

FOR  
YOUNG ADULTS

K. Indrapala

# ANCIENT SRI LANKA

## *Glimpses of the Past*

*Jetavana Stupa  
The largest & tallest  
human-made structure in  
the ancient world, outside  
ancient Egypt*

JPL



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**ANCIENT SRI LANKA**  
**GLIMPSES OF THE PAST**



# ANCIENT SRI LANKA

## GLIMPSSES OF THE PAST

For Young Adults

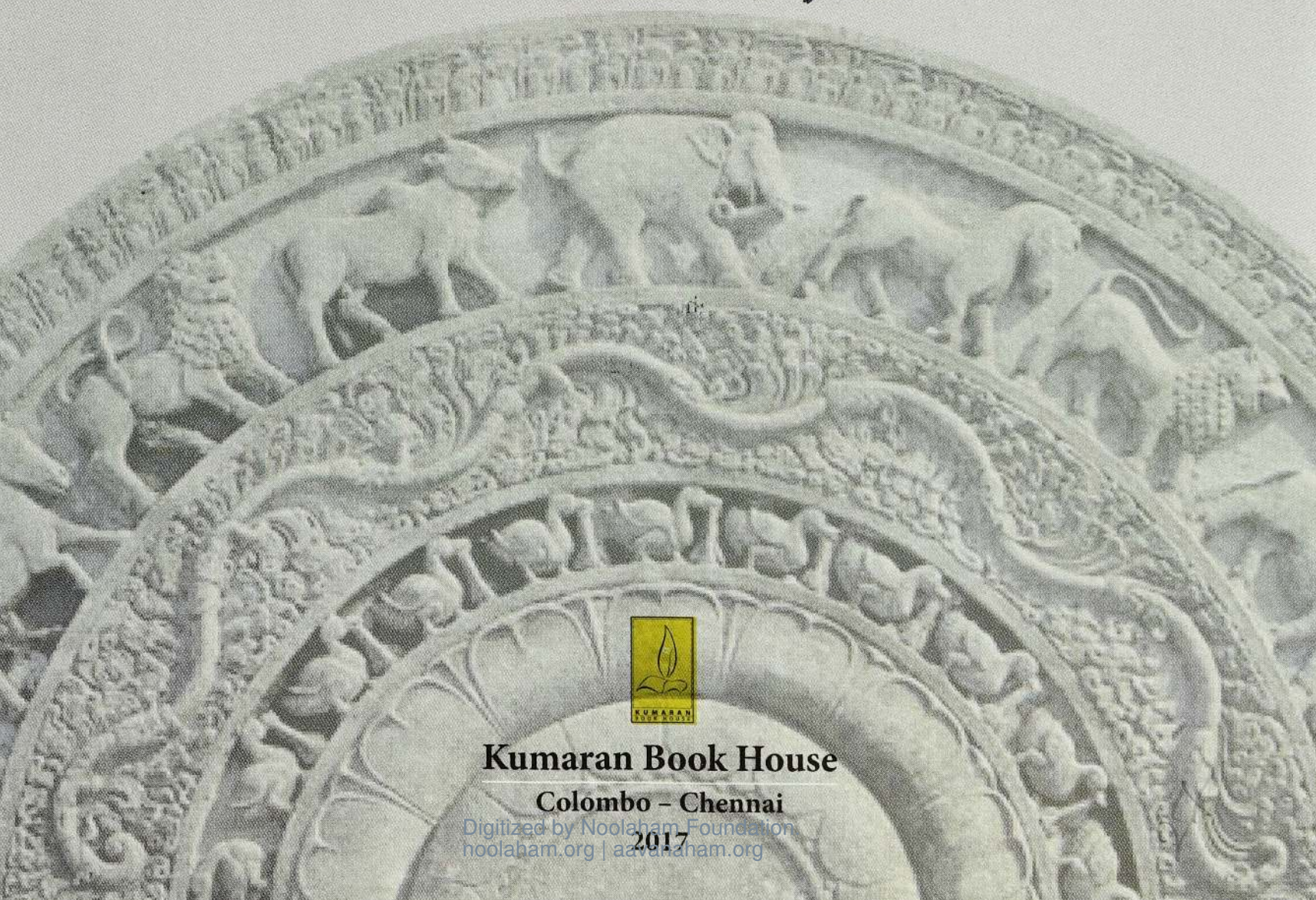
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Colombo - Chennai

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Ancient Sri Lanka: Glimpses of the Past  
by K. Indrapala

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First Edition 2017

*Published by*  
Kumaran Book House  
39, 36th Lane, Colombo 6, Tel.: 113097608, 112364550, E-mail: kumbh1k@gmail.com  
3, Meigai Vinayagar Street, Kumaran Colony, Vadapalani, Chennai 600 026 Tel.: 2362 2680

*Printed by*  
Kumaran Press Private Limited  
39, 36th Lane, Colombo 6, Tel.: 113097608, 112364550, E-mail: kumbh1k@gmail.com

Publication No. # 755

ISBN 978-955-659-567-3

**TO**  
**THE CHILDREN OF SRI LANKA**

The descendants of many many generations of people  
who had made this island their home,

With the hope that this will lead you to study the past  
and understand the present,

**AND TO**

Meghana, Maya, Vivek, Mira (Sydney);  
Kishan, Brewien (Berlin); Andrew, Elena (Manheim, Pennsylvania);  
Shivaani, Sharujan, Cherub, Chevon (London);  
Jerine, Morine, Corine, Ben Dilharan, Sharon Rishiharan (Jaffna);  
Kelvin Akash, Devin Amaresh, Levin Rishikesh,  
Jaydon and Jaydrah (Colombo)

**THE GREAT-GRANDCHILDREN OF THE SRI LANKAN COUPLE**

**Karthigesu and Kanakambikai**  
(my parents)

You reveal through your lives how, within a short span of four generations,  
the descendants of one couple live spread out in four continents, speak  
three different languages at home and follow two different religions.

If we all trace back our origins far enough, beyond the different  
homelands, language replacements and change of religions,  
we will end up with one couple in one place.

## Preface

This book is written for the benefit of you, the children of Sri Lanka, a land with a long history and a rich heritage. It is a country with a string of names reflecting its historical connections. It was the Tamraparni (Tambapanni) of the ancient Indians who later called it Simhala and Ilam. For the Graeco-Romans it was Taprobane. The Arabs knew it as Serandip. Sang-kia-lo was how the Chinese called it. The Malays of Indonesia used the name Singhala. To the Portuguese it was Ceilaõ. Zeilan was the name that the Dutch first used. Later the Dutch and the English preferred the name Ceylon. But right through the period when all these names were used – a period of more than 2500 years – it was known to its people by the name of Lanka (a name firmly entrenched in the memory of the Indians during this whole period because of the central place the island occupies in the Indian epic *Ramayana*). For most of its history, its rulers called themselves Lankesvara (Lord of Lanka), rendered in Old Sinhala as Lakisura and Lakindu, and in Medieval Tamil as Ilankecuvaran, Ilankaiyarkkiraivan and Tennilankaikkon. After the end of European rule, the name Lanka became official with the addition of the honorific prefix ‘Sri’.

Being an island meant Sri Lanka has developed a distinctive personality. The influence of this geographical feature on its history should not be underestimated. Being an island also meant being easily open to influences from outside. But it also helped to develop an insular attitude and to jealously guard the main traits of its character and culture.

Though a tiny country compared with many other countries of the modern world, Sri Lanka has had an interesting history with remarkable achievements. The island has historical records and archaeological remains for a period of over 2200 years. Much has been discovered about its past. Much remains to be discovered. It is important for you to know the past. This helps you to understand the present. Some of you may go on to study the country’s past in greater detail and to discover more to add to the knowledge we already have. This book is intended to give a peep into that past.

**K. Indrapala**

12 July 2017



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### Acknowledgements

The Commissioners (later, Directors-General) of Archaeology, Sri Lanka, and the Directors of the National Museum have been granting me permission to publish photographs of inscriptions, bronzes and other sculptures during the last fifty years. My thanks are due to them.

Meghana Reddy and Maya Pararajasingham helped me with their computer skills. Special thanks to them. Vivek, Mira, Harini, Dharini, Chandra, Aravindan and Priya provided the necessary support and encouragement to complete this undertaking in a short time. My thanks to all of them.

Sarvam Kailasapathy, Pavithra Kailasapathy and K. Romeshun deserve special thanks for their very generous hospitality, support and help with feedback. Their assistance is unforgettable and I am grateful to them for this.

Finally, I thank Kumaran Ganeshalingan and Agnas Jeyanthan for giving the book its final shape.

**K. Indrapala**

## Section 1 Ancestors

### 1. Journey from Africa

*All of this – all of us – began in equatorial Africa over a million years ago as Africans with black skins and the full suite of associated physical features.*

Neil Oliver, *A History of Ancient Britain* (London 2011).

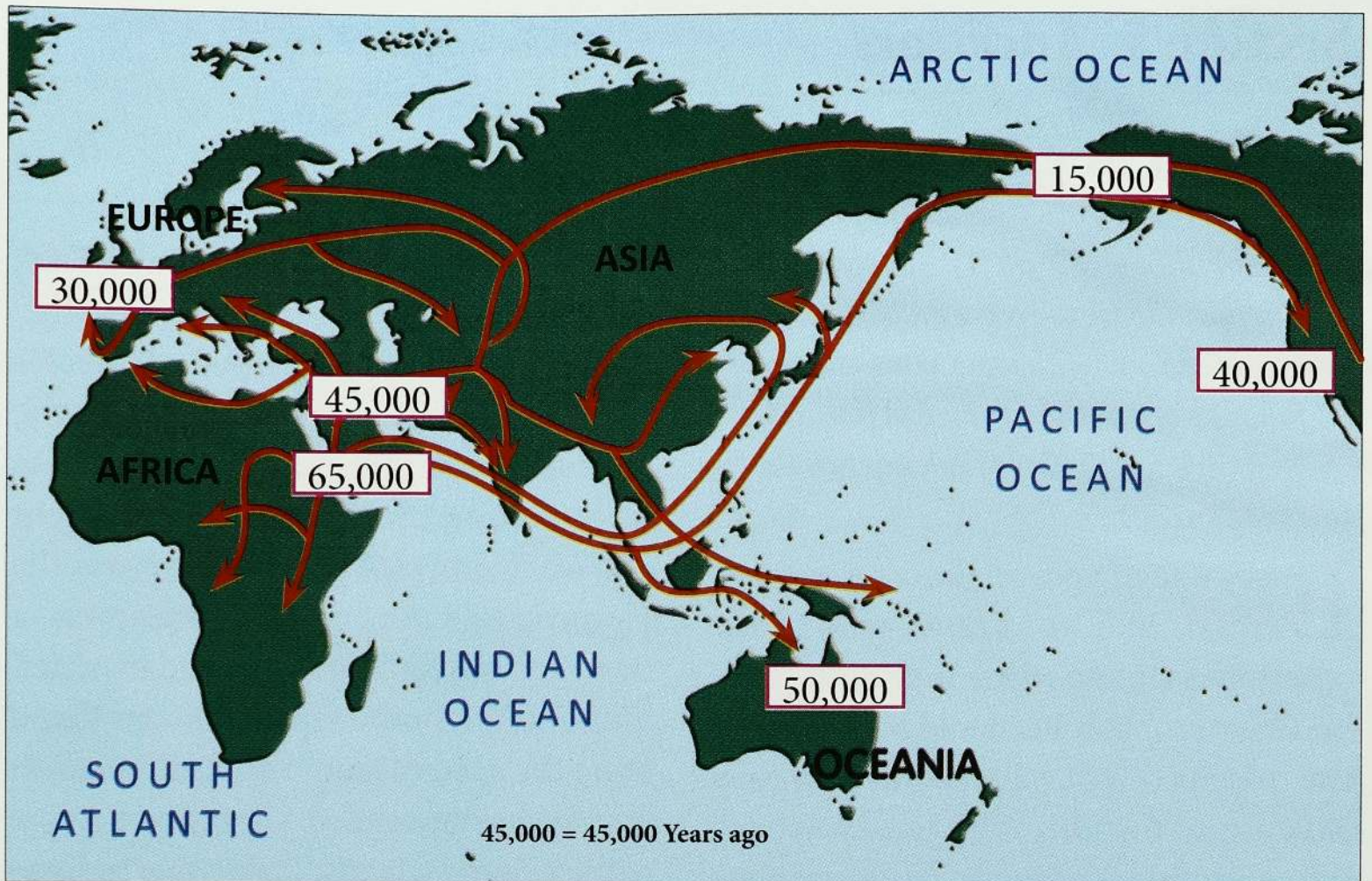
Every one of you, or almost everyone, would like to know who your ancestors were and where they came from. You have probably been told a story about the origins of your ancestors. You may have found that this story took you back into a mythical past. Or, you may have been told not an origin myth but about a claim that your people are among the oldest on the planet.

Origin myths are common in most societies. In the distant past many people had belief in these myths. But in this century, the advance of scientific knowledge has forced all origin myths to lose their credibility, although the Internet enables many to peddle their myths to unsuspecting enthusiasts on a scale never seen before. As a result, many are confused. Young people like you are at a loss to know what to accept. You need to check who is telling you what.

So, let us see what today's leading scientists are telling us about the human past. That is a good beginning. It is widely agreed among scientists that the earliest humans were found in Africa. Before humans, for millions of years, there were

other animals, both large and small. Then came the human types. They are called hominids. There were several species of these humans. One of them was the *Homo erectus*. Humans in this species were among the first to stand upright and walk with two legs. Another was the *Homo habilis*. About 200,000 years ago a new species of humans appeared in Africa. This one, the *Homo sapiens*, is considered to be the species from which all modern humans are descended. The others became extinct. Some scientists think that in some places *Homo sapiens* interbred with some of the earlier humans.

For the moment we have to begin our story with the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. For more than a 100,000 years these modern type humans lived in Africa making very little progress. Already, before their emergence, the earlier humans had taken some important steps in the long human journey to conquer the world. More than a million years ago, early humans began to change their natural way of life. This helped to make them different from all the other animals. One of the first steps they took to change their life was to use tools. These were mainly stones, sticks and bones found in the natural environment. There were other animals and birds, too, that used tools (and still do), like the chimpanzee, gorilla, raven and crow. But humans used stones



Map 1 - Migration out of Africa

and sticks far more effectively and in a wide variety of ways because of their very flexible fingers and arms. Soon they took the next important step – making tools to suit their needs. The Homo sapiens who came later kept improving these tools and there was no end to it, as we all know.

But progress was very slow. Homo sapiens lived as hunter-gatherers with their limited tools for more than 100,000 years. Hunter-gatherers were people who hunted small animals and gathered fruits, yams and other edible vegetables in their environment for their food. The earliest humans were mainly herbivores, that is, they ate vegetarian food. But slowly they began to eat meat, often from animal bodies left over by carnivores (meat-eating animals). They may also have eaten roasted

meat of animals burnt in bushfires. Such meat would have been their first taste of cooked meat. Plant foods, however, formed their main diet. As they began to eat more and more meat, they also began to make better tools for hunting and cutting animal flesh.

As the Homo sapiens hunted more and more with improved tools (like spears and arrows) they moved long distances following their prey. As their prey moved with changing seasons, so did bands of early humans. Some bands wandered across the eastern part of Africa. Then some of them arrived at the north-eastern part of the African continent some 70,000 years ago.

While many details relating to this migration may be debated by scientists

and may get revised as more research is done, at present there is general agreement that a particular group of Homo sapiens migrated out of Africa from the northeast region sometime between 85,000 and 65,000 years ago. Scientists also generally agree that it is from this group that all modern non-Africans are descended.

These modern humans moved along the coast of the Arabian peninsula and

then along the Iranian coast on to the western coast of the Indian peninsula (see Map 1).

Moving down the coast some reached the southern part of the peninsula while some others moved inland. At that time Sri Lanka was not a separate island. It was joined to India and formed the southern tip of the peninsula.



*An example of a stone handaxe used by early humans in Africa*

### **Ages in Prehistory**

Palaeolithic Age = Old Stone Age  
 Mesolithic Age = Middle Stone Age  
 Neolithic Age = New Stone Age

### **What is CE and BCE?**

CE = Common Era  
 (same as AD)  
 BCE = Before the Common Era  
 (same as BC)  
 (See page 53)

## Section 1 *Ancestors*

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### 2. Arrival of Homo Sapiens in Sri Lanka

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One fine day, possibly more than 10,000 years after the first Homo sapiens left Africa, the first of their descendants set foot on the land that we now call Sri Lanka. This happened possibly about 50,000 years ago. Scientists are of the view that at that time the total population of the modern humans in the world was only about 10,000.

What do we know about these early ancestors? What was the environment like when they arrived in the new land? What did they confront here? The answers to these questions can only be speculative, that is, we can only guess. The evidence about all this is still very little. But, with what has already been concluded by scientists, it is possible to give a general picture of these humans and the environment in which they found themselves.

At the time Homo sapiens came out of Africa and for thousands of years after that major changes in climate were deeply influencing every continent. There was also a huge volcanic eruption in Sumatra (Indonesia) about 73,500 years ago and this resulted in a heavy cloud covering a good part of Asia and cooling the earth considerably. The clouds of heated ash spewed out by the volcano has been found buried more than 3000 kilometres away from the volcano – in places like the Indian

subcontinent and the South China Sea. Sri Lanka, too, no doubt was affected by the eruption.

By the time Homo sapiens arrived in the region of modern Sri Lanka, conditions had changed considerably. Lush green vegetation and tropical forests welcomed the newcomers. Elephant, leopard, wild boar, wild buffalo, sambur, spotted deer, monitor lizard and crocodile were among the big and small natives of the land. Peafowl, parrot and jungle fowl were among the many colourful birds there to greet the newcomers. It is not known whether any surviving members of the earlier human types, like the Homo erectus, were also there. We know that they were there elsewhere in Asia when Homo sapiens went to those places but became extinct not long afterwards. In the salubrious climate of Sri Lanka the Homo sapiens, with their superior intelligence and skills, were destined to survive.

