātīttha (modern Mantai), located near the mouth of the same river and facing the Arabian Sea. With the shifting of the main entrepot trade to Sri Vijaya, the port of Mahātīttha was deprived of much of its life blood and there is some indication that Anuradhapura, the capital city lost much of its attractiveness. The Sinhalese rulers soon realized that the principal arena for the East-West exchange trade had shifted from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal. Thus, we find them evincing an increasing interest in the north-eastern zone of the island, wherein were located ports such as Trincomalee opening out into the Bay of Bengal. The agricultural development of this part of the dry zone, watered by the lower reaches of the perennial Mahaveli river, had begun much earlier, the first big land mark being the construction of the extensive Minneri reservoir by Mahasen (274-301). Political recognition was given to the region early in the sixth century A. D. when Silākāla (518-531) appointed the heir to the throne as its provincial ruler. In and after the seventh century A. D. an even more sustained interest is evinced in this area. The construction of the Kantalai and Giritale tanks by Aggabodhi II (604-614) was an important contribution to the economic development of the region. Much more significant is the fact that between the seventh and tenth centuries A. D. four Sinhalese kings left Anuradhapura and ruled from the north-eastern city of Polonnaruva. These rulers were Aggabodhi IV (667-683), Aggabodhi VII (727-777), Udaya I (797-802) and Sena I (833-853).

The economic interdependence of Polonnaruva and the port of Trincomalee (ancient Gokaṇṇa) was the same as that which existed between the capital city of Anuradhapura and the port at Mahātīttha. Polonnaruva lay on the banks of the Mahaveli river, within easy access of Trincomalee which was situated near the mouth of the same river. Thus, the emergence of Polonnaruva in the seventh century A. D. is significant in terms of the trade in the Bay of Bengal and Sri Lanka's interest in it. The seventh century not only marks the rise of Sri Vijaya as a maritime power in Southeast Asia but it also witnesses the ascendancy of the Pallava dynasty on the east coast of India. The Pallavas played a major role in the trade between India and Southeast Asia and Sri Lankan rulers cultivated very close ties with the Pallavas during this time.⁷ With these two trading powers, Sri Vijaya and the Pallava kingdom on either side, the Bay of Bengal became an area of intense trading activity and it is perhaps not a coincidence that the interest of Sri Lankan rulers was gravitating towards Polonnaruva, a city which could command the port of Trincomalee. This was the prelude for the permanent transfer of the capital from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruva at the end of the tenth century A. D., the Coḷa occupation of the island providing the catalyst for the change. It must be emphasized that the pull towards Polonnaruva had already begun, the changing pattern of trade in the Indian Ocean providing one of the chief incentives. The Coḷas only provided the necessary push.

Coḷa interest in Sri Lanka stemmed from both political and commercial reasons. The latter had once again to do with the Bay of Bengal trade which had grown by leaps and bounds by the tenth century. Beginning from the seventh century, Arab trade was spanning the ocean routes extending right up to the ports of China, reaching a peak position in the ninth century.

However, a major change occurred when in 878 A. D. a Chinese rebel massacred 120,000 foreigners in Canton and among them are said to have been Arabs, Christians, Jews and Persian Muslims.⁸ From this time onwards, as a rule, Arab ships avoided going to Canton. They stopped at the Indian and Southeast Asian ports, thus making the Bay of Bengal a more lucrative trading area than even before. Sri Vijaya gained tremendously from this turn of events and the Coḷas who had displaced the Pallavas on the east coast of India began to cast covetous eyes on this trade. Coḷa commercial policy aimed at controlling the western seaboard of the Bay of Bengal first and this could not be completed without the eastern and southern ports of Sri Lanka. The Coḷas had ample political reasons for invading Sri Lanka⁹. That such reasons existed was perhaps to the advantage of the Coḷas for it would have been against the norms of international behaviour to attack a country without provocation merely to secure trading advantages. The Coḷas were able to conquer the greater part of Sri Lanka but the southern and south-eastern parts of the country (the Rohaṇa kingdom) remained independent. However, what is important is that the port of Trincomalee fell into their hands. The Coḷas made the decision to abandon Anuradhapura and rule Sri Lanka from Polonnaruva. Their occupation of Sri Lanka lasted for a little more than half a century during which period they established an effective administrative machinery in the country.¹⁰ Thus, Coḷa foreign policy, at least as far as Sri Lanka was concerned, hardly fits the description 'politics of plunder' given to it by E. W. Spencer¹¹. With the Kingdom of Rohaṇa offering resistance, Polonnaruva was important to the Coḷas from a military stand point too. However, when one considers the overall pattern of the commercial policy of the Coḷas which sought to control the Bay of Bengal both from the Indian as well as South-east Asian coasts, Sri Lanka and its ports were a *sine qua non*. Thus, in the shift of the Sri Lankan capital from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruva, commercial strategy would have been a major consideration.