Coming along a tropical route from north Africa to south Asia, these humans had black skin and other physical features like their ancestors in Africa. But, as other Homo sapiens moved into the colder regions of Europe and Northeast Asia, the cold climate and the temperate environment brought about changes in skin colour, eyes and hair. Those who made their home in India, Sri Lanka, Southeast

Asia and Australia retained their dark skin colour and African features for thousands of years.

What skills did the *Homo sapiens* bring to Sri Lanka? Long before *Homo sapiens* appeared in Africa, other human species who were their ancestors had acquired many skills that helped them to progress from the natural way of life that animals lead. The larger size of their brain and the deftness of their fingers enabled them to make better and better tools to change their lives.

They made tools out of stone, bones, antler and wood. Sharp stone knives were made to cut meat and fruits. They used stone to grind nuts and process food. They could even shape organic material such as antler, bone and ivory into implements, like needles. They hunted small animals and caught fish and other marine creatures. They were able to pierce shells and carve bones and use them as jewelry. One of the most important skills they had was the ability to control fire. Fire, as you know, is a bad master but a good servant. As long as they knew how to control it, they were able to use it to roast their meat, keep themselves warm and even defend themselves against big animals.

With these skills the newcomers began to explore every nook and corner of the island. They did not settle down in one place. They occupied the rock shelters in the hill country but kept moving with the animals they hunted. As the wet season changed to dry season, the animals kept

moving and the humans followed them. Sometimes they were at the coast catching small fish and mollusc. Then they went inland carrying some of the shells. They also caught fish in the rivers. Food was always the driving force that kept them moving.

Among the caves used by these early humans is Batadomba Lena (Ratnapura District). In this cave archaeologists found microlithic (small stone) tools, beads made of shells, bone points and some human remains. These are among the earliest modern human remains found in Sri Lanka, in fact in the whole of South Asia. They are dated to 26,500 BCE (that is, nearly 28,500 years ago). Another cave in Kitulgala (Sabaragamuva Province) was used for a long time, from 25,000 BCE to 1400 BCE. Here remains of animals eaten by the humans as well as plant food were found. These include remains of pig, deer, squirrel and porcupine. The fruits include wild banana and breadfruit. The humans who used this cave had brought marine shells from the coast nearly 80 kilometres away.

There are now archaeologists looking for more evidence about these early humans. In the coming years and decades more information about these people will surely become available. For the moment we have some information about what these people and their descendants did in the many thousands of years before the beginning of the Early Iron Age.

## Section 1 *Ancestors*

### 3. The Balangoda Folk

**W**e will never know how many were in the first band of Homo sapiens to arrive in Sri Lanka. Perhaps a couple of families or a whole clan came and were joined by more later. At the beginning there would have been only a few. Over the next few thousand years, as the population increased, they spread over a large part of the country. As hunter-gatherers, they roamed all over the region, in the hill country as well as in the lowland, in present-day Sri Lanka as well as in southern India (for Sri Lanka was still joined to India).

So far you were told about these ancestors only in general terms. Now you are ready to meet the actual humans who lived in Sri Lanka about 35,000 years ago (the skeletal remains of Homo sapiens in the island date to 34,000 years ago). For convenience, the typical person of this group of people has been called the Balangoda Man. This name is given because the sites where remains of the earliest Homo sapiens were found happen to be close to Balangoda, in the hill country. So we will stick to this name.

Meet the Balangoda Man we know. He is about 174 cm tall (the Balangoda



*Old Stone Age tools*

woman is about 165 cm tall). His brow-ridges are very prominent. His nose is depressed. His neck is short. His skin colour and hair are dark like those of his African ancestors.

What did the Balangoda Folk eat? Evidence of what they ate has been found in some of the caves where they found shelter. Their diet was very healthy, low in fat. They ate a wide variety of plant food. Canarium nuts, wild bananas and breadfruit were some of this food. They also dug out various types of yams which were probably baked in hot ash and eaten. To this vegetarian diet was added the meat of small animals, which included rats and snakes. Occasionally they would have hunted larger animals like sambur and spotted deer and enjoyed a communal feast.



## Section 1 *Ancestors*

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### 4. Mesolithic Age

**W**hen Homo sapiens entered the region of Sri Lanka they were still in the Palaeolithic or Old Stone Age. After this came the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age. One important development in this period was the use of microliths or small stone blades. These were fitted on to long sticks or wooden handles to make arrows, spears and better knives. In Sri Lanka the earliest microlithic tools have been dated to about 26,000 BCE. These are among the earliest microliths in the whole of South Asia. The Mesolithic Age lasted till about 1000 BCE.

For most of this period of about 25,000 years no major developments took place in Sri Lanka. But some very important events were taking place in certain parts of the outside world. Climate change has always been and is a thing affecting all living creatures on earth. During this period there were major changes in climate. From about 21,000 to 18,000 BCE land temperatures fell drastically and northern Europe as well as North America were completely covered with ice. It was an Ice Age there. By the end of the Ice Age many large animals had become extinct. Elsewhere, in Africa and South America, deserts expanded. Sri Lanka escaped these severe changes.

#### **Separation From India**

However, about 7000 years ago there was an important event that affected Sri Lanka. For a long time the sea was eating away the land connection between India and Sri Lanka. Sometimes it would appear as if the land connection was gone. At other times it would reappear. It was as if Sri Lanka was undecided whether to stay with India or go separate. And finally, about 7000 years ago, Sri Lanka separated. The separation shaped the future of the new island.

For thousands of years many hundreds of people were moving into Sri Lanka from India. The separation slowed down this movement and gave the chance to the island to develop its own personality. Like a daughter who had moved away from her mother but was still being influenced by the mother, Sri Lanka continued to be influenced by India and felt its impact throughout its history. The narrow sea separating the two countries was in fact not a barrier but a unifier.

#### **Southwest Asia**

While the people in Sri Lanka continued with their hunter-gatherer lifestyle for another 4000 years after the separation from India, very important developments

took place in other parts of Asia, especially Southwest Asia (modern Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Israel and Palestine), India-Pakistan and East Asia. In Southwest Asia we see the domestication of certain plants and animals which soon led to the beginnings of farming. After several thousand years of life as hunter-gatherers, farming was a major revolution for humans. It led to settled life and the emergence of villages. Not long afterwards we see the rise of the first cities and the first civilizations in Iraq, Egypt and the Indus Valley (India-Pakistan).

With farming and herding of goats, sheep and cattle, villages were established. Some of these grew into the world's first towns. The world's oldest town that we know has been discovered in Turkey, in a place called Catalhöyük. Farmers and herders established a large settlement in the area which grew into a town of more than 3000 people about 9400 years ago. It had houses which were built close together.

We also see here early signs of religious activity. The people here seem to have worshipped a mother goddess and paid respect to bulls. Another bigger town was Jericho (called Araha in Arabic) in the West Bank of Palestine.

All these developments soon led to the rise of the first cities and civilization. This happened first in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), then in the Nile valley in Egypt. The first cities in the Indus valley (modern Pakistan and north-west India) came soon afterwards. The rise of civilization in China was not far behind. Until the beginning of the Iron Age, about 3000 years ago, the people of Sri Lanka and southern India were not influenced by any of these developments. They continued to live in the Middle Stone Age. Before they made progress to the Neolithic (New Stone) Age with settled life in villages, new influences came from outside and changed their way of life.



*Excavated area at Catalhöyük*

## Section 1 *Ancestors*

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### 5. Mesolithic Age Languages

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The story of humans in Sri Lanka narrated so far covers nearly 40,000 years. Yet in this story you would have noticed there was no specific person or event. You did not come across any name. This is because we do not have any written records or oral traditions (stories passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation) from this long period. We have no idea about the languages they spoke.

As the early humans spread across the land in small bands and later each of the bands evolved into tribes and had control of separate territories, they developed their own separate ways of doing things. Their dialects (subgroups of their original language) also developed over centuries into separate languages. We have to only look at the example of Australia to get some understanding of this. This is a case for which there is plenty of evidence because we came to know about it only in recent centuries.

As in Sri Lanka, humans have been in Australia for nearly 40,000 years. But as the sea level rose Australia was cut off from the rest of the world for thousands of years. During this long period, the Aboriginal people of Australia split into many different groups and there developed many different languages. About 250 years ago when Europeans went to Australia the Aboriginal population of the whole

country was under one million and they spoke as many as 250 separate languages and many more dialects of these languages. In the last 200 years English replaced most of these languages and only a few are still spoken.

In the case of Sri Lanka, which was not cut off from the rest of the world, more people kept coming into the land for thousands of years and more languages were brought in. By the time the Mesolithic Age ended there were many different groups of people and languages. These languages disappeared in the next thousand years. Though some words from these languages have survived in the languages spoken in the island today, it is hard to identify them.

The story of ancient Sri Lanka is in many ways similar to that of ancient Britain. Britain and Ireland were part of the European mainland and got separated only about 7500 years ago. Various groups of people kept moving into Britain even after it became an island and many Celtic and other languages were spoken there before the Romans went there. These languages disappeared but the people who spoke them are the ancestors from whom a majority of modern British are descended. In the same way, the people of the Mesolithic Age in Sri Lanka are the ancestors of the majority of the modern people of the island.

## Section 1 *Ancestors*

### 6. The World Outside

While the people in Sri Lanka were in the Old and Middle Stone Ages, many important developments took place in West Asia and certain other parts of the world. This is a brief list of some of the developments:

About 10000 BCE : Farming begins in West Asia

About 7000 BCE : The world's oldest town, Catalhoyuk, is flourishing

About 5000 BCE : Farming begins in the Nile Valley

About 5000 BCE : Farming begins in China

About 3500 BCE : People in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) build the world's first cities

About 3500 BCE : The wheel is invented in Mesopotamia

About 3200 BCE : Writing is invented in Mesopotamia

About 3000 BCE : Beginning of the Indus Valley civilization

About 2700 BCE : Silk is first made in China

About 2500 BCE : The Egyptians start building the Great Pyramid at Giza

About 2000 BCE : The Minoans build palaces on Crete (Greece, Europe)

About 1500 BCE : End of the Indus Valley civilization

About 1500 BCE : Arrival of Sanskrit-speakers in India

#### What Have We Got From the People of Mesopotamia?

Apart from the wheel and the art of writing which the world has found extremely valuable ever since their invention, certain other aspects of the legacy (what they have given to us) of the Mesopotamian people are always with us in this modern world, in fact in everyday use. Do you know that almost every minute we are using something that the Mesopotamians invented? When we look at the time, when we refer to a day by name, when we count the weeks, we are using a method that these people gave us. Have you ever wondered why there are sixty minutes in an hour and not a convenient number like hundred? That is because the Mesopotamians counted in blocks of sixty – so we have sixty seconds in a minute and sixty minutes in an hour. This was their way of measuring time. Similarly, we have seven days in a week and not a convenient number like ten. Again this is a system they had. Even the names of the days, like Sunday and Monday (that is, Day of the Sun and Day of the Moon), are names given by them.

## Section 2 *Early Iron Age*

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### 1. The Arrival of Iron

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About 3000 years ago Sri Lanka began to feel the effects of some major developments that took place in the Indian subcontinent. Rising in the fertile valley of the mighty Indus River (the original Sanskrit form of this name was Sindhu), a great civilization spread to a large part of Pakistan and northwest India. Its major cities, now known as Harappa and Mohenjodaro, were in Pakistan but there were many other cities as far as Gujarat. The people of this civilization were very advanced. They built well-planned cities with a surprising drainage system. They traded with distant places, including the West Asian cities. They used a writing system to help them in this trade. It is possible that their traders sailed down as far as Sri Lanka in search of such items as pearls, ivory and peacock feathers.

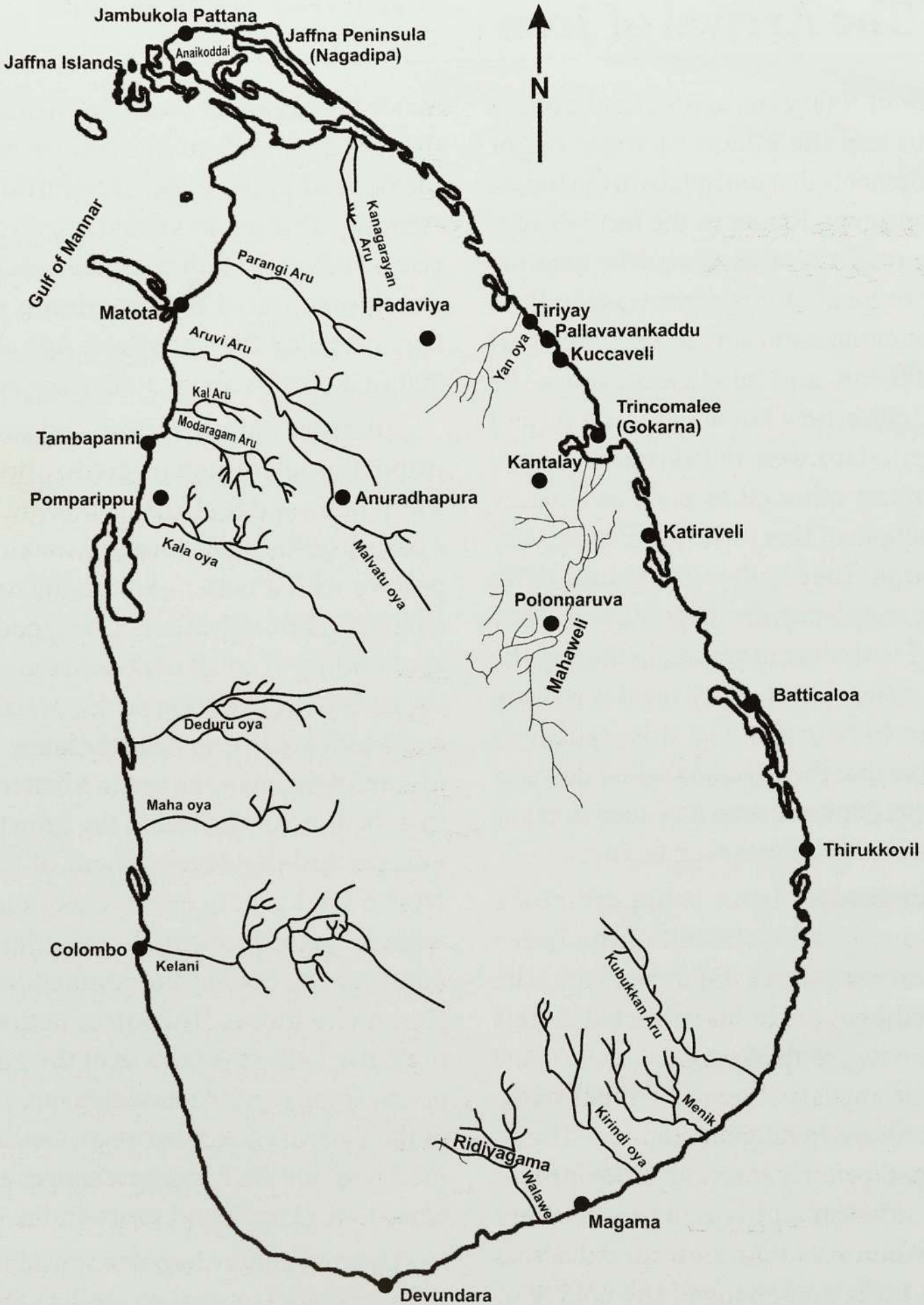
But traders from India did come to Sri Lanka after the fall of the Indus civilization. About 3500 years ago the great cities of the Indus valley fell. At this time a new group of people speaking the Sanskrit language entered the Indus valley. They followed a religion dominated by an educated priestly class called Brahmins. Their religion and language were very powerful forces that soon spread across north India and changed the course of history in South Asia.

Before these new forces spread to south India and Sri Lanka, another

major development took place. This was the spread of an Iron Age culture which introduced pottery, the use of iron and farming. This led to settled life and the rise of villages. With such far-reaching developments Sri Lanka entered what may be called the Early Iron Age about 900 BCE, that is about 3000 years ago.

This new culture introduced several important elements of civilization to south India and Sri Lanka. These include a basic iron-using technology, making of pottery with a potter's wheel, the use of a plough, the cultivation of rice (paddy), the building of small tanks and dams for the purpose of irrigating fields, specialised crafts such as carpentry and the know-how to control the environment in a better way than before. All this led to the growth of villages and the development of trade. New burial practices were associated with the growth of rituals and religious observances. Settled life resulted in the rise of chiefdoms. The introduction of the horse led to the growth of the power of chiefs and conflicts among them. Thus, in the Early Iron Age between about 900 BCE and 300 BCE, major changes took place in Sri Lanka and south India.

This new culture began to spread from Maharashtra (in western India) about 1200 BCE. Spreading south in the next few centuries, it spread to Sri Lanka. The northwestern coast of the island, between



Map 2 - Main Iron Age and ancient historical sites in Sri Lanka

Mannar and Puttalam, appears to have been one of the first areas where the new culture spread. One of the most important sites here, with urn burials belonging to the new culture, is Pomparippu, in the Wilpattu National Park. It is estimated that there are about 8000 Early Iron Age burials here. The culture revealed by this site is similar to the culture seen in many Iron Age sites at the southern tip of India, especially in the place called Adichchanallur.

Other burial sites show that the new culture spread fairly rapidly to the north, northeast and south of the island. Many cist burials have been found in the northeast, along the banks of the Yan Oya. Ibbankatuwa is another important site. In the Jaffna District, too, several sites have been discovered. A complete skeleton with an inscribed signet ring was discovered at Anaikoddai. Evidence of the spread of the new culture has also been found in the Southern Province, in places like Ridiyagama and Pallemalala.

From the point of view of the future history of Sri Lanka, the most important Early Iron Age site is Anuradhapura. This place was the scene of human activity for nearly 6000 years. The Mesolithic Folk were here and their microlithic tools in this place have been dated to 3850 BCE. They seem to have been hunting here and fishing in the natural ponds during the dry season. Later when the Iron Age culture spread, a settlement was established about 3000 years ago.

It began as a simple settlement with small circular houses. The people were

engaged in agricultural activity and keeping domesticated animals. But they also hunted animals. The settlement grew into a large village which we know as Anuradhagama later. By about 450 BCE, that is about 2500 years ago, the village covered an area of about 26 hectares (64 acres). Besides farmers, there were craftsmen working with iron, copper, ivory, bone and semi-precious stones. Overseas trade connections had been established. Horses were used here which shows the emerging power of those who controlled or ruled this place. In the next hundred years, that is by 350 BCE, this place grew into an important urban centre enclosed by a ditch and ramparts, and covered an area of nearly 66 hectares (163 acres).

The rise of Anuradhagama was no doubt helped by the growth of the port of Matota (now Mantai) on the northwestern coast. The Megalithic Folk were active here about 4000 years ago. In historical times Matota was one of the important ports linking Anuradhapura to the outside world. This connection appears to have started in the Early Iron Age. Another important port that was connected to Anuradhapura was Jambukola-pattana in the Jaffna peninsula. Traders from the port of Tamralipti in north India (West Bengal) and Kaveri-pattinam in south India (Tamil Nadu) sailed to Jambukola-pattana. On the east coast, Trincomalee (which came to be known as Gokarna-pattana) was another port connected to Anuradhagama. With the help of these ports, Anuradhagama benefited from the long-distance trade of South Asia and soon became a major

## The Island Gets a Name

As traders came and went, they gave a name to the island. We will never know what the first name was. By about 500 BCE, a name for the island came into use in north India. That name, in Sanskrit, was Tamraparni (which in Pali was Tambapanni). This name may have been given to a larger region including the southern tip of the Indian peninsula. For we find the same name being used for the extreme south of India. It also became the name of a river there. We do not know whether it was a local name that became Tamraparni in Sanskrit.

The name Lanka seems to have been used by some others, particularly in the island itself. This name appears to have been given to the island by people of Southeast Asian descent who had moved into the northeast and eastern part of India. The name seems to be from Munda (an ancient language of Southeast Asian origin). Lanka means 'island' and a number of small islands off the coast of Andhra have names ending

in '-lanka'. In ancient times there were islands off the coast of Tamil Nadu which also had names ending in '-lanka'.

### Names for Sri Lanka through the ages

Tamraparni	Tambapanni
Parasamudra	Taprobane
Palaesimoundu	Lanka
Tamradvipa	Amradvipa
Ratnadvipa	Simhala
Sihala	Saimhalaka
Sieladip	Seladiv
Serandip	Singhala
Sang-kia-lo	Jazirathul Yaqut
Sailan	As Sahilan

### Names in Sinhala

Heladiva	Siri Laka
Laka	Trisimhala

### Names in Tamil

Ilam	Ilankai
Tennilankai	Lankadvipam

urban centre that was able to control a large part of northern Sri Lanka.

A similar urban centre emerged in the south of the island, which came to be known as Magama. The ports in the southern coast were also connected to the long-distance trade routes of South Asia. Magama benefited from the influences that flowed from long-distance trade. The result was the rise of a chiefdom rivalling Anuradhagama.

Long-distance trade opened up Sri Lanka to the rapid flow of cultural

influences from India, both from the north and the south.

At the same time, there were important local developments. Settled village life and the farming of rice and other crops as well as the keeping of domestic animals led to the ownership of land, caves, small tanks and other property.

The more powerful among these property owners controlled villages and became chiefs of new chiefdoms. Political and religious ideas that spread from India strengthened the new society that emerged in the Early Iron Age.



## Section 2 *Early Iron Age*

### 2. Monks and Traders from the North

**A**fter the fall of the magnificent urban civilization of the Indus valley about 3200 years ago, some major developments took place in north India. These were to shape the future of India and its culture. When the Indus civilization was in decline there was a slow movement of people speaking Sanskrit (and other related dialects) from the west. They came from the area now known as Iran and Syria. Their language was closely related to the Old Iranian language. They also shared much in common with the religion of the people in Iran. They were mainly pastoralists, that is they kept cattle and moved with their cattle looking for pasture.

Among the most important developments was the spread of the new language. It spread from the Indus valley across the Gangetic Plains as far as modern Bangladesh. It was more advanced than the languages spoken in north India at that time. It became a language of prestige and adopting it had many advantages. As the various peoples of north India adopted the new language, it changed in many ways in different places. Most importantly, the local people could not pronounce the words of the new language in the same way that the original speakers did. So the words became modified. From about 1500 BCE the language of the newcomers underwent changes as it spread, and within

a thousand years new languages called the Prakrits came to be spoken in several parts of north India. The Buddha spoke a Prakrit language and his teachings are in Pali, a Prakrit. Sanskrit became a language of the educated priestly class, called Brahmins, and was used in religious rituals but died out as a spoken language. The modern languages of north India are derived from these Prakrits. If you consider this, the coming of Sanskrit to India was a major development in Indian history.

Another major development was the introduction of the Vedic religion, the religion of the newcomers. The power of the Sanskrit language in which hymns were composed and sung, the attraction of the elaborate rituals which involved sacrifices, and the authority of the learned class of Brahmins helped the new religion to absorb elements of religious practices among the local people and emerge as the dominant religion of north India. This was to later become Hinduism, the religion of the majority of modern Indians. But its authority was challenged very early by those who opposed the animal sacrifices and the authority of the Brahmins. The result was the emergence of new religions. Among the most important of these were Buddhism, Jainism and the Ajivika religion.

The Sanskrit-speaking newcomers introduced the horse and the chariot with

spoked wheels. The horse was not used in the time of the Indus civilization. It was not known to the other cultures in India. When chiefdoms and kingdoms were established, the horse, along with the elephant, played an important part in the rise of political power. We see this happening in north India in the sixth century BCE, that is, about 2600 years ago.

These and other development in India had their impact on developments in Sri Lanka. Long-distance trade connected the newly emerging urban centres and market towns in north India along new routes

across the land to different parts of India. Across the sea, this trade also connected the north Indian ports to ports in south India and Sri Lanka. Traders helped not just the exchange of goods but also the exchange of ideas. And there were plenty of these to be brought to Sri Lanka in the first millennium BCE.

Several products found in Sri Lanka and in the narrow sea separating the island and south India have attracted long distance traders from very early times. It is possible that traders from the cities of the Indus valley civilization, who sailed



*The skeletal remains of an Early Iron Age chief (Ko)  
from Anaikoddai, Jaffna District*

as far as the Persian Gulf, came to the northwestern coast of Sri Lanka looking for pearls and other products. Later, the Phoenicians from the Mediterranean area may have also come to this coast. By the middle of the first millennium BCE, that is, about 2500 years ago, traders from India did come to the ports of Sri Lanka looking for pearls, chanks, ivory and other products. Precious stones may have been among the other products in demand.

In all countries and in all ages, when traders were engaged in regular trading they established settlements in the ports frequented by them. They also built places of worship for their religion in these ports. We know that Indian traders did this in later centuries in Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and China. There is no doubt that traders from India did this in Sri Lanka from about 2500 years ago.

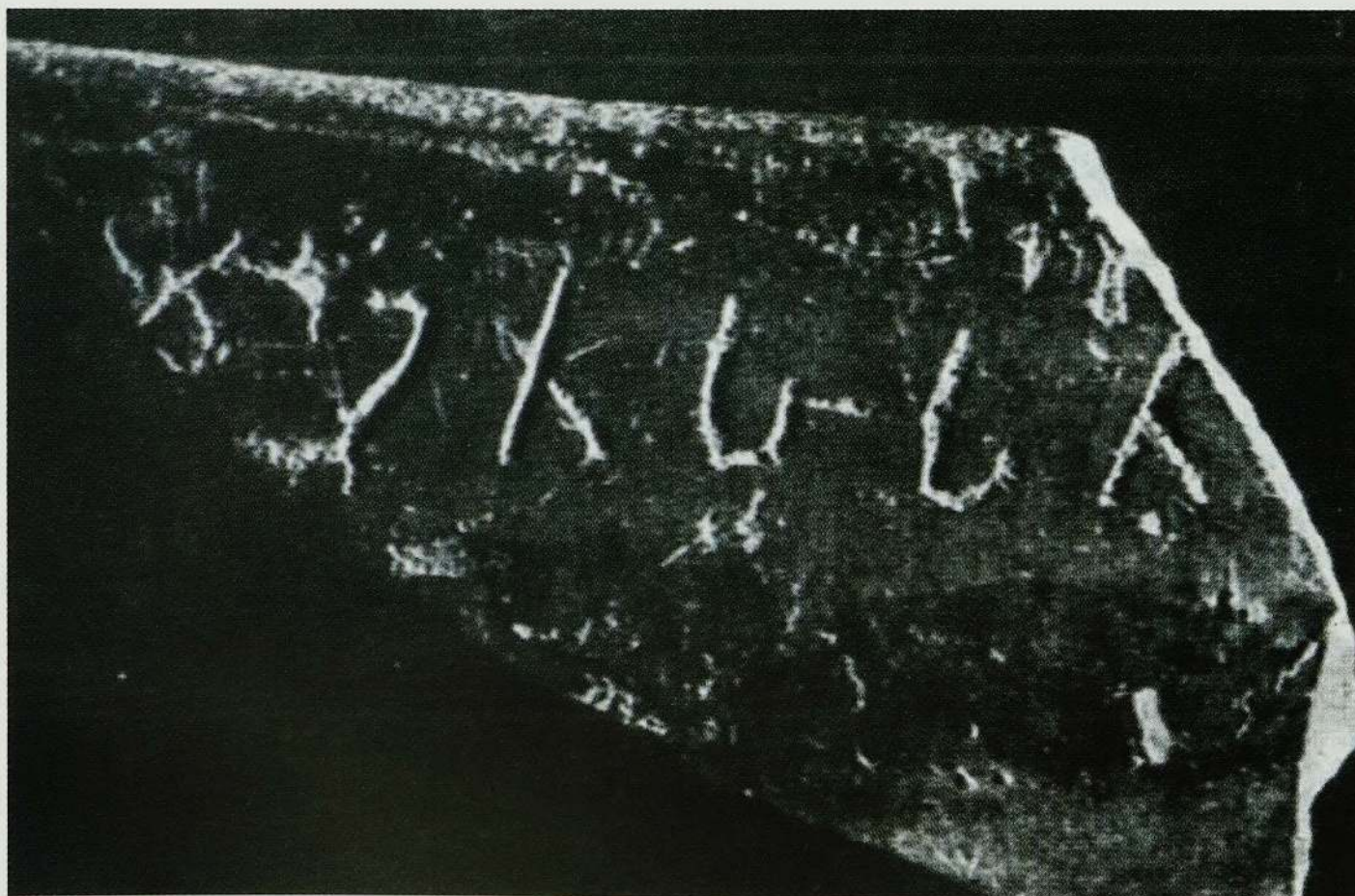
The traders brought various things that were not known to the people of Sri Lanka and exchanged them for the products of the island. But more importantly they brought new ideas. They brought information, they brought knowledge. They brought knowledgeable people like Brahmins and monks. They brought skilled craftsmen for the chiefs with whom they traded. Their boats also brought fortune-seekers who had heard fascinating stories about the island from traders. The traders and the others who came with them brought languages that were more developed than the languages spoken in the island. All this helped the people of the island to leave their prehistoric way of life behind and enter a new age.

When these traders and others came from India there would have been many different languages spoken by various groups in Sri Lanka. Some of these languages may have been spoken in south India, too. Some may have been related to languages spoken in south India. As there are no records of prehistoric languages, we will never be able to know anything about these early languages. As written records begin to appear in the third century BCE we are able to find out much about the new languages introduced into the island in the previous centuries.

Traders from north India brought the Prakrit languages spoken in the western as well as the eastern parts of north India. At this early stage the differences among these languages were not so marked and the speakers of one were able to understand the others. So we might refer to these Prakrit languages as a single language. This was the common language of long-distance trade in South Asia. Since there were several languages spoken in Sri Lanka, Prakrit became useful as a common language or language of communication for those who were engaged in trade with the north Indians. Later, monks belonging to the new religions of north India (Buddhists, Jains and Ajivikas) as well as fortune-seekers came with the traders, and they also spread Prakrit in the island. For those who wielded power and authority, it was a language of social prestige. The manner in which Prakrit spread in Sri Lanka can be compared with the way Vulgar Latin (the Latin spoken by ordinary people in the Roman Empire) spread in places like



*A potsherd with designs from the Early Iron Age site at Adichchanallur, Tamil Nadu*



*An Early Iron Age potsherd with a Brahmi graffito from Kantarodai, Jaffna District*

Spain and France and replaced the many languages spoken in those places and led to the evolution of Spanish and French. In a few centuries the Prakrit introduced to Sri Lanka was changed by the new speakers in the island, through the way they spoke the language and also by the addition of some words from their earlier languages. It became a new Prakrit language and developed further in the later centuries to become the Sinhala language.

Traders coming from the south Indian ports were also busy in the ports of Sri Lanka. Coins with Tamil legends issued by some of these traders have been found near the ancient ports of the southern coast of Sri Lanka. Some of them brought horses to the island. Some of them were also engaged in trade in the urban centre of Anuradhapura. Apart from traders there were many others who moved from south India to Sri Lanka from time to time in the Early Iron Age. All these people from south India helped to spread the Tamil language in some parts of the island when Prakrit was spreading in other parts.

The flow of ideas and new knowledge from north India helped in the political, economic and social organization of the population. Chiefdoms became better organized and one of them grew into a major kingdom. A class of land owners, cave owners and tank owners began to dominate the villages. Titles used in north India were proudly adopted by local

leaders. There were also titles that were already in use or came from south India.

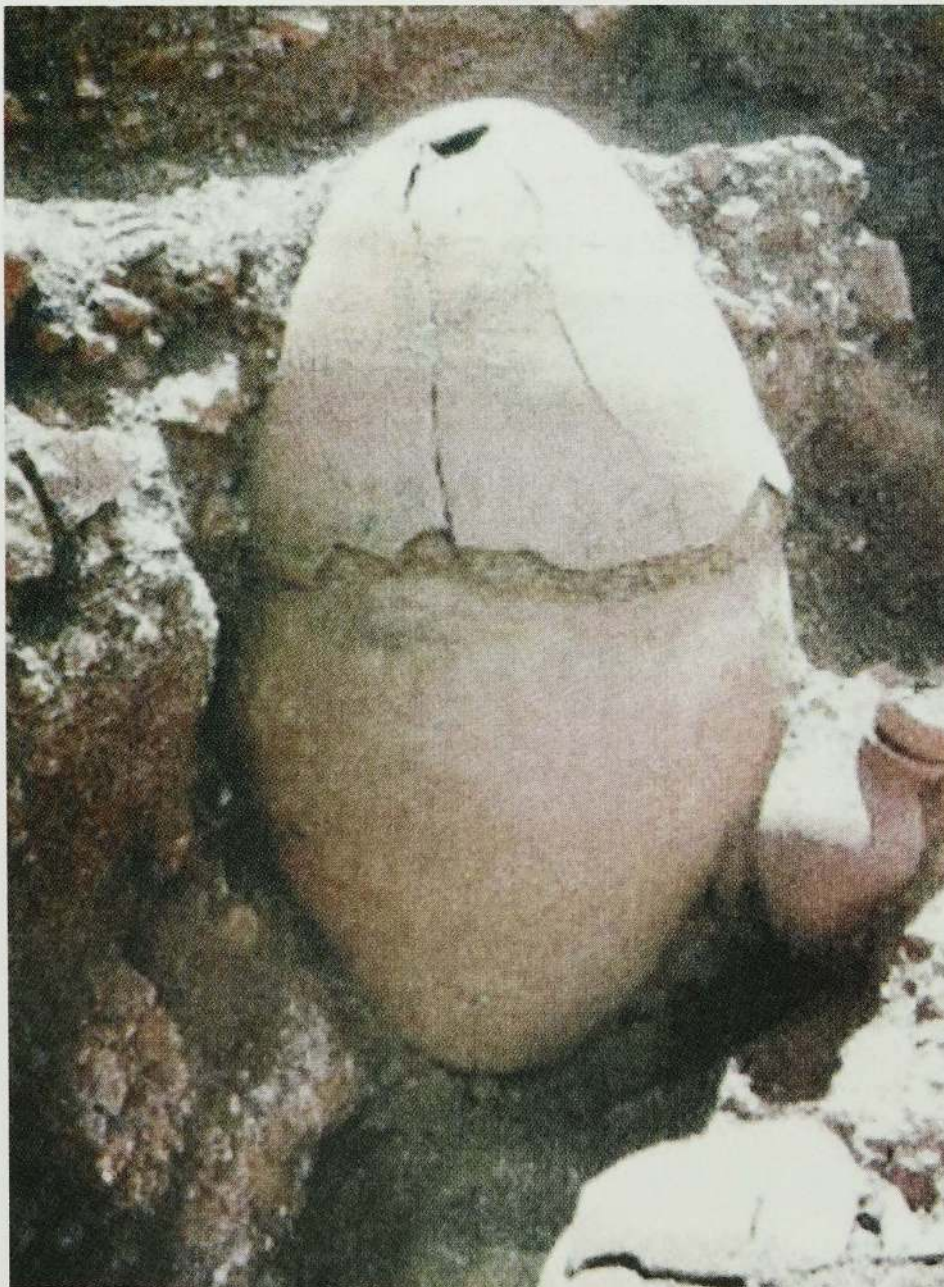
Chiefs in the various chiefdoms took on the title of *raja*, like their counterparts in north India. Some had the title of *ko* which was commonly used in south India. Both *raja* and *ko* originally meant 'chief' but later became the title of a king. Village communities of related families were originally called *grama* (pronounced *graama*) in north India. The leader of such a village community took the title of *gramani* (pronounced *graamanee*). *Grاما* later came to be used for any village. The title *gramani* was also used for the chief of a group of traders. In Prakrit it became *gamani* (pronounced *gaamanee*). In Sri Lanka it took the shorter form 'gamani'. When some village leaders became leaders of chiefdoms, they continued to keep this title. Some of them kept the title even when they became kings.

Land owners in north India had the title of *grihapathi*, meaning 'householder'. In Prakrit it became *gahapathi* and this title was also adopted in Sri Lanka. Another title used by prominent members of the emerging richer class was *parumaka* which could be a title from south India where the title *perumakan* was used.