Even after the Coḷas were ousted from Sri Lanka, the commercial advantages of the northeastern capital were not lost sight of. Vijayabāhu I, who restored Sinhalese rule in northern Sri Lanka around 1070 continued to rule from Polonnaruva, although he recognised the legitimacy that could be derived from Anuradhapura, the original seat of Sinhalese power. Vijayabāhu I sought to gain this legitimacy by having his consecration ceremony performed at the old capital but more pragmatic reasons made him stick to the city favoured by the Coḷas and Polonnaruva held its spell. Even before he captured northern Sri Lanka, Vijayabāhu had had a taste of the lucrative trade of the Bay of Bengal through the ports of Rohaṇa, his original power base. The *Cūlavamsa*¹² records that Vijayabāhu, seeking assistance against the Coḷas sent costly treasure to the king of Burma and he in turn sent ships laden with various stuffs, camphor, sandalwood and other goods. These were commodities greatly valued in the international trade during this period and this makes it quite clear that the Coḷa monopoly was never complete. It would therefore seem that trade was an important source of income for Vijayabāhu in his struggle against the Coḷas. With the conquest of Polonnaruva and the control of Trincomalee, the advantages were greater, hence the reluctance of the monarch to shift back to the old capital, Anuradhapura.

What has been argued so far is that the shift away from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruva as the political centre of Sri Lanka mirrored the dynamics of the Indian Ocean trade. The period between the seventh and tenth centuries was a kind of transitional period when some Sinhalese rulers felt the growing attractions of an eastern capital. This period witnessed the gradual shifting of the main East-West entrepot trade to the Bay of Bengal. What has been suggested is that a link exists between these two sets of events. By the tenth century A. D. the Bay of Bengal trade had acquired new dimensions and Sri Lanka was caught up in the commercial ambitions of the Coḷas. With the weakening of Coḷa political power Sri Lankan rulers seem to have been anxious to retain for themselves the commercial benefits that had accrued to the Coḷas in Sri Lanka. By the end of the eleventh century the Coḷas had not only lost Sri Lanka, but also the ports of Southeast Asia. The break up of the Coḷa monopoly, gave the kingdoms round the Bay of Bengal immense trading opportunities, which ultimately led to trade rivalries and even trade wars. The history of Sri Lankan politics, both internal and external, continued to be sensitive to both the tensions and opportunities in the Bay of Bengal for some time longer.

The death of Vijayabāhu I in c.1110 was followed by a period of internal political strife which lasted for a little over forty years. The country broke up into three kingdoms and what ensued was a tripartite struggle for Polonnaruva. The constant conflict did not allow the warring states to harness fully the agricultural resources of the country and rulers seem to have considered foreign trade as a supplementary source of income. The importance of trade in the country's economy is perhaps reflected in the enormous power wielded by South Indian mercantile communities in the period immediately following the death of Vijayabāhu I, when ministers of state and the chief Buddhist prelate of the Uttaramūla fraternity entrusted the Tooth Relic, the most sacred object of the Buddhists, to the Tamil Veḷaikkāra soldiers with whom were associated two mercantile groups of South Indian origin, the Nakarattār and the Valañceyar¹³. Gajabāhu II (1132-1153), faced with severe opposition often sought refuge in the Koṭṭiyar region near the port of Trincomalee and at the end of a protracted civil war, retired to Gangātaṭaka (Kantalai) in the immediate hinterland of the port, to rule from there.¹⁴ Gajabāhu II's political career demonstrates an increasing dependence on trade for state purposes.