With these and other developments taking place in the island, the ground was prepared for the emergence of a large kingdom.



*The Brahmi inscription and non-Brahmi symbols on the seal belonging to an Early Iron Age chief from Anaikodai*



*Burial urns from Adichchanallur*

## Section 2 *Early Iron Age*

### 3. The Rise of Anuradhapura

There are no written records coming from the period before 300 BCE. Therefore, we do not know the names of any chief or chiefdom in the Early Iron Age. But there are stories about some of the events that took place in the island before 300 BCE. These give names of some personalities and places. The details in these stories are not reliable. But they seem to be based on some facts. They refer to traders from north India coming frequently to Sri Lanka by boat. There were others, too, coming by boat looking for a better future. They met people whose culture was different and who were already established in settlements with their own chiefs. The newcomers faced difficulties with these people but eventually they were successful in controlling them. Some even married local women and gained power in the settlements.

This is the pattern of events we see in ancient times (and even later) when traders and others from more developed societies went to new places where they met people who were not as developed as they were. For the first time in these stories we get names of persons and places in the island. For the first time we get to know that the island was called Lanka. We

find the names of some of the settlements and villages in the island. These include Tambapanni, Nagadipa, Kalyani and Anuradhagama. We also get the names of some of those who wielded power in these settlements. One of them is simply called Vijaya, the 'Victorious One'. He married a local maiden, whose name is given simply as Ku-vanna (the Black One), and gained power at Tambapanni. Another is named as Panduka (sometimes given as Pakunda) who fought with certain chiefs and captured power at Anuradhagama. For the first time, we also get the names of some of the different groups of people who lived in various parts of the island – names such as Yakkhas, Nagas and Pulindas. Some of these names were given to these groups by the newcomers.

Panduka, whose full name is given as Panduka Abhaya, is given the credit for changing Anuradhagama into a city on the lines of the cities that were being established in north India. The archaeological evidence is very clear. By 350 BCE this place had grown considerably with ramparts and moats. In the following centuries it kept growing with important religious monuments and became one of South Asia's great ancient cities.

## Section 3 *Dawn of History*

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### 1. Emperor Ashoka and His Vision

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*Among the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses, and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star.* H.G.Wells, *The Outline of History*, I: 433 (New York 1920).

**A**shoka was an Indian emperor and you may wonder why there is a separate chapter on him in this book on ancient Sri Lanka. It is because this great emperor and the missions he sent to Sri Lanka to spread his message about looking after the welfare of the people of the island have made a very lasting contribution to the way the culture of the people of Sri Lanka developed in the last 2000 years. You may not have read about this in your history books. This is because historians have not given much importance to the contribution of Ashoka to the development of Sri Lankan values in the centuries following his missions.

Ashoka was a great king who ruled northern India about 2300 years ago. He was very ambitious and wanted to conquer neighbouring kingdoms and become the emperor of the whole of India. He was victorious in many wars but had to fight hard against the kingdom of Kalinga (in eastern India). Many thousands died before this kingdom was conquered by Ashoka.

The war against Kalinga was his last one. He felt very sad at the death of thousands of people and was, we are told, comforted by a Buddhist monk. His devotion to Buddhism increased and he realised the foolishness of waging violent wars. He decided to rule his empire by adopting a policy of non-violence and peace. He called this policy Dhamma. He explained this policy to the people of his empire through a number of inscriptions on specially prepared rocks and huge stone pillars. They are known as the edicts of Ashoka. He also appointed special ministers to travel to various parts of his empire and to neighbouring lands to spread the Dhamma. These inscriptions are still there, after 2300 years, without a single word being altered. So, in Ashoka's own words, we have an account of what he was trying to do to promote the welfare of his people after the terrible Kalinga war.

What was this policy of Dhamma?

For a start, Ashoka as the king of a large population consisting of various cultural and religious groups assumes the role of a father figure to all of them. He clearly declares:

'All people are my children. Just as I desire for my children that they should obtain welfare and happiness, both in this world and the next, so do I desire the same for all people.'



Ashoka's Dhamma was a policy intended to protect the weak against the strong. We can break this up into different parts. First of all, there is the general policy followed by the king to promote the welfare and happiness of all the people. This included: a) providing medical facilities and planting medicinal herbs; b) improving communications (building roads); and c) providing social services. (digging wells along the roads and planting trees, such as banyan, to provide shade for travellers, planting mango-groves, and building rest houses for travellers.)

Then there was the policy he adopted towards particular groups of people. Ashoka was deeply concerned with the

welfare of the poor, the aged, and other disadvantaged people such as servants, slaves and prisoners. He wanted servants and slaves to be treated with respect. He instructed that special consideration be given to prisoners who behaved well, had children or were old or sick.

Ashoka's Dhamma was also concerned with promoting morality among his people. His officers were asked to go on tours and instruct the people to be obedient to mother and father, to show respect and be obedient to elders, to respect teachers, and 'to behave well and devotedly towards their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, relatives, slaves and servants'. He instructed his officers to be impartial and to avoid such faults as 'jealousy, shortness of temper,



*Ashokan Pillar with inscription*

harshness, rashness, obstinacy, idleness, or slackness’.

Though a Buddhist himself, Ashoka through his Dhamma aimed at treating all religious sects equally and promoting the welfare of each sect, including the giving of donations to monks and Brahmins. Ashoka was very keen on promoting harmony among all the religions. He clearly states one should honour another man’s sect. He calls on his people to give donations to all monks and Brahmins.

And finally, if you are an animal lover, this will please you. Ashoka’s Dhamma had an important place for non-violence and the welfare of animals. ‘It is good not to kill living beings’ are Ashoka’s words. He repeatedly asks his people not to kill or injure living beings. He banned the killing of many animals, including parrots, pigeons, tortoises, squirrels and deer and all animals which are not eaten. He also banned the killing of she-goats and sows (female pigs) which had their young with them. He declared that ‘an animal must not be fed with another animal’.

This is only a short summary of Ashoka’s Dhamma. One day you should read his edicts to know more about it. In one of his inscriptions Ashoka asks the

question ‘And what is Dhamma?’. He then gives the answer: ‘It is having few faults and many good deeds, mercy, charity, truthfulness and purity’.

It is this Dhamma that Emperor Ashoka sent as a gift to Sri Lanka through his ministers. His mission is the earliest recorded event in the history of Sri Lanka. In the reign of Ashoka, no doubt with the emperor’s support, his son Mahinda arrived in the island to spread the Buddha Dharma. Ashoka’s Dhamma was not in conflict with Buddha Dharma and the two merged to lay the foundations for a peaceful society to develop in the island. The fact that a very powerful emperor was behind the two missions must have greatly influenced not only the king of Anuradhapura but also many of the other chiefs in the island to readily embrace Buddhism and Ashoka’s Dhamma.

Three great men of India were successful in combining politics and religion in order to bring about harmony among their people. The first was Emperor Ashoka with his Dhamma; then came Emperor Akbar with his Din-i-Ilahi. The third was Gandhi with his Ahimsa. The policy was successful in their lifetime but did not continue after them.

## Section 3 *Dawn of History*

### 2. King Tissa - The First Major Change-Maker

**I**n the reign of Ashoka Sri Lanka comes into full view and enters the South Asian political scene. Until about 300 BCE we get only a blurred and misty view of what was going on in the island. The interaction between the people of India and those who were in Sri Lanka, the arrivals and departures of groups of people, the exchange of goods by traders and the attempts of fortune-seekers to grab land or obtain precious materials are known to us only through legends and traditions written down at a later time and through some of the things left behind by people, including their burials. But from the time of Ashoka we get names of important persons, names of groups of people and information about events. History begins at this time.

There were many chiefdoms all over the island. The leaders of the major tribes and other groups were the chiefs and, as in all countries, there would have been conflicts among these chiefdoms. By 300 BCE the chiefdom based at Anuradhapura had grown to become a kingdom and the city was a place where different groups had come together. Among them were Brahmins as well as Jaina and Buddhist monks. This kingdom was known to Emperor Ashoka and his ministers. The king of Anuradhapura was also aware of the empire that was expanding from north India towards the south.

The king of Anuradhapura in Ashoka's time was Tissa. He established contacts with Ashoka. There were exchange of missions. Two important missions arrived from the Indian empire. These two were major events in the early history of the island. One was the Dhamma mission sent by Ashoka. The other was the Buddhist mission headed by Ashoka's son Mahinda Thera. Ashoka's Dhamma mission was intended to bring Tissa under the emperor's influence and spread the Dhamma in the island.

Tissa received the mission and accepted the authority of the Indian emperor. As a mark of this acceptance, we are told that a consecration (crowning ceremony) was held for Tissa as requested by Ashoka. We are told that various things needed for the ceremony, including water from the sacred Ganga (Ganges) river, were sent by the emperor. As a mark of the new status he had assumed, Tissa took on the royal title of Devanampiya, which Ashoka himself was using in his edicts. A very close and cordial relationship was successfully established between the mighty Indian empire and the tiny kingdom in Sri Lanka.

The religious mission led by Mahinda Thera was of even greater importance. Tissa received this mission with great enthusiasm. He accepted Buddhism as his religion and brought about a major change in Sri Lanka by helping to establish

## King Tissa Starts a Tradition

As the first Buddhist ruler of Anuradhapura, Tissa started a tradition. What he did became the example to be followed by future rulers of Anuradhapura. Even when the king was not a Buddhist he gave protection to the Buddhist Sangha. This happened about a hundred years after Tissa when Elara was ruling at Anuradhapura. Nearly 1400 years later, a prince from Kalinga (in the modern Indian state of Odisha) became the king at Polonnaruwa. He was Nissanka Malla, who not only accepted Buddhism but even went to the extent of declaring that non-Buddhists were not entitled to rule as kings. Like Ashoka, he announced that 'it is *daham* (Dhamma) that conquers the whole world'. Five hundred years after him, the last kings of Kandy who came from south India accepted Buddhism and protected the Sangha. When the last of these rulers was defeated by the British, the conquerors agreed to protect Buddhism in order to be accepted as the new rulers of the kingdom.



*Thuparama*

the Buddhist Sangha in the country and providing royal patronage to it. We do not know anything about Tissa's earlier religious beliefs. His father's name was Muta Siva. Going by this name, it is possible to assume that the king's family were worshippers of Siva. There were Brahmins in his court and in other parts of the island. Some of them would have been engaged in performing rituals associated with the worship of Siva. Besides the followers of this religion, there were Jainas, Buddhists and possibly Ajivikas. But the vast majority of the people at this time were probably still believers in spirits and animal deities like their ancestors in prehistoric times.

It was in this background that Buddhism became a religion accepted by the people ruled by Tissa. It should not be seen as a conversion from one religion to another as we see in modern times. Nor should it be compared with the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity which led to the people of Europe becoming Christians. That famous conversion led to a violent break with the earlier religions of Europe (Greek and Roman religions and what was known as paganism). Some of the most beautiful temples of the Greek and Roman gods were destroyed after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire. In Sri Lanka when the king accepted Buddhism and helped to establish the Sangha, the people followed him. They began to listen to the sermons of the monks and give alms to them, worship the stupa and gradually change their way of life.

The acceptance of Buddhism under the leadership of the king brought together various communities which were used to following different religious beliefs. The language of Buddhism and the language used for sermons gradually led to the development of a Prakrit language that would also unify the people. In these two ways the acceptance of Buddhism by Tissa and the enthusiastic steps he took to establish it as the religion of his kingdom made him a change-maker.

Becoming a Buddhist ruler and taking on the responsibility of protecting Buddhism was a new experience for Tissa. This is where we can see that Ashoka became his role model. Tissa received Ashoka's Dhamma missions, took the emperor's royal title and followed his example in the task of building stupas. He built the Thuparama, the first known stupa in Sri Lanka. Tissa also helped to establish the renowned Mahavihara which grew to become one of the great Buddhist monasteries of the ancient world. Just as Ashoka was concerned with protecting the Dhamma, Tissa was now the protector of Buddhism and the Dharma associated with it.

Tissa, in turn, would have become the role model for the chiefs in various parts of the island. As the king of Anuradhapura, with the title of *maharaja* (the great king), he led the way to the establishment of the Buddhist Sangha. The minor rulers, who called themselves, *raja* or *gamani* or *parumaka*, looked up to him and he became their role model. This is how we can see the development that took place in the third century BCE.

## Section 3 *Dawn of History*

### 3. Gamani Abhaya: The Second Major Change-Maker

From the reign of Devanampiya Tissa Sri Lanka enters into written history. There is no doubt that the monks of the newly established Mahavihara began to preserve a historical tradition relating to the main events in the history of their religion. They composed easy-to-remember verses about the history of Buddhism and the kings who supported the religion and memorised them (see p.44). These were used for their sermons and passed on from generation to generation and later written down as a book. With the spread of Buddhism many people learnt to read and write. And so for the first time we get inscriptions written on rocks. That is how we are able to get written evidence about events from the time of King Tissa.

When Tissa was ruling over the Anuradhapura kingdom there were many chiefdoms in other parts of the island. In such a situation, there is usually hostility and wars among the chiefdoms. Their chiefs try to get more territory and gain more power. Eventually the weaker chiefdoms are defeated and a large kingdom emerges. This happened in north India about a century or so before Ashoka. It came to an end in the time of Ashoka when a large empire covering the whole of north India and areas up to Afghanistan in the north-west was created. In south

India and Sri Lanka it took a longer time for large kingdoms to emerge.

Between the southern border of his empire and Sri Lanka, Ashoka saw the dominance of four clans. These were the Keralas, the Atiyamans, the Cholas and the Pandyas. Except the Atiyamans, the others were able to establish their own large kingdoms. But they had to fight hard against many chiefdoms in south India. A similar situation was seen in Sri Lanka.

There were conflicts among the chiefdoms in the island. The successors of Devanampiya Tissa were weak and there were conflicts within the Anuradhapura kingdom, too. The weakness of these rulers is clearly seen when two brothers, Sena and Guttaka, from the family of a trader in horses, were able to capture power at Anuradhapura. As suppliers of horses to the Anuradhapura ruler, they probably saw the weakness of the government and seized the opportunity to become kings. They no doubt had enough horses and the means to raise an army to overpower the ruling king. We can only guess that this is what happened. We do not get much information about these two rulers, except that they were Tamils and that they ruled at Anuradhapura for 22 years with justice. But they too were unable to build a strong kingdom. Both lost to a person named Asela who was ousted after a few years

In his northward march Gamani Abhaya had to defeat many more chiefs before reaching Anuradhapura. Clearly he had a powerful army and was well organized for the final battle with Elara's forces. This was undoubtedly a major battle and it captured the imagination of ordinary people as well as those who recorded the events. Elara was defeated and Gamani Abhaya became the ruler of a large kingdom which combined for the first time the southern part of the island with the northern kingdom.

The achievement of Gamani Abhaya was a development of great historical importance. It paved the way for the elimination of small chiefdoms and to the unification of the island. Anuradhapura came to be recognised outside as the seat of the ruler of the country who, in course of time, assumed the title of Lankesvara (Lord of Lanka). Those who came to power at Anuradhapura looked upon the whole island as their domain. Gamani Abhaya had helped to make the change from a country dotted with a number of chiefdoms to a large kingdom with authority over the whole island.



*Ruvanveli Stupa*

by an outsider called Elara, who came from south India. Elara appears to have been a stronger ruler for he is said to have ruled for 44 years. But conflicts among the chiefdoms outside Anuradhapura continued, although Elara himself did not make any attempt to annex new territory.

The move to subdue the many chiefdoms and create a larger kingdom covering the whole island came from the south. This part of the island is generally known as Rohana. Here the dominant chiefdom was Mahagama (also known as Magama, modern Tissamaharama). In the years after the death of Devanampiya Tissa, the chiefs of Mahagama slowly expanded their territory by subduing neighbouring chiefdoms.

Early in the second century BCE, Gotha Abhaya (Abhaya the Short) attacked the neighbouring chiefdom of Kataragama and brought it under his control. Mahagama's expansion towards the borders of the Anuradhapura kingdom may be said to have begun with this conflict. We do not know what other chiefdoms were attacked by Gotha Abhaya and annexed to his chiefdom.

Gotha Abhaya's son and successor continued the conquests of neighbouring chiefdoms. He is known in the chronicles as Kakavanna Tissa, which means 'Tissa the Crow-coloured'. You may find it hard to believe that such nicknames were applied to rulers on the basis of some special physical characteristics they had. Of course, ordinary people would not have called their rulers by these names.

Members of the upper class, especially other chiefs and merchants, as well as monks who kept records of events may have been the ones who gave such nicknames. This happened in other countries, too. In ancient European history you will come across names of kings such as Pepin the Short and Charles the Bald. For Tissa of Mahagama to be called 'Crow-coloured', his skin colour must have been very dark compared with that of people around him. He may have been a descendant of a chief of the prehistoric period. Whatever his origins, he certainly had great power and was able to subdue many chiefs. As a result, he extended his territory up to the Mahaveli River.

The final stage in the expansion of Mahagama was reached under Kakavanna Tissa's elder son Gamani Abhaya who is given the nickname 'Duttha' (Dutu Gemunu) in the chronicles. At his father's death he had to fight hard with his younger brother, Saddha Tissa (Tissa the Pious) to establish his authority in the expanded Mahagama chiefdom. Such conflicts were common in the rise to power of young men in ancient times. For example, Ashoka was engaged in a violent conflict with his brothers before becoming the ruler of north India. According to Buddhist sources, he killed all the brothers who opposed him. In south India, about the time Gamani Abhaya fought with his brother, there was a bitter conflict between two members of the Chola clan (Nalankilli and Nedunkilli) in south India. In a similar manner, Gamani Abhaya defeated his brother and began his march to Anuradhapura.



## Section 3 Dawn of History

### 4. An Act of Gamani Abhaya without Parallel

An extraordinary event took place in Anuradhapura when Elara died in battle. He died just outside the southern gate of the city. Gamani Abhaya paid the highest respect to his enemy by an act that is unparalleled in Sri Lankan history. (A slightly similar event took place about a thousand years later in Sri Lanka - see page 70.) He summoned the people of the city to the spot where Elara died and conducted the funeral there. Elara was cremated at the spot where he died and Gamani Abhaya built a *chetiya* (shrine/stupa) there for the dead king. But what is more important, Gamani Abhaya ordered that his subjects should perform worship at the *chetiya*. There is evidence that this order was obeyed by people who went past the *chetiya* until modern times.

This event happened in the second century BCE. Writing seven centuries later (in the fifth century CE), the author of the chronicle *Mahavamsa*, gives the above information and adds that even in his day respect was being paid to the Elara *chetiya*. Another Pali book written possibly in the ninth century says that there was also an Elara Image-house in Anuradhapura. Another chronicler,

writing in the fourteenth century, says that the Elara *chetiya* was still being worshipped in his time. There is evidence that in the nineteenth century, too, people paid their respects to the Elara *chetiya*.

You may wonder why Gamani Abhaya honoured Elara in this manner. We know from the chronicles that Elara was a ruler whose reign was marked by justice. It was a time when emphasis was placed on what came to be known as *rajadharma*, the king's moral duties. This included protecting the people and meting out justice. Elara seems to have shown a great devotion to justice that several legends about it were floating among the people. They were so popular that some of them were included in the chronicles written several centuries later. In fact, one of them was carried overseas by traders and has reappeared in different versions. This is the legend of the cow that sought justice from Elara. Do you think that Gamani Abhaya's unparalleled act was due to the great admiration he had for Elara's justice?

So I will leave you with this question: Why do you think Gamani Abhaya built a *chetiya* on the spot where Elara died and ordained his people to worship it?

## The Elara Chetiya Down the Ages

**E**lara died in 161 BCE and a *chetiya* for him was built soon afterwards. It was venerated for over 2000 years.

### About 500 CE:

#### Author of the *Mahavamsa*

“On the spot where Elara’s body had fallen, Gamani Abhaya burned it, built a *chetiya* there and ordained worship. And even to this day, the lords of Lanka, when they come near this place, silence the music of their processions because of the worship at this place.”

### About 900 CE:

#### Author of the *Vamsatthappakasini*

“The spot where Elara fought and died is situated at the southern gate of the city, in the southern part of Anuradhapura, between the potters’ village and the Elara Image-house.”

### About 1400 CE:

#### Author of the *Saddharmalankaraya*

“A dagaba named after Elara was built at the place where he was burnt. Even at this time when processions of princes come this way, drums are not beaten.”

### 1837 CE:

#### George Turnour, translator of the *Mahavamsa*

Referring to the respect paid to Elara at Anuradhapura, Turnour says:

“These honours continue to be paid to the tomb of Elara up to the period of the British occupation of the Kandyan territory.”

### 1840 CE:

#### Major J. Forbes in his *Eleven Years in Ceylon*

“The ruined tomb of an infidel is now looked upon by many Buddhist pilgrims as the remnant of a sacred edifice, although twenty centuries have elapsed since the death of Elara. I do not believe that the injunctions of his conqueror have ever been disregarded by a native. In 1818 Pilima Talawa, the head of the oldest Kandyan family, when attempting to escape, after the suppression of the rebellion in which he had been engaged, alighted from his litter, although weary and almost incapable of exertion; and not knowing the precise spot, walked on until assured that he had passed far beyond this ancient memorial.”

### 1860 CE:

#### Emerson Tennent in his book *Ceylon*

“The contest between the rival chiefs is the solitary tale of Ceylon chivalry, in which Elala is the Saladin and Dutugemunu the Coeur-de-Lion. So genuine was the admiration of Elala’s bravery that his rival erected a monument in his honour on the spot where he fell; its ruins remain to the present day and the Sinhalese still regard it with respect and veneration.”

### 1885 CE:

#### S.M. Burrows in his *Buried Cities of Ceylon*

“Satiated with military success and penitent for the bloodshed he had caused, he [Gamani

Abhaya] determined to devote the rest of his life to expiatory acts. But his first care was to erect a generous and fitting monument to his rival Elala and to enact that the music of processions should cease and kings alight from their palanquins as they pass the tomb. The site is marked by a conical mound of earth, nor was the generous monument less lasting; as in 1818 Pilima Talawa, the head of the leading Kandyan clan was escaping through Anuradhapura after the unsuccessful attempt at insurrection, he alighted from his litter, weary as he was, and walked on until he was well past the venerable memorial.”

**1912 CE:**

**H.W. Cave in his *The Book of Ceylon***

“Then followed an act of chivalry on the part of Dutthagamani so remarkable that

it has been regarded with admiration for twenty centuries. He caused Elara to be cremated on the spot where he fell and there he built a tomb. He further ordained that the tomb should receive honours, and that no one should pass it without some mark of reverence; and even to this day these injunctions are to some extent respected and the tomb is still marked by a huge mound.”

**1928 CE:**

**The verdict of a Pali scholar**

“It is to the credit of the people of Ceylon that during two thousand years and more they obeyed this decree [of Gamani Abhaya] and continued to pay their homage to one who was a brave man and a just and humane ruler.” Prof. G.P. Malalasekera in his *The Pali Literature of Ceylon*.



*The Dakkhina Stupa at Anuradhapura which was considered by Buddhists early in the 20th century as the Tomb of Elara (Elala Sohona)*

## **Elara and the cow that lost its calf**

### **A Legend about Elara's justice (as told in the *Mahavamsa*)**

At the head of his bed King Elara had a bell hung up with a long rope so that anyone with a complaint could come and ring the bell and ask for his judgement. The king had a son and daughter. One day the son went out in his chariot and accidentally ran the chariot over the neck of a little calf that was lying on the road with its mother. The calf died. The mother cow was very upset. She ran to Elara's palace and rang the bell. The king found out what had happened and killed his son by running the same chariot over his neck.

The legend became a traveller's tale and spread to Europe.

## **Charlemagne (Charles the Great) and the Snake**

The Emperor Charles often held his court in the palace at Zurich. He was a just judge and ruler, and had a ready ear for any of his subjects who came to him with a wrong to be righted. He wanted the poorest and the humblest of his people to be able to appear before his judgement-seat. He, therefore, ordered a pillar to be set up near the palace and from this pillar a bell to be hung. The following proclamation was then issued: 'Whoever has suffered a wrong at the hands of another shall pull this bell and justice shall be done.'

One day when the Emperor was sitting with his courtiers, the bell rang. When he came to the pillar he was astonished to see a snake hanging from the bell-rope and causing the bell to ring. Then the snake let herself down to the ground and slid down the hill. The Emperor followed the snake and came to a place where she had her nest. A venomous toad was sitting on the little snake's eggs. She could not remove her enemy without crushing the eggs. It was this that had driven her to seek the help of the Emperor, who then had the toad removed from the nest, and condemned it to be burnt alive.

When the snake's eggs were hatched, she appeared once again at Charles the Great's banquet-table, slid up to where his drinking cup was standing, and dropped a sparkling jewel into the Emperor's wine. The Emperor treasured this jewel, had it set in gold and presented it to his wife.

**There were similar legends in south India and China, too.**

## Section 4 *The March of History*

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### 1. Dominance of Buddhism

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**G**amani Abhaya was a great patron of Buddhism and his reign marks the beginning of a period of amazing building activity that has made Sri Lanka famous for its monumental Buddhist structures. As the religion got firmly rooted in all parts of the country, the rulers of Anuradhapura devoted much of their attention and wealth to the building of large stupas. As a result, before 300 CE Anuradhapura had the three largest stupas in the Buddhist world. They still remain among the largest human-made structures of the ancient world.

Gamani Abhaya set the pattern for these achievements. He first built the Mariccavatti (Mirisavati) Thupa which was much larger than the Thuparama built by Devanampiya Tissa. It was more than double the size of the Thuparama. Gamani Abhaya then went on to build a much bigger stupa but died before it was completed. This is known as the Mahathupa or the Ruvanveli dagaba. It was (and still is) a huge monument, with a diameter of 294 feet (89.6 metres) at its base. Its original height is estimated to have been about 300 feet (91.5 m). It was the largest Buddhist stupa at that time. The largest stupa in India, the Sanchi Stupa built by Ashoka, was much smaller (54 feet/16.5 m in height, 120 feet/36.6 m diameter).

In the next century (first century BCE) two more colossal stupas were built at Anuradhapura. These are the Dakkhina Thupa and the Abhayagiri Dagaba. This was a time when Buddhism was rising to a dominant position in India. There was an increase in trade and commercial activity in the whole of South Asia. Rich traders, powerful local rulers and wealthy upper class (elite) people like the *gahapathis* became great patrons of Buddhism and helped to build stupas in the major urban centres and trade routes. These wealthy patrons also helped the development of Buddhist sculpture. Images of the Buddha and scenes from the life of the Buddha and the Jataka stories were beautifully carved in stone to decorate the stupas.

The increase of trade with India helped to bring about closer relations between the Buddhist monasteries in Anuradhapura and those in the major Buddhist centres in south India. Among these centres were Amaravathi and Nagarjunakonda in the Andhra region and Kanchi and Kaveripattinam in Tamil Nadu. Monks from Anuradhapura frequently visited these centres and monks from India also came to Anuradhapura. This led to a flow of influences that resulted in new developments in Sri Lanka.

For nearly a century after its establishment, the Mahavihara of



*Abhayagiri Stupa, Anuradhapura*

Anuradhapura was the dominant monastery in the island and the Buddhist teachings followed by its monks were not challenged by others. But the new influences from south India changed all that. The first split in the Buddhist Sangha took place early in the first century BCE when a group of monks disagreed with the others at Mahavihara. They left this monastery and formed a new group at the Abhayagiri-vihara where they were joined by some monks from south India. Soon Abhayagiri-vihara became a rival of the Mahavihara.

While Buddhism was enjoying a dominant position in India, this was also a time when various interpretations were given to the teachings of the Buddha. This

resulted in the rise of many Buddhist sects. In the end we see Buddhism split into two major divisions. These were the Theravada and the Mahayana. The Mahavihara monks at Anuradhapura strictly followed the Theravada. But their authority began to decline with the arrival of new sects from India. These sects found a welcome home in the Abhayagiri-vihara. By the end of the first century BCE, this monastery's influence had grown to such an extent that it gained the support of the king, Vattagamani Abhaya. He built for them the Abhayagiri-dagaba which was larger than the Mahathupa.

With the beginning of divisions within the Buddhist Sangha, we also see



*Jetavana Stupa, Anuradhapura*

the first signs of religious intolerance. Vattagamani Abhaya who gave support to the monks opposed to the Mahavihara is also known to have destroyed a Jaina monastery at Anuradhapura and built a Buddhist vihara in its place. Later, as the rivalry between the Mahavihara monks and the monks influenced by Mahayana ideas increased, some Anuradhapura rulers turned against the Mahavihara. But some took harsh measures against the Mahayana monks. Early in the third century CE, King Voharika Tissa had the books of the Mahayana monks burnt. Later in the same century, King Gothabhaya punished sixty of the Mahayana monks by placing brand marks on their bodies and

banishing them. They went to a monastery in Kaveripattinam (south India).

The burning of Mahayana books by Voharika Tissa is one of the earliest instances of book-burning in South Asia as a result of religious intolerance. In its long history, Mahayana Buddhism lost vast collections of books when enemies burnt them down. This happened as late as even the last century. As the influence of Mahayana declined in later centuries, its monasteries came under attack; more Mahayana books were burnt. The worst instance of book-burning took place in the twelfth century, in 1193 CE, at the famous centre of Buddhist learning at Nalanda (Madhya Pradesh, India), popularly



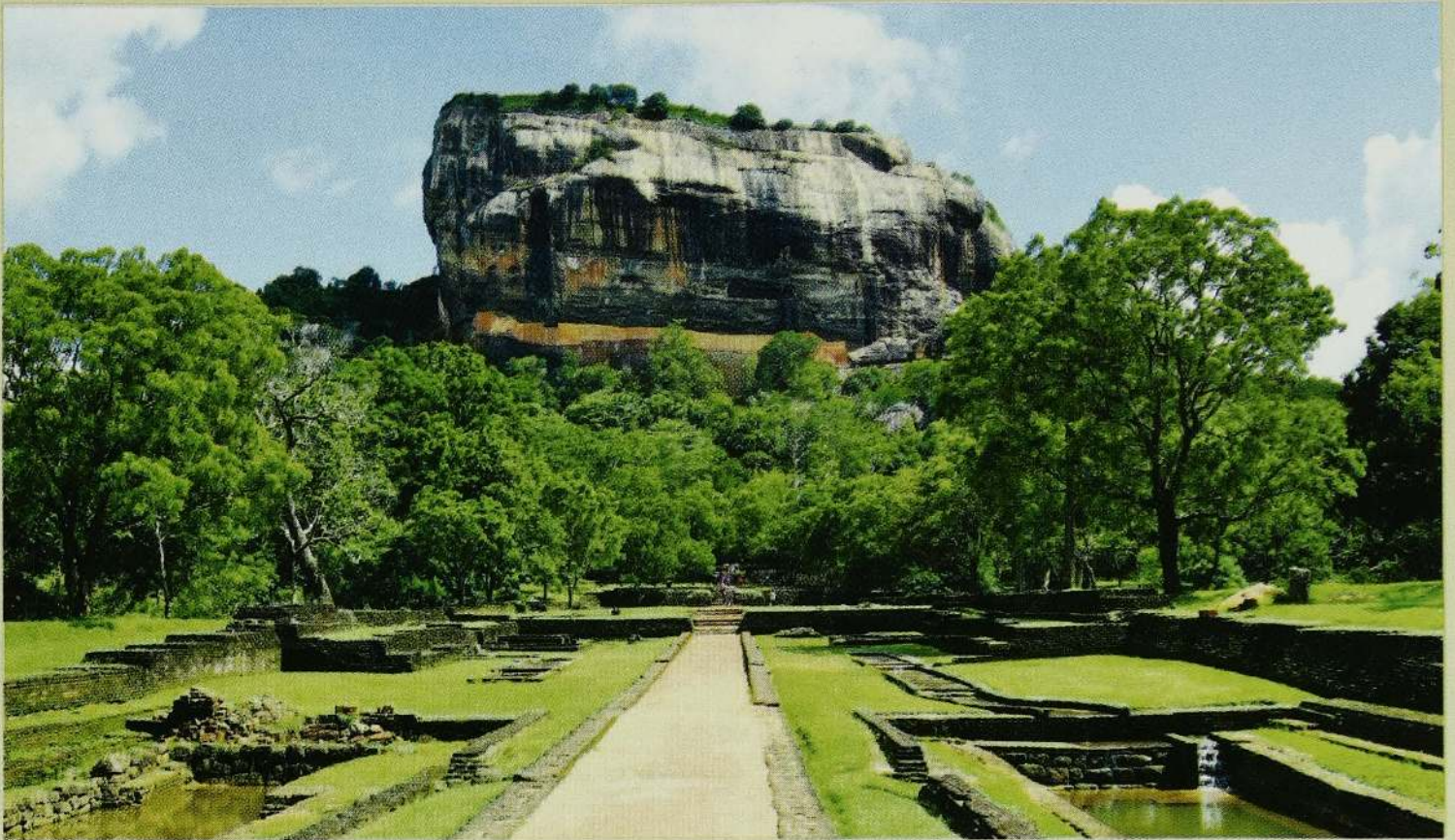
*Pallava style relief sculpture at Isurumuniya*

known as the Nalanda university. For many centuries it was considered to be one of the most important centres of learning in Asia. It had a large library with three floors filled with manuscript books. In 1193 CE the commander of the army of the Delhi ruler attacked the Nalanda monastery and burnt down the entire library. One of the latest instances of book-burning took place in 1966. In that year, the Red Guards of China's Cultural Revolution burnt a vast collection of very old Mahayana books kept at the ancient seven-storied monastery called DayanTa (the Wild Goose Pagoda, in Xi'an). The monastery had collected these books over 1500 years.