The arguments so far adduced with regard to the foreign trading interests of Sri Lanka have been largely of a circumstantial nature. But coming down to the reign of Parakramabāhu I (1153-1186) we have a solid body of evidence which demonstrates the concern and interest of the state in foreign trade. The complete involvement of this monarch in the Bay of Bengal trade is amply borne out by the fact that he did not hesitate to declare war on Burma, a traditionally friendly state, when Sri Lanka's trading interests were threatened. The *Cūlavamsa*,¹⁵ which describes this war in detail, makes it fairly clear that the reason for the war was a trade dispute which had largely to do with the trade in elephants. It is rather unfortunate that this war is known to us only from Sri Lankan sources which doubtless expresses only the Sri Lankan point of view. Among the acts of provocation by the Burmese ruler are said to have been a ban on the sale of elephants to foreigners by private traders, the raising of the price of elephants, stopping the traditional custom of presenting an elephant to every Sri Lankan ship that called with gifts, the seizure

of Sri Lankan vessels together with elephants already purchased and other merchandise, the ill-treatment and imprisonment of Sri Lankan envoys, falsely accusing them of being bound for Cambodia and finally extracting a written declaration from the envoys that no vessel from Sri Lanka will be sent to the Burmese ports in future. It is likely that these events took place over a period of time. The main point at issue seems to have been the trade in elephants. This is also seen from the peace treaty at the end of the war, which was brought about by the intervention of the Buddhist Sangha. The treaty assured Sri Lanka of a regular supply of elephants. A contemporary Sinhalese inscription¹⁶ which records a grant to one of the victorious generals, Kit Nuvaragal, states that he administered the city of Kusumi in Burma for five months before peace was made. These details of the war with Burma give us some idea of Sri Lanka's stakes in the Bay of Bengal trade. Sri Lankan ships going out to the Burmese ports in search of elephants may seem strange, for the country had its own elephants. Megasthenes¹⁷ as early as the third century B. C. and Duarte Barbosa¹⁸ as late as the sixteenth century mention elephants among the exports of Sri Lanka. Obviously these animals were not needed for the local consumer market. It would seem that Sri Lanka was a thriving centre for the East-West entrepot trade and Parākramabāhu tried to make sure that adequate stocks of coveted Asian goods were available at the Sri Lankan trading marts.

Thus the reign of Parākramabāhu I witnessed the high watermark of Sri Lankan participation as middlemen in the Bay of Bengal trade. In fact the winds of change had once again begun to sweep across the Indian Ocean, a subject which will be discussed in the sequel. It is tempting to suggest that Parākramabāhu's war with Burma, which cast aside traditional friendship, was a sign of the initial tremors that were experienced in this region and the sense of insecurity which was felt among the trading nations of the region. The establishment of monopolies, such as that which was attempted by Burma, suggests diminishing trade. Taking resort to force to safeguard commercial interests was a symptom of the same malaise. Parākramabāhu I sensed the changes that were coming over the trade patterns of the Indian Ocean and took steps to adapt the country to the evolving situation. The close attention paid to Sri Lanka's trade with South India and the renewed interest in the western sea-board of the island bear out this policy.