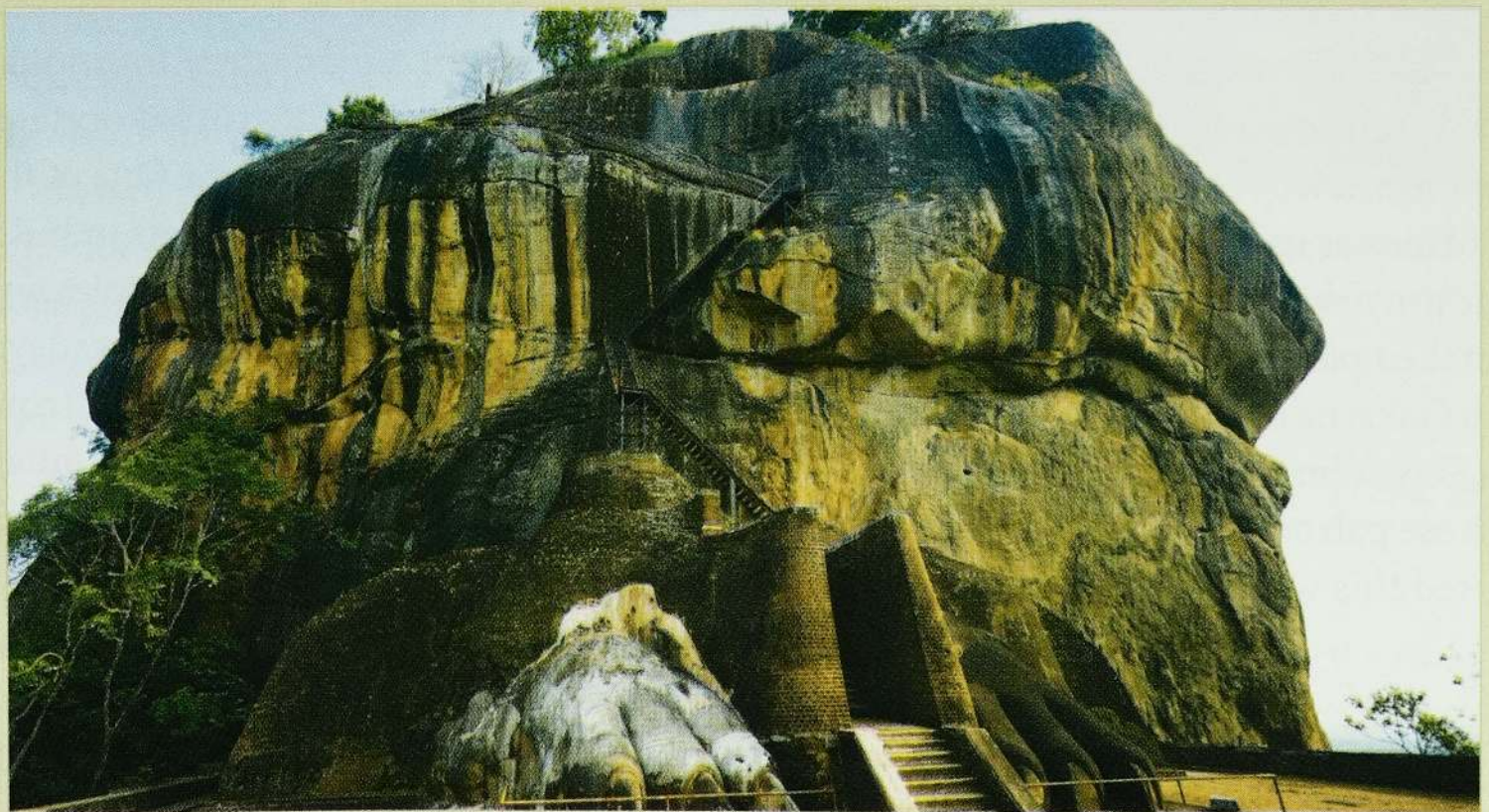
By the end of the third century the Mahayana monks at Anuradhapura had become so powerful that they were able to win the favour of King Mahasena and destroy the old Mahavihara. For nine years the Mahavihara was abandoned. Near this monastery Mahasena built for the Mahayana monks a new stupa larger than any of the stupas built earlier. This is the Jetavana-dagaba, the largest in the island. This has remained the largest Buddhist stupa in the world and is considered to be the largest human-made structure in the ancient world, after the pyramids of Egypt. This stupa has a diameter of 367 feet (111.9 m) at its base and even in its ruined state stands to a height of 232 feet



## A Royal Pleasure Garden and Art Gallery



**K**ing Kasyapa was an exception to the rule. He seized power at Anuradhapura, driving away his brother to south India, in the fifth century. But he did not rule from Anuradhapura. He moved to a solitary rock fortress (Sigiriya, the Lion Rock) and built his palace on top of it. Ramparts and moat were built around the rock. A mirror wall and a fresco gallery, filled with colourful paintings adorned the palace. A beautiful garden was laid out in front of the rock. Kasyapa was a king who admired art.





*Late Pallava style Mahayana Buddhist Temple commonly referred to as the Nalanda Gedige, Matale District. This is the earliest known building in Sri Lanka which was entirely of stone construction*

(70.7 m). Its original height according to available records was about 400 feet (121.9 m).

Mahasena's religious intolerance was directed not only against the Theravada monks; it led him to destroy Brahmanical shrines as well. Of the several shrines he destroyed to build Buddhist monasteries in their place, one was on the eastern coast, in Gokarna (modern Trincomalee). It was a Shiva temple and may have been among those patronized by wealthy traders who used this well-known ancient port.

Mahayana monasteries in Anuradhapura continued to have very close relations with the south Indian centres of Buddhism, especially those in the Andhra

region (such as those at Amaravathi, Nagarjunakonda and Sannathi) and those in Kanchi and Kaveripattinam. There was even a monastery for monks from Sri Lanka at Nagarjunakonda. It was named the Sihala-vihara. One of the leading Mahayana philosophers in India was Nagarjuna. Among his disciples was a monk from Sri Lanka named Aryadeva. Clearly there were many monks from Sri Lanka who had gone to south Indian monasteries and accepted Mahayana ideas.

In the early centuries of the Common Era, that is about 2000 years ago, Buddhist monasteries were established along the main trade routes in central and south India. These played an important role

in the change from a tribal society to a state society. This happened in Sri Lanka, too. By the fifth century, Buddhism was dominant in the whole region. But it was also undergoing important changes. One of them was the worship of the Buddha image. In the time of Ashoka there were no Buddha images. Instead, it was the Bodhi tree that symbolised the Buddha. The other two objects of worship at that time were the stupa and the Dharma-chakra (Wheel of Law). With the beginning of the worship of the images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, the art of Buddhist sculpture began to flourish. In the different regions different styles of sculpture developed. Amaravathi developed its own style while a different style developed in Sri Lanka. But because of the close relations between these regions, we find that beautiful Buddha images and other sculptures were brought from Amaravathi to the monasteries in Sri Lanka.

After the fifth century, Buddhism faced serious problems in India and began to decline. By the end of the tenth century Buddhism had almost disappeared from India. It was confined only to a few monasteries and areas around them. The great centres of Buddhism in the northwest of the subcontinent (in modern Pakistan) and beyond (modern Afghanistan), in the cities of Purushapura (modern Peshawar) and Takshasila (Taxila) were in ruins. But in Sri Lanka and in the east (Southeast Asia, China and Japan), Buddhism continued to dominate the lives of the people.



*Buddha image in the Amaravathi style of Andhra, from Chunnakam, Jaffna District*

## Some of the Men behind the Recovery of South Asia's Ancient Past

Three hundred years ago, as the English slowly conquered territories in India and began to build their empire in the east, the ancient history of India was not known to them. Some of the young British administrators serving in Bengal and other parts of India were curious to find out about India's ancient past. But the Brahmin pundits they consulted could only tell them some stories from their ancient Puranas. These young men saw hundreds of inscriptions on stone but they failed to find anyone who could read them. Ashoka, the greatest emperor of ancient India, was unknown to the Brahmin pundits. In this situation, a number of young Europeans learnt Sanskrit, Pali and other Indian languages, collected valuable manuscripts and made attempts to read the stone inscriptions. These men made an enormous contribution to recover the lost history of India, Sri Lanka and other countries in South Asia.

### James Prinsep

**The man who deciphered the Brahmi script and read the inscriptions of Ashoka**

One of the best known of these young men is James Prinsep. He was born in England in August 1799. At the age of twenty, he went to Kolkata to work. It was a time when many other young British men in India were showing a keen interest in India's past and discovering ruins of ancient buildings as well as inscriptions. Prinsep quickly developed a deep interest in these

matters. He learnt Indian languages, studied some of the ancient coins discovered in India and wrote about them. From this he went on to decipher the ancient Brahmi script in 1837. This enabled him to read the inscriptions of Ashoka which had been already discovered in various parts of India. Prinsep's achievement helped to read the oldest cave inscriptions of Sri Lanka, too. He died in 1840.

### George Turnour

**The Jaffna-born Pali scholar and the first translator of the *Mahavamsa* from Pali to English**

Another young British scholar who made valuable contributions to the rediscovery of South Asia's past is George Turnour Jr. He was born in March 1799 (the same year as James Prinsep) in the Jaffna Fort where his father was working. His father was British



James Prinsep

and his mother was French. At the age of eleven, he was sent to England to study. After completing his studies, he returned to Sri Lanka in 1820 as a Civil Servant. Soon he became a Government Agent and served at Ratnapura. He learnt Sinhala and Pali and developed a deep interest in the history of the island. With great difficulty, he obtained a copy of the *Mahavamsa* and translated it into English. This was the first English translation of this chronicle from the Pali original. Turnour died in 1843.

**Paul Goldschmidt**

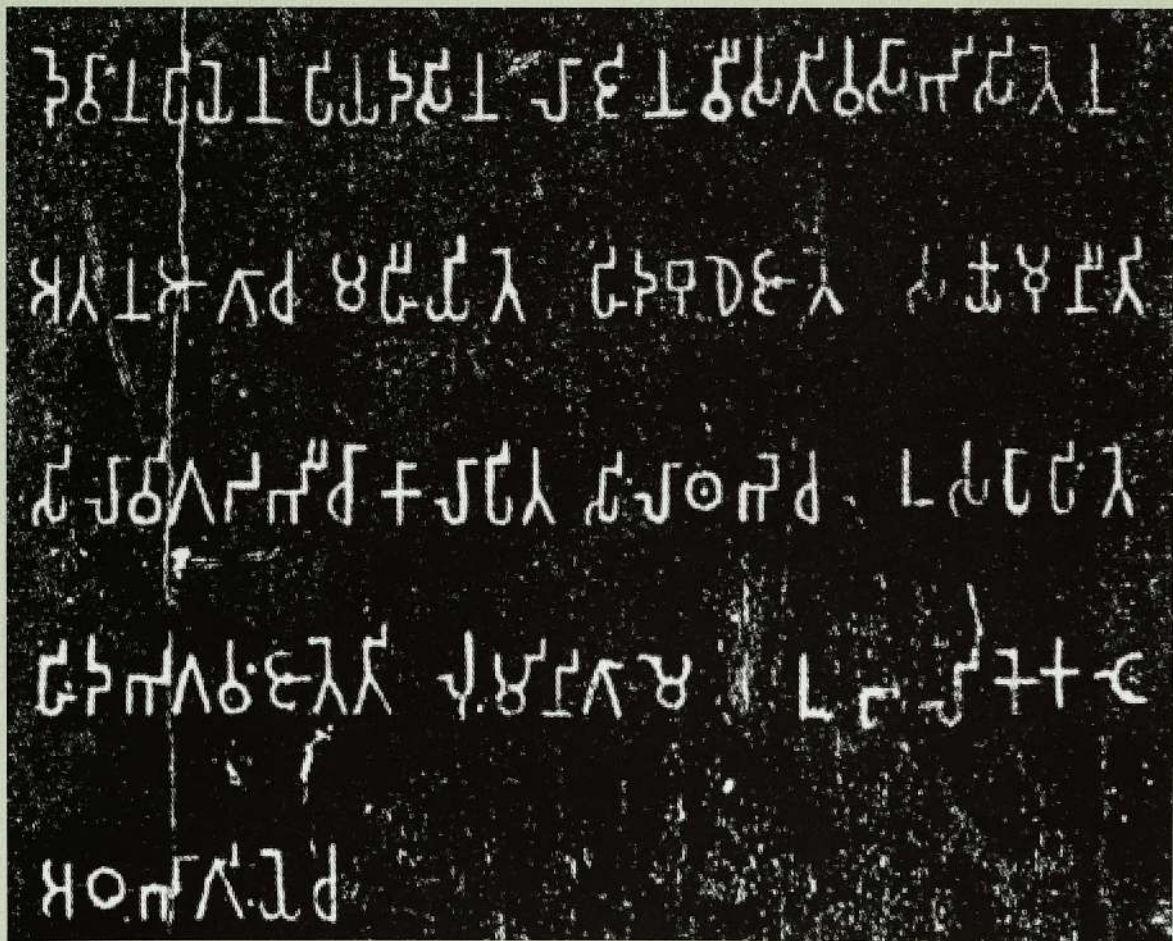
who copied many Brahmi inscriptions in Sri Lanka and translated them

Soon after James Prinsep read the inscriptions of Ashoka, a number of people showed interest in the Brahmi inscriptions

in Sri Lanka. As a result, the government appointed a young German scholar, Paul Goldschmidt, to survey the country for inscriptions and read them for publication.

For two years this young scholar worked hard collecting copies of inscriptions in the North Central Province, the North Western Province and the Hambantota District.

He was continuously exposed to the tropical sun and to malaria in the jungles. As a result, he fell seriously ill and died in May 1877. He was able to write a few reports but could not publish all the inscriptions he had copied. His work was taken over by Edward Müller, who succeeded him. Müller published a number of these inscriptions in 1883.



*Ashoka's inscription at Lumbini (Nepal), the birthplace of the Buddha*

## Section 4 *The March of History*

### 2. Anuradhapura – A Leading Centre of Buddhist Learning

By about the fourth century CE the main monasteries in Anuradhapura had become centres of learning. In the centuries that followed, scholar monks from India, China and other countries came to reside there to copy manuscripts and write commentaries. Some of them came to learn the local Hela (Old Sinhala) language and translate Buddhist commentaries from that language. There were similar centres of Buddhist learning in Kanchi, Kaveripattinam and Amaravathi in south India as well as in Nalanda, Vikramashila and other places in north India. Just as scholars from the Indian centres came to Anuradhapura, monks from Sri Lanka went to the Indian centres.

#### **Easy-to-memorise verses (mnemonic verses)**

These helped the monks to preserve historical traditions before the books were written down on palm leaves. This is an example:

“Couch, Animissa shrine, a covered place, and a jeweled house, Ajapala banyan tree, Mucalinda snake with Khirapala grove as the seventh” (*Dipavamsa*).

These seven topics helped a monk to remember the story and expand it.

The language of the Theravada Buddhist texts was Pali. It was not the spoken language of the people or of the monks, although monks from different kingdoms would have used it as a language of communication among themselves. By about 2000 years ago, Pali and Sanskrit were not spoken by ordinary people anywhere. They were, what we call, dead languages. As the Buddhist texts were not written down before the first century BCE, the monks had the task of memorising them and passing them on to the next generation of monks. This is called oral transmission. So the monks were always busy learning Pali, memorising the texts and composing commentaries in their own language. These commentaries were needed to understand the Pali texts and to preserve related information, including accounts about historical events. For these reasons, the monasteries were places where learning was happening all the time. They also functioned as schools where some ordinary people also went to learn reading and writing.

The Pali texts of the Buddhist religion were written down on palm leaves in the first century BCE. Copies of these were also made for use in different monasteries. All this activity no doubt started a good tradition of learning. Monks wrote not

only commentaries but also new books. None of the new books written before the fourth century CE has been preserved. The earliest complete book that we now have is the *Dipavamsa* (a chronicle of the island) written in Pali in the fourth century CE. The well-known chronicle *Mahavamsa* was written in the fifth century.

By about the fifth century, the main monasteries of Anuradhapura had become well known centres of Buddhist learning. As mentioned earlier, monks from India as well as from China came to these monasteries to learn and copy Buddhist texts. Some composed important commentaries while residing in these monasteries. While the Mahavihara

attracted Theravada monks, many Mahayana monks visited the Abhayagiri and Jetavana monasteries.

The language used by the Mahayana Buddhists was Sanskrit. As Mahayana Buddhism gained influence in the island, the Abhayagiri and Jetavana monasteries became centres of Sanskrit learning. Many Mahayana inscriptions in Sanskrit written on stone are found in various places in the island. From time to time, Mahayana Buddhism was suppressed in Sri Lanka and in the end the Mahayana monasteries lost their books. As a result, we do not have the books the Mahayana scholars wrote or much information about them.

### Foreign Buddhist Scholars at Anuradhapura

Of the Theravada scholars who came from Indian monasteries to Anuradhapura, there were three who became very famous because of the Pali commentaries they wrote while in Sri Lanka. The most renowned of them all was Buddhaghosa. He learnt the local language and, making use of the Buddhist writings in that language, wrote a number of commentaries in Pali. Another scholar, Buddhadatta, came from Tamil Nadu after writing some commentaries in a monastery there. The third renowned commentator, Dhammapala, also came from Tamil Nadu. These scholars from India made use of the writings in Old Sinhala to write their commentaries.

Many Mahayana scholars, too, came to Anuradhapura from India as well as from China. The best known of the Chinese monks was Faxian who came in the fifth century and resided at the Abhayagiri monastery. He came in search of Buddhist texts and was able to get some in Anuradhapura. Another famous Chinese monk, Xuanzang, planned to visit Anuradhapura but could not go there because of disturbances at that time. We also get the name of another Chinese monk, Wu-zing, who came in the seventh century and resided in monasteries here for some time. An eminent Mahayana teacher named Gunavarman came from Kashmir, stayed in Sri Lanka for some time and then proceeded to Indonesia. In the seventh century, another well-known Mahayana monk named Vajrabodhi came from Kanchi, stayed at the Abhayagiri monastery and then went to China. Later, he made a second visit to Anuradhapura.

## Section 4 *The March of History*

### 3. Anuradhapura-The City and the Kingdom What Foreigners Saw or Heard

#### FIFTH CENTURY CE

#### **Faxian, the Chinese Monk who lived in the city for two years**

As Buddhism spread widely in China, several Chinese monks undertook the very difficult journey to India in order to visit the Buddhist sites, learn at the leading Buddhist monasteries and to collect Buddhist texts for translation into Chinese. Some of them wrote about their experiences when they returned to China and have remained famous to this day because of the value of their writings as sources of history. One of the earliest of these scholarly monks was Faxian (spelt earlier as Fa Hien).

Faxian began his long journey from Shanxi province in 399 CE with four other monks. They travelled overland, through Central Asia. You can imagine how difficult it must have been in those days, more than 1600 years ago, when only horse carriages and bullock carts were used for travelling. Of course, some travelled on horseback. But these pilgrims walked long distances and were probably helped by traders who took them in their caravans. After three years, travelling through many Buddhist kingdoms, Faxian reached the Indus region in modern Pakistan.



In the Gandhara region (an area extending from northwest Pakistan into Afghanistan), Faxian found that the people there were Buddhists and saw many monasteries and stupas. In Purushapura (modern Peshawar) he saw a large stupa built over the alms bowl relic of the Buddha. From there Faxian went to a number of Buddhist sites in north India, learnt Sanskrit, collected Buddhist manuscripts and, after nearly ten years, began his return journey.

Deciding to take the sea-route back to China, Faxian sailed in a merchant ship from Tamralipti (modern Tamluk in West Bengal) to Sri Lanka. The journey took fourteen days. Faxian stayed at the Abhayagiri monastery for nearly two years before returning to China.