By encouraging trade with South India, Parākramabāhu was looking for fresh sources of merchandise for the Sri Lankan entrepot trade. The Nainativu inscription¹⁹ reveals the fact that the king was looking out particularly for elephants and horses from South Indian merchants. This inscription found in the north of Sri Lanka, close to the South Indian coast, is written in the Tamil language and concerns foreign traders. Here Parākramabāhu was addressing South Indian traders visiting the port town of Ūratturai (modern Kayts). The king's proclamation reads that foreign merchants were welcome at the ports of Sri Lanka, and that they are assured of protection. It states that elephants and horses were of special interest to Sri Lanka and vessels carrying them were given greater concessions. If ships carrying horses and elephants were wrecked off the coast of Sri Lanka only a fourth share of the cargo was to be taken by the treasury. Ships carrying other merchandise, if wrecked, had to give up half their cargo to the Sri Lankan authorities. The demand for elephants is perhaps an indication of the diminishing Burma trade. Horses, on the other

hand, were always imported for local use but it is not unlikely that Sri Lanka was a supply centre for this commodity too, meeting the demand for horses in Southeast Asia.

Parākramabāhu I waged a protracted war in South India. Even though this was very largely politically motivated, commercial benefits do not seem to have been completely out of the picture. In fact, both the port of Ūratturai and horses figure prominently in these campaigns. This port seems to have been one of the main points of embarkation for South India, Mahātīttha being the other²⁰. A Coḷa inscription of 1178 A. D.²¹ states that Parākramabāhu was building ships and assembling troops at Ūratturai during the South Indian campaigns. An interesting point regarding the war is the repeated reference to the capture of horses as booty by the Sinhalese army in South India²². Reference is also made to the capture of elephants and the transportation of both elephants and horses to Sri Lanka during the course of the war²³. At one stage of the war it is stated that a victorious Sinhalese general accepted gifts brought to him by the *vessas* and *Yavanas*²⁴. These terms probably refer to the local and Arab traders of the region. Also the general, Lankāpura, after many victories in the Paṇḍyan country, is said to have introduced, for purposes of trade, coins (*Kahāpaṇas*) stamped with the name of Parākramabāhu²⁵. All this evidence suggests a certain preoccupation with South Indian commercial opportunities perhaps as a compensatory move for the unstable conditions in the Bay of Bengal trade. Another notable feature is that together with Indian trade, increasing attention was paid to the western seacoast of the island during this time. The large scale agricultural development of the province of Dakkhiṇadesa which bordered on the western coast suggests a movement of population into this region²⁶. This demographic change was soon to be accelerated, following the pattern of trade.

After the death of Parākramabāhu I in 1186, the kingdom of Polonnaruva did not survive for very long. Dynastic struggles and foreign invasions lead to political instability and with the invasion of the Kaliṅga ruler Māgha in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, Polonnaruva lay shattered. Two further invasions by a Malayan king, Chandrabhānu, and the Pāṇḍyan involvement in the politics of Sri Lanka added to the political confusion of the period. The Sinhalese leaders who fled Polonnaruva took up positions in the south and southwest of the country. Eventually the city of Dambadeniya in Dakkhiṇadesa became the main centre of resistance and the final expulsion of the invaders from Polonnaruva was accomplished by the rulers of Dambadeniya. The sequence of events from this time is reminiscent of the transfer of the capital from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruva. Just as Vijayabāhu I sought legitimation by having himself consecrated at Anurādhapura, Parākramabāhu II of Dambadeniya held his consecration ceremony at Polonnaruva. A massive effort was made to restore the former capital. Irrigation works and places of religious worship were said to have been repaired and a large number of people were re-settled at Polonnaruva.²⁷ Despite all this, the king returned to Dambadeniya, leaving a prince of the royal family to administer the old capital. The question is, why?