Faxian was 62 years old when he began his journey to India. He travelled for fifteen



years facing many hardships. Having been separated from his Chinese friends, he was travelling alone for many years. Since he had not seen a Chinese face for several years, he became emotional when he saw a merchant from his country presenting a Chinese fan to a Buddha image at the Abhayagiri monastery in Anuradhapura. He could not help crying. This is what he wrote about it (note that Faxian is writing this in the third person):

“Several years had now elapsed since Faxian left the land of Han (China); the men with whom he had been associating had all been from places strange to him; he had not seen an old and familiar hill or river, plant or tree; his fellow-travellers, moreover, had been separated from him, some by death, and others going off in different directions; no face or shadow was now with him but his own, and a constant sadness was in his heart. Suddenly (one day), when by the side of this jade image (of the Buddha) he saw a merchant [from China] presenting as his offering a fan of white silk [ a Chinese fan]; and the tears of sorrow involuntarily filled his eyes and fell down.”

### **A Jade Buddha at Abhayagiri**

“In the monastery called the Abhayagiri there are (now) five thousand monks. There is in it a hall of the Buddha, adorned with carved and inlaid work of gold and silver, and rich in the seven precious substances, in which there is an image (of the Buddha) in green jade, more than twenty cubits (about nine metres) in height, glittering all over with those substances [gold and silver] and having

an appearance of solemn dignity which words cannot express. In the palm of the right hand there is a priceless pearl.”

### **Rich Merchants in the Capital City**

“In the city there are many Vaisya elders [traders] and Sabaeen merchants [West Asians], whose houses are stately and beautiful. The lanes and passages are kept in good order. At the heads of the four principal streets there have been built preaching halls where, on the eighth, fourteenth and fifteenth days [Poya days] of the month, they spread carpets, and set forth a pulpit, while the monks and common people from all quarters come together to hear the Law [*dhamma*].”

### **The Tooth Relic Festival**

Faxian gives a vivid account of the Tooth Relic Festival which was then associated with the Abhayagiri monastery and appears to have been more a Mahayana festival:

“The tooth of the Buddha is always brought forth in the middle of the third month. Ten days beforehand the king grandly caparisons a large elephant, on which he mounts a man who can speak distinctly, and is dressed in royal robes, to beat a large drum, and make the following proclamation: “The Bodhisattva, during three Asankhyeya-kalpas, manifested his activity, and did not spare his own life. He gave up his kingdom, city, wife and son; he plucked out his eyes and gave them to another; he cut off a piece of his own flesh to ransom the life of a dove; he cut off his head and gave it as alms; he gave his body to feed a starving tigress; he

grudged not his marrow and his brains. In many such ways as these did he undergo pain for the sake of all living. And so it was, that, having become Buddha, he continued in the world for forty-five years, preaching his Law [*Dhamma*], teaching and transforming, so that those who had no rest found rest, and the unconverted were converted. When his connection with the living was completed, he attained to *parinirvana*. Since that event, for 1497 years, the light of the world has gone out and all living beings have had long-continued sadness. Behold! Ten days after this, Buddha's tooth will be brought forth and taken to the Abhayagiri-vihara. Let all and each, whether monks or laity, who wish to amass merit for themselves, make the roads smooth and in good condition, grandly adorn the lanes and by-ways, and provide abundant store of flowers and incense to be used as offerings to it.

When this proclamation is over, the king exhibits, so as to line both sides of the road, the five hundred different bodily forms in which the Bodhisattva has in the course of his history appeared: here as Sudana, there as Sama; now as the king of elephants; and then as a stag or a horse. All these figures are brightly coloured and grandly executed, looking as if they were alive. After this, the tooth of the Buddha is brought forth and is carried along in the middle of the road. Everywhere on the way offerings are presented to it, and thus it arrives at the hall of the Buddha in the Abhayagiri-vihara.

There monks and laity are gathered in crowds. They burn incense, light lamps, and perform all the prescribed services,

day and night without ceasing, till ninety days have been completed, when the tooth is returned to the vihara within the city."

### **Cremation of a Holy Theravada Monk of the Mahavihara**

"Four or five *le* [about 2 kilometres] from the vihara there was reared a great pile of firewood, which might be more than thirty cubits [about 14 metres] square and the same in height. Near the top were laid sandal, aloe, and other kinds of fragrant wood. On the four sides (of the) pile they made steps by which to ascend it. With clean white hair-cloth, almost like silk, they wrapped (the body) round and round. They made a large carriage-frame, in form like our [Chinese] funeral car, but without the dragons and fishes.

At the time of the cremation, the king and the people, in multitudes from all quarters, collected together, and presented offerings of flowers and incense. While they were following the car to the burial-ground, the king himself presented flowers and incense. When this was finished, the car was lifted on the pile, all over which oil of sweet basil was poured and then a light was applied. While the fire was blazing, every one, with a reverent heart, pulled off his upper garment and threw it, with his feather fan and umbrella, from a distance into the midst of the flames, to assist the burning. When the cremation was over, they collected and preserved the bones and proceeded to erect a stupa."

Faxian was 77 years old when he finally returned to China. He died at the age of 88.



*A Nestorian Cross*

## SIXTH CENTURY CE

### **A Persian Christian Church**

West Asian merchants lived in Anuradhapura and the major ports from the early centuries of the Common Era. Among them were Jews and Christians. A Greek merchant from Alexandria (Egypt) says in his book (*Christian Topography*) that there was in Sri Lanka a community of Persian Christians with a priest who was ordained in Persia (Iran). This is what that merchant, Cosmas Indicopleustes (Cosmas who travelled to India) says:

“The island has also a Church of Persian Christians resident there, and a presbyter ordained in Persia, and a deacon, and all the liturgy of the church. The natives and the king are pagans. They have many temples in the island, and on one of their temples, placed on high, there is a hyacinth [a gem], so they say, glowing red, and as big as a big pine-cone. It glitters from afar, especially when the sun shines on it, and it is a spectacle without peer.”

An ancient Nestorian cross carved on stone was discovered in Anuradhapura. It probably belonged to a Persian Christian church there. Another such cross was discovered in the ancient port of Mantai.

## SEVENTH CENTURY CE

### **Xuanzang**

Like Faxian, another Chinese Buddhist monk named Xuanzang went to India in the seventh century in search of Buddhist texts and wrote about his travels and experiences. He travelled widely in India, visiting all the major Buddhist sites. While in Kanchi, in south India, he was planning to sail to Sri Lanka but was discouraged by a large group of monks from Sri Lanka who had arrived there at that time. They told him about political troubles in the island and made him to cancel his plan to visit the kingdom. Instead he joined many of the Sri Lankan monks on pilgrimages to Buddhist sites in south India. From the Sri Lankan monks he gathered much information about Sri Lanka and included them in his book.



*Xuanzang (a later painting)*

### Temple of the Tooth Relic

“By the side of the king’s palace is the vihara of the Buddha’s Tooth, which is decorated with every kind of gem, the splendour of which dazzles the sight like that of the sun.”

### A Gold Buddha Statue

Xuanzang heard about a gold Buddha image housed in a monastery at Anuradhapura. Rich merchants used to donate expensive images and jewelry to monasteries at that time. We hear of a gold Buddha statue in a monastery at Nagapattinam (Tamil Nadu) at about the

same time. It is because of such precious images and jewelry that monasteries and temples were plundered whenever there were political troubles or invasions. The gold statue in the monastery at Nagapattinam was stolen when religious conflicts took place in the seventh century. But at least one Buddhist monastery still has an old Buddha statue made of gold. It survived because it was covered with plaster for a long time and no one knew it was a gold statue. When a worker was cleaning it in 1955, some of the plaster fell off revealing the gold beneath it. This statue is in Thailand, in the Wat Traimit temple in Bangkok. It is three metres tall and weighs 5.5 tonnes. So it is possible to believe that a monastery in Anuradhapura also had a gold Buddha statue.

This is what Xuanzang says about the statue in Anuradhapura:

“By the side of the vihara of the Buddha’s Tooth is a little vihara which is also ornamented with every kind of precious stone. In it is a golden statue of the Buddha; it was cast by a former king of the country, and is of the size of life. He afterwards ornamented the head-dress with a precious gem,”

In the ninth century, an Arab seafarer named Abu Zayd al-Sirafi says that there was a big gold image in the island. He may be referring to the Buddha image described by Xuanzang.

“Here [in Sri Lanka] is a very great idol of the finest gold, but concerning its weight there is no agreement among the navigators (who have been to the island).”

## Alms for the City Monks

Faxian says: “The king prepares in the city a common supply of food for five or six thousand monks.” That was in the fifth century. In the seventh century, this is what Xuanzang had heard:

“By the side of the king’s palace there is built a large kitchen, in which daily is measured out food for 8000 monks. The meal-time having come, the monks arrive with their bowls to receive their allowance. Having received and eaten it, they return, all of them, to their several abodes.”

## NINTH CENTURY CE

### Jewish Merchants

Among the West Asian traders who were resident in Anuradhapura and in the major ports there were no doubt many Jewish merchants. The ninth century Arab traveller Abu Zayd al-Sirafi says:

“In this same island (Sri Lanka) there is a very great multitude of Jews, as well as of many other sects, even Tanwis or Manichees, the king permitting the free exercise of every religion.”

It is interesting to note that the 12th century Arab geographer Muhammad al-Idrisi refers to a council of sixteen persons at the royal court in Sri Lanka, consisting of four Buddhists, four Muslims, four Christians and four Jews.

### A Favourite Pastime: Cock-fighting

Abu Zayd al-Sirafi says that people in Sri Lanka played draughts, and adds:

‘Their other principal pastime is fighting of cocks, which are very large in this country, and better provided with spurs than cocks commonly are. And besides this the Indians [Sri Lankans] arm them with blades of iron. Upon these combats they bet gold, silver, lands, farms and many other things.’



*The gold statue of the Buddha, weighing 5.5. tonnes, in Bangkok*

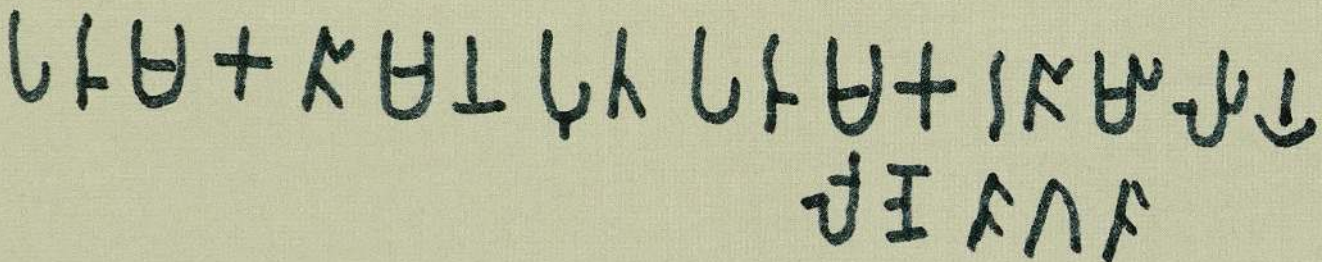
## What writing did the ancients use?

You read earlier that the common language called Prakrit which was widely used in north India later evolved into the modern languages of Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati and others spoken there today. Did you know that the modern scripts of these languages are derived from a common script? This script, called Brahmi, came into use nearly 2500 years ago. From the time of Ashoka it was widely used all over India. Then it slowly developed into the different scripts of India.

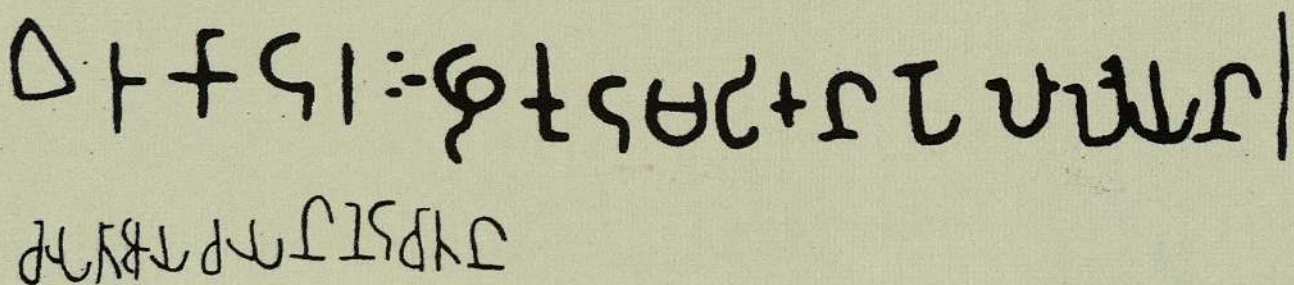
A similar development took place in Sri Lanka. The Prakrit used in the island as a common language evolved as a language different from the north Indian languages. The common Brahmi script used in north India was also used in Sri Lanka. This later evolved into a separate Sinhala script. The Tamil script also developed in the same way from Brahmi. The earliest records we have in Sri Lanka and south India are in the Brahmi script.

Brahmi is a very simple script. It is very easy to write and can be learnt quickly. But over the centuries it changed in different regions and today the scripts derived from Brahmi are rather complicated and take time to learn. In Europe, the Roman script (in which English is now written) was kept without major changes for over 2000 years and today different European languages are written in the same Roman script. If the people of India and Sri Lanka (and Southeast Asia where the same Brahmi script became the mother of the modern Thai, Burmese, Cambodian and Lao scripts) had kept Brahmi without changes, what a difference it would have made today!

Look at Figure -1 (p.53) to see how a simple letter used for 'ka' (like a plus sign) changed over time to the complicated 'ka' in Sinhala and Tamil. Also, look at the Ashokan inscription (p.43), the Sri Lankan cave inscription and the cave inscription from Tamil Nadu (below) to learn how similar they were 2300 years ago.



*A cave inscription in Brahmi, recording the donation of the cave to the Sangha*



*A Brahmi inscription in Tamil, Thiruparankunram, Tamil Nadu*

### How did the ancients date their documents?

You know very well how documents are dated today. When you write 10/07/2017, it means the tenth day of the seventh month (July) in the year 2017 CE/AD. The year is based on the Christian era, that is the system of counting the years from the year of the birth of Jesus Christ. This is the reason why it is called AD which stands for the Latin words Anno Domini (meaning ‘in the Year of our Lord’). This system is now widely used in the modern world by both Christians and Non-Christians. Yet some Non-Christians feel uncomfortable using the name AD, for Jesus Christ is not their Lord. For this reason, many prefer to call the Christian Era by the name ‘Common Era’ and CE stands for that.

Followers of non-Christian religions have been using their own systems of counting the years. But a common system for dating documents that was widely used in ancient times is the system based on regnal years, that is counting the years from the time a king or queen of the country began to rule. This system is still used in Japan. In the UK, too, certain official documents are dated in the regnal years of the ruling monarch along with the date in the Christian Era.

In India, nearly 2300 years ago, the great emperor Ashoka dated his edicts in his regnal years. This is an example from his edict : (See page 42 for the original)

‘Devanampiya Raja Piyadassi, when he had been consecrated twenty years,

Date	Sinhala	Tamil
200 BCE	+	+
100 BCE	+	+
200 CE	ƒ	ƒ
500 CE	ƒ	ƒ
1000 CE	ƒ	ƒ
1500 CE	ƒ	ƒ

Fig 1 : How the Brahmi letter + (ka) changed in Sinhala and Tamil

came in person and revered the place where Buddha Sakyamuni was born.’

Dating documents in the regnal years of the ruler was the practice in Sri Lanka, too, in the ancient times. Sometimes the Buddhist Era (counting the years from the *Parinirvana* or death of the Buddha) was also used.

When it was necessary to give exact dates, the Indian practice of giving more details (according to the Indian lunar calendar) was adopted. In this system, the regnal year, month, fortnight (the month was split into two fortnights) and day of the fortnight (not day of the month as we do now) are given. Such a system is used in the Hindu calendar even now. The month is split into two fortnights – the period of the waxing moon (from the new moon to the full moon, called in Sanskrit *Shukla Paksha*) and the period of the waning moon (from the full moon to the new moon, called in Sanskrit *Krishna Paksha*). The following is an example from a record of king Kanittha Tissa who ruled in the second century CE, that is 1800 years ago:

පුවය මලි තිස මහරජන වන ලගිත සත අවනත  
වසති බග වද අව මසිය සතපත දිවස

*Puvaya Mali Tisa Maharajaha cata  
lagita sata avanaka vasahi Baga cada  
ava masiya sata paka divasa.*

Translation: Dated seventh day of the waning moon in the month of Baga in the seventh year of King Mali Tisa.

Even in the tenth century there was no change in the system. The following is an example from an inscription of Kassapa V:

ශ්‍රී අභ සලමෙවන් මපුරුමුත දෙවන්තෙ නවය  
අව සතවත් දිවස්

*Sri Abha Salamevan Mapurumuka  
devanne navaya ava satavak davas*

Translation: Hail. On the seventh day of the waning moon in the month of Navaya in the second year of His Majesty Abha Salamevan.