The shifting of the centre of Sri Lankan politics away from Polonnaruva first to Dambadeniya and later to other capitals is commonly known as the 'Drift to the South West'. Reasons such as a break down in the hydraulic system, the spread of malaria and foreign

invasions have been adduced for it²⁸. It is reasonable to assume that civil strife and foreign invasions led to the break down of irrigation works. That the immediate reason for the abandoning of Polonnaruva was foreign invasion is also beyond doubt. But the question that has to be answered is, was the hydraulic system of the dry zone beyond repair, despite statements in the chronicles that they were in fact repaired? Why did Parākramabāhu II return to Dambadeniya, having held a consecration ceremony at Polonnaruva? It was not only the king but even some of his people, who had earlier abandoned Polonnaruva, who refused to return there. The *Cūlavamsa*²⁹ states that when Vijayabāhu, the son of Parākramabāhu II set out to restore Polonnaruva, many people wanted to join him but some dignitaries, soldiers and others refused to go. The chronicle goes on to say that in such cases the wives and children of these people opted to go leaving the men. What is significant in this narration is that the refusal of a certain section to go back to the old city has gone on record. It seems clear that Polonnaruva had lost its charm to both the rulers and the people. This city proved attractive in an earlier era due to reasons of trade. I would like to suggest that what led to its desertion was also trade.

At this point it would be useful to consider the changes that were taking place in the trading patterns of the Indian Ocean during the latter half of the twelfth century. The commercial policies of China had always been a crucial factor in the trade mechanisms of South and Southeast Asia, and in this regard there was a significant and far reaching change which took place during the period of the Southern Sung dynasty (1127-1278). The traditional foreign trade of China was the "tributary trading system", whereby the privilege of trading with China was restricted to missions bringing 'tribute'. This arrangement made it imperative that all those who wished to trade with China came to its ports. This also made China dependent on foreign ships for her overseas trade. It is due to this policy of the Chinese that intermediary states such as Sri Vijaya were able to build large commercial empires. Many countries vied with one another to secure Chinese recognition and numerous embassies from India, Sri Lanka and the countries of Southeast Asia are on record. This scheme of things was completely upset by the Southern Sung who abandoned the tributary trading system. They allowed overseas trade to Chinese vessels and traders. Accompanying this radical departure from traditional policy were the huge strides made in the development of Chinese naval technology³⁰, making it possible for them to straddle the seas with ease. These changes had wide repercussions on the trade patterns of the entire Indian Ocean region. O. W. Wolters³¹ has convincingly argued that the decline of Sri Vijaya in the twelfth century was largely the result of Chinese commercial policy under the Southern Sung. With Chinese vessels and merchants visiting the ports of India and Southeast Asia, the scope for intermediaries was very limited. Sri Vijaya whose prosperity had depended on its entrepot trade was bound to suffer in the new scheme of things. Sri Vijaya was not the only country which had profited as intermediaries in the East-West trade. Other countries round the Bay of Bengal had enjoyed a share of it and were likewise affected.

The arrival of Chinese traders in Indian waters affected the traditional trade in two ways. Western merchants did not now have to go to the entrepôts of Southeast Asia and the ports of eastern India or Sri Lanka for Chinese goods such as silk and porcelain, greatly coveted in the West. An equally important aspect of the Chinese trade was the huge market

available in China for South and Southeast Asian commodities such as spices, resins, incense, etc., and the transport of these goods to China by intermediaries. With Chinese traders visiting the producing areas, the role of the intermediaries ceased. Henceforth for Western goods needed in the markets at home, the Chinese began to visit the trade centres along the western coast of India. Chao Ju-kua³² writing at the beginning of the thirteenth century, Marco Polo³³ and a little later Ibn Baṭuṭa³⁴ in the fourteenth century speak of Chinese ships sailing to the Malabar coast. In fact, Marco Polo sailed as far as Persia in a Chinese ship. The port of Cambay in Gujerat and the ports of Malabar became the main centres of commercial exchange and the theatre of activity shifted from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea. In this climate Trincomalee would have fallen on evil days. It is not suggested here that trade in the Bay of Bengal ceased, for there is evidence to the contrary. Arab and Chinese ships visited this region for their primary products and a certain amount of exchange trade was done by South Indian mercantile groups. But the profitability of intermediary trade as a major source of state income in the Bay of Bengal region ceased and it is in this context that the centre of political gravity moved away from Polonnaruva.

Even if one considers the commercial opportunities in primary products in the Bay of Bengal region, the north eastern ports of Sri Lanka had hardly a role to play. The hinterland of these ports did not produce the merchandise which foreign merchants were looking for. The pearl banks and the important gem producing areas were in the west and southwest of Sri Lanka and these were the two most important commodities for which the island was best known in international markets. Even cinnamon for which, the country was gaining recognition during this time grew in the southwestern areas. Letters of Jewish merchants found in the Cairo Geniza, which have been dated in the twelfth century mention Sri Lanka as the source of cinnamon.³⁵ It is therefore not a coincidence that the power centre of Sri Lanka shifted to this very area which could provide the commodities required by the international trade. In this regard one must also emphasise the direct line of communication between the ports of Gujerat, Malabar and southwest Sri Lanka, which was perhaps the most crucial factor in the emerging pattern of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean.

Although the early rulers of Dambadeniya, the new capital, tried to maintain an interest in the agricultural resources of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva regions, this was not sustained for long. Their efforts were naturally directed towards the development of the areas closer to the administrative centre. Paddy cultivation under wet-zone conditions was neither easy nor rewarding. Rice being the staple food of the people, every effort was made to grow paddy. However, one finds increasing attention being paid to commercial crops such as coconut and jak and cotton. The planting of coconut gardens³⁶ and groves of jak trees³⁷ is given great prominence during this period. Coir ropes from coconut fibre and hard wood from the coconut tree and jak tree would have found ready buyers among Arab traders. Also these plantations as well as lands producing gems are frequently mentioned among the grants to temples.³⁸ Commercial crops and lands producing commercial products were the more important sources of wealth. The importance of trade in the country's economy is brought into sharp focus by a statement in a contemporary literary work, which says "there is no wealth when one does not indulge in trade".³⁹ Recent research⁴⁰ has taken notice of

the fact that during this period a new class of land owners came into existence, owning land that yielded commercial products. Attention has been drawn to the very lavish grants made to temples by them.⁴¹ Rulers too placed great reliance on trade for state income. Port dues were a regular source of income. Taxes are said to have been collected at nine ports during this period.⁴² The most eloquent testimony to the fact that Sri Lankan foreign trade was concerned with lands bordering the Arabian Sea and that this trade was basically concerned with the primary products of the country is an Arab document of the thirteenth century which refers to an embassy sent by Bhuvanekabāhu I of Sri Lanka⁴³.

“Ceylon is Egypt and Egypt is Ceylon. I desire that an Egyptian Ambassador accompany mine on his return and that another be sent to reside in the town of Aden. 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 spears. If the Sultan asks me for twenty vessels yearly, I shall be in a position to supply them. Further, the merchants of his dominions can with all freedom come to trade in my kingdom. I have received an ambassador of the Prince of Yemen, who came on behalf of his master to make me proposals of alliance. But I have sent him away through my affection for the Sultan. I possess twenty seven castles of which the treasuries are filled with precious stones of all kinds. The pearl fisheries are part of my dominions and all that is taken there belongs to me”.

The ‘banian’ merchants were obviously the Indian merchants who were engaged in the intermediary trade. Sri Lankan rulers were obviously trying to leave out the middlemen and enter into direct trade with the Arab countries with a view to increasing their profits. It may be of interest to mention the recent find⁴⁴ of four Sri Lankan coins, the last of which dates to the reign of Bhuvanaikabahu I in whose time the Egyptians embassy took place, at Mogadishu in Kenya.

In conclusion one may add a word of caution. The two major shifts of political centres in Sri Lanka, from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruva and then to the South West, should not be explained in terms of maritime commerce alone. There is no mono-causal explanation for change in history. However, the impact of the vagaries of maritime factors in an island situation has to be given due consideration in respect of Sri Lanka’s history, a perspective which has not received the attention it deserves. Political change in Sri Lanka during the period between the tenth and fourteenth centuries did keep step with the rhythm of trade in the surrounding sea and an obvious link exists between them.

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