In some Tamil records, more details relating to the exact time of the recorded event are given. In a record of the eleventh century, dated in the regnal year of a Chola ruler at Polonnaruva, the following details are given:

கோ ஸ்ரீ சங்கவன்மரான உடையார் ஸ்ரீ  
சோழ இலங்கேஸ்வர தேவர்க்கு யாண்டு  
பத்தாவது இய்யாட்டைக் கும்ப ஞாயற்று  
பூர்வபக்ஷத்து துவாதசியும் செவ்வாய்க்  
கிழமையும் பெற்ற ஆயிலேயத்து நாள்  
அன்றிரவு

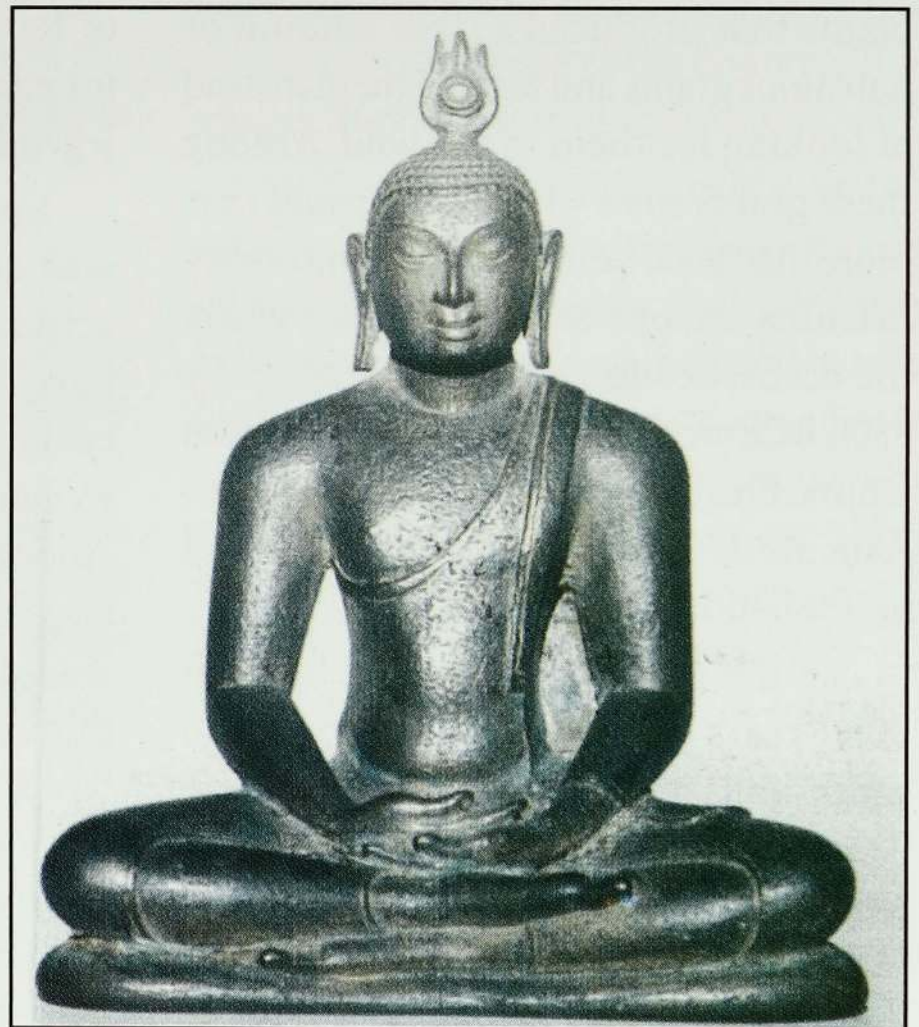
*Ko Sri Chankavanmarana Udaiyar  
Sri Chola Ilankesvara Thevarkku  
yandu paththavathu Iyyattaik Kumpa  
Nayarru purva pakshaththu dvadasiyum  
Chevvaikkilamaiyum perra Ayileyaththu  
nal anriravu.*

Translation: The tenth year of King Sri Sangha[Bodhi]varmar alias Lord Sri Chola Ilankesvara Devar – the night of Tuesday, on which day the Aslesha *nakshatra* was current, the twelfth day of the first fortnight of the month of Kumbha in this year.





*Andhra style  
Dhyana Buddha bronze image  
from Tiriya,  
Trincomalee District  
This is one of over  
fifty Mahayana Buddhist bronzes  
unearthed in the  
ruins of the Mahayana Temple  
at Tiriya showing influences  
of Andhra art. About the 7<sup>th</sup> century*



*Dhyana Buddha bronze image  
in the Chola style,  
from Thirukkivil,  
Ampara District  
This is one of  
two Chola Buddhist bronzes  
unearthed in Thirukkivil*

## Section 4 *The March of History*

### 4. Tank-Builders and Irrigation Engineers

The large stupas at Anuradhapura and other places, the many stone and metal Buddha images and other ancient sculptures found not only at Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa but also in other parts of the island, and the huge tanks (reservoirs) still supplying water for cultivation are achievements of ancient Sri Lanka. These were possible because of the success in agriculture and foreign trade. The surplus food produced by the farmers and the wealth of merchants helped in these achievements.

As humans began to settle down and live in villages, they domesticated certain plants and animals. They selected certain plants that produced a large amount of nutritious grains and farmed them instead of looking for them in the wild. Among these grains were wheat, barley and rice. More than 8000 years ago, the Yangzi valley in China was one of the first places where the domestication of rice took place. By 3500 BCE rice farming spread to southern China. From there it spread to Southeast Asia. By 2300 BCE rice farming spread to Thailand.

In the Early Iron Age, that is about 3000 years ago, rice farming spread to south India and Sri Lanka and soon rice became the staple diet of the people of this region. Rice farming, along with cattle-keeping, brought about a big change in the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the people.

But for rice cultivation to be successful plenty of water was needed. So from the beginning village chiefs paid much attention to the supply of water to the villagers. The result was the building of village tanks. Such small tanks were owned by individuals, too, and some were donated to Buddhist monasteries.

As the many small chiefdoms in south India and Sri Lanka grew into large kingdoms, one of the main ideals of the rulers was to ensure an adequate supply of water for rice cultivation through the construction of tanks and dams. There are legends about the rulers who were successful in fulfilling this duty. Karikalan of Tamil Nadu and Gajabahu of Sri Lanka, for example, are heroes in some of these legends.

Since the construction of tanks was considered to be an important achievement of a ruler, the chronicles have listed the tanks and dams built by every ruler at Anuradhapura. From this we know that by the first century CE the Anuradhapura kings had begun to build large tanks. Vasabha, in the first century, is said to have built eleven tanks. In the third century King Mahasena built sixteen tanks. The biggest of these, still in use, is the Minneriya tank (covering an area of nearly 4670 acres). The people greatly appreciated Mahasena's contribution and made him into a god – the god of Minneri.

In the centuries after Mahasena, kings devoted much attention to building new tanks and dams, restoring some old tanks and enlarging some others. Clearly there were further developments in irrigation engineering. By the end of the fifth century these developments resulted in the construction of one of the largest reservoirs in the ancient world. This happened in the reign of Dhatusena (in the last quarter of the fifth century). That tank is Kalaweva which is still in use. It covers an area of 6380 acres. A long canal called Jayaganga (54 miles/87 km in length) was also built to carry water from the Kalaweva to the Tisaweve in Anuradhapura.

Many large tanks and canals were built in the sixth century. One of the largest of these is the Nachchaduva tank near Anuradhapura. It covers an area of 4408 acres. Another large tank is the Thanimurippu-kulam, near Mullaithivu, in the Northern Province. Two other large tanks constructed in the sixth century are the Kantalay and Giritale tanks.

Construction dates are not available for all the ancient tanks. This is especially so for the tanks in the Northern Province, Southern Province and Eastern Province. The biggest of these is in the Mannar District and is popularly known as the Giant's Tank (Yodhaweve/Kaddukarai-kulam). It covers an area of 4547 acres and was one of the largest human-made reservoirs in the ancient world. Among the others are the Padavi tank, the Iranaimadu tank, the Vahalkada tank, the Vavuni-

kulam, the Allai tank, Pandikulama and Mandagala.

From the seventh to the end of the tenth century there was no major tank-building activity. But some of the rulers enlarged existing tanks and extended canals. When strong rulers came to power in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, large irrigation works were resumed and tank-building reached its peak.

The many rulers who were responsible for the construction and maintenance of such a large number of irrigation works deserve much credit. They did this to grow enough food for the people and to promote the prosperity of the country. They gave priority to planning and constructing these works rather than engaging the labour of the people to build big palaces and tombs for themselves. What they did is still contributing to the welfare of the people and to the prosperity of the country. This makes their work really admirable.

What is more admirable is the remarkable work of the many generations of irrigation engineers and the large number of labourers and technicians who helped them. The technical excellence of these engineers has been praised by modern engineers and scientists. Many are surprised that the ancient engineers were able to build the huge reservoirs and long canals without the kind of scientific instruments that we have today.

When a basic knowledge of tank-building was introduced about 3000 years ago, that knowledge was common to both south India and Sri Lanka. Over

the centuries the technology relating to building tanks and canals was gradually developed in both areas and no doubt many ideas were shared. But engineers in both places met various challenges and devised their own way of solving their problems. Similar problems were solved in different ways in other parts of Asia, such as China, where reservoirs were needed for rice cultivation. It is in the solution of these problems, in the planning and designing of the huge reservoirs and long canals and in the management of the labour involved that the engineers in the small island of Sri Lanka have shown their excellence and won the praise of modern scientists. We do not know the name of any of them. We do not have the

books they used. We have no idea of the instruments they used or how they made precise measurements. If only we think about these, we can fully appreciate the work they did.

The technical aspects of the work of these ancient engineers are complex. One day some of you may become engineers and get interested in investigating these aspects. For the present you may like to know one of them.

This is the special kind of sluice that was developed in Sri Lanka. It is different from the sluice developed in south India. It is a device that reveals the excellent technical skills that were developed to achieve the building of an efficient irrigation system in ancient times.



*Kalawewa - the largest irrigation reservoir in the island (26 sq.km)*

## Section 4 *The March of History*



### 5. Society

#### Food

With the introduction of rice cultivation in the Early Iron Age, rice became the staple food of the people in Sri Lanka. As more and more rice was cultivated with the increase in the construction of large tanks, rice was probably an essential ingredient in all the meals. But other grains were also cultivated. Some of these grains were *tana*, *amu* and *meneri*. Beans and pulses were also cultivated. Food prepared with these formed the main meal at night. In the morning, a kind of gruel (*hambu*) was the meal. This no doubt was prepared with rice and certain other grains.

Among the fruits that were eaten, mango and banana deserve to be mentioned. Other varieties of fruit collected in the wild would have been commonly eaten. Since there is information about the cultivation of sugar-cane and sugar-cane mills, some kind of sugar would have formed part of the diet of richer people. On special occasions monks were given jaggery (*sakur*) which was probably made with sugar-cane juice. Coconut was eaten but the technology to extract the oil from it was not known in the early centuries.

Goats and cattle were kept by those who could afford them. Milk, curd and ghee (*gitel*) were part of the diet of these people. Honey collected from the forests was used for food as well as for medicine.

Fish certainly was included in the diet of many people. In the coastal areas fish and other seafood would have been eaten almost daily. In the interior regions fish from tanks, rivers and canals were caught. Certain animals were hunted for meat which was supplied to villages and towns.

In the preparation of food, pepper, ginger, turmeric as well as certain other spices were used.

#### Lighting

Living in today's world you cannot imagine how it must have been to live without lights in the night. But that was how the ancient people lived. They had to complete all their daily activities, including their dinner, before nightfall. Before they learnt to extract oil from coconut, the only oil that was used for lamps was ghee. That was hard to get and expensive. As lamps had to be kept burning in shrines, special grants were made to monasteries for the supply of ghee for burning lamps. In some monasteries a person was employed to take care of the lamps in the shrine (by frequently filling them with oil) throughout the night. In the royal palace and in the houses of the rich, ghee was probably used for lighting. In south India large numbers of goats and cows were donated to temples for the purpose of obtaining ghee from their milk in order to keep lamps burning in

the shrine throughout the night and day. Similar donations would have taken place in Sri Lanka, too.

## Language

### Change from Prakrit to Hela/Elu

When Sanskrit-speakers spread their language in north India about 3500 years ago, the people who were already settled there had difficulty pronouncing many of the Sanskrit words. So these words changed in their speech. The result was the birth of the Prakrit languages which later developed into the modern languages of north India. In the same manner, when Prakrit-speakers came to Sri Lanka and introduced their language, the people already settled in the island found it difficult to pronounce many of the Prakrit words. This is like the difficulty some have in pronouncing the English 'F' and say 'P' instead. In those days they had difficulty saying 'dra' or 'gra'. Some said 'ka' for 'ga'. These difficulties led to more changes in these words. In course of time, the Prakrit spoken in Sri Lanka gradually (after nearly a thousand years) developed into the Hela or Elu language which further developed later into Sinhala. Just a few examples in

the table at the end of this page may help you to get an idea of this change.

### Survivals from Prehistoric Languages

When Prakrit replaced the old prehistoric languages, some words and elements of the old languages survived. It is very hard to trace these survivals without evidence in the form of records. Those who have studied the development of the Sinhala language have pointed out some words that can be taken as survivals from the prehistoric languages. Among these are words for parts of the body: *kakula* (leg), *oluva* (head), *bella* (neck), *kata* (mouth), *kalava* (thigh), *bada* (stomach) and *tola* (lip).

### Survivals from Old Tamil

Some words and elements of Old Tamil have also survived in later Sinhala and Jaffna Tamil. But again not all of them can be traced easily. Since there are inscriptions from the third century BCE for every century, some words can be traced with these records. One such word that is found in the earliest inscriptions is 'marumakana' (grandson). This word later changes to 'manumaraka'

Sanskrit	Pali (North Indian Prakrit)	Prakrit of Sri Lanka	Hela/Elu
chandra	chanda	chada	sanda සඳ
graamanii	gaamanii	gamani	gemunu ගැමුණු
nagara	nagara	nakara	nuvara නුවර
dharma	dhamma	dama	dam/daham දහමි

in the second century CE. By the ninth century it takes the form 'munuburaa'. Another word, meaning 'young', occurs as the first element of some words as well as a separate word. It is the word 'ila' இள which occurs as 'la' ள in inscriptional Tamil. In Sinhala it is seen as the first element in such words as 'lamayaa', 'lapati' and 'ladaru' (with the meaning 'young') and as a separate word (in the name La Parideva in a sixth century inscription) meaning 'young'. The word *kulai* குழை (meaning tender leaf in Old Tamil) still survives in the same form in Jaffna Tamil, and as *kola* (කොළ) in Sinhala.

### Graffiti on the Mirror Wall at Sigiriya

None of the literary compositions in the Old Sinhala (Hela) language before the

eighth century has survived. However, on the Mirror Wall of the Sigiriya fortress there are some verses scribbled by visitors who went to see the paintings in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. These provide some idea of the non-religious poetry of that time. The following is one of them, addressed to a lady in the paintings.

හමුල් මරු ජහස්සුය හස්සන්දල්ලා  
තුරු ගල් කො හල්හු මල ගල්හි හැල්ලා  
ගොනින් මුත් කලවි කළ තමිඛ ලපල්ලා  
පැ රැය දිගේ ත දුන් හසුන් කුමි වැල්ලා

The wind raged, bringing down the trees  
In their bud-time beauty –  
Thousands, hundreds of thousands;  
The curlew shrieked, the torrents  
Roared down the Maleya mountains  
But the night glowed tender, the leaves  
Copper colour, in the sheen  
Of innumerable fireflies.



One of the ancient paintings in Sigiriya

Visitors to Sigiriya, 1000 Years ago, wrote their comments and thoughts on the Mirror Wall near the paintings. See a verse written by a visitor (above).

O long-eyed one,  
I read your message, but  
What does it hold for me?  
(English rendering by Prof. Ashley Halpe)

### A Tamil verse on stone from a Buddhist monastery

A stone slab, on which is recorded in Tamil certain arrangements made at the Tamil Buddhist monastery called Maakkothai Palli, in Anuradhapura, has a Tamil verse in praise of a pious monk named Dharmapalan. The inscription belongs to about the ninth century. Maakkothai was the name of the capital of a kingdom in Kerala at that time. It seems that Buddhists from Kerala had built this Maakkothai Palli. The verse is as follows:

போதி நிழல் அமர்ந்த புண்ணியன் போல்  
எவ்வயிர்க்கும்  
தீதில் அருள் சுரக்கும் சிந்தையான் - ஆதி  
வருதன்மம் குன்றாத மாதவன் மாக்கோதை  
ஒரு தர்மபாலனுளன்.

Translation: [Here] lives in Maakkothai a Dharmapalan [Protector of the Dharma] who, like the Meritorious Being [the Buddha] seated in the shade of the Bodhi [tree], has a [gracious] heart pouring out flawless blessings to any living being, and who is Madhavan, never deviating from the Dharma that has come down from ancient times.

### The Four Guardian Deities

From very early times Buddhists believed that the world is protected by four deities who are the guardian gods of the four quarters (directions). This was a belief common to all Indian religions. In addition

to this, in Sri Lanka there was also the belief that there are four separate deities who are the guardian gods of the country (known to the common people in Buddhist villages as the *Hatara Varan Deviyo*).

In the earliest chronicles it is stated that Upulvan (Uppala-vanna) was the god with the responsibility of guarding Sri Lanka. An ancient temple for this god existed in the south, at Devundara (Dondra). It was destroyed by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Upulvan may have been a god worshipped in the island before Buddhism was introduced. One of the main physical features of this god is his dark colour. The name Uppala-vanna in fact means 'blue-coloured' (uppala = blue Indian water lily). A similar dark-coloured god named Maayon (also Maal) was worshipped in neighbouring south India about the same time. Both Upulvan and Maayon were later identified with the Brahmanical god Vishnu. So, in course of time, Upulvan became Vishnu (though some argue that the two are different gods).

When the Brahmanical as well as Buddhist idea that there are four gods guarding the four quarters was accepted in Sri Lanka, three more deities were added as guardian gods of the island. The three are Saman, Vibhishana and Kataragama. As the chronicles do not provide information about popular cults, it is not known how and when this development took place. In the period after the fall of Polonnaruva, when more information is available, we know that shrines for the guardian gods were built in the capital cities. The



shrines built in the last capital before the British conquest, namely Kandy, are still functioning. However, in different places different gods have been considered as the guardian gods. In Kandy, for example, the four gods are Vishnu, Kataragama, Natha and Pattini.

While there are shrines for these gods in various parts of the island, the central shrines are located as follows: Vishnu at Devundara, Kataragama/Skanda at Kataragama, Natha at Thotagamuva, Vibhishana at Kelaniya, Saman at Ratnapura and Pattini at Navagamuva. These temples may have their origin in ancient times.

### **The Monastery as Employer**

When we get the earliest cave inscriptions, we find that caves were donated to the Buddhist Sangha in general and not to individual monks or monasteries. The common phrase used in these records is: '*agata anagata catu disa sagasa dine*' (donated to the present and future Sangha of the four quarters). Monks of that time and monks of the future were to use the caves as their residences. That was in the second and first centuries BCE (about 2200 years ago).

Gradually this situation changed and we find lands, canals and small tanks being donated to individual monasteries. Thus the monastery began to change as a property-owning institution. 'Granting of lands to monasteries for the members of the Sangha to derive revenue from was an innovation which went against the ideas

of early Buddhism'. Once this practice of making land grants was adopted, it spread very fast. From the beginning of the Common Era, that is from the first century CE, for the next 1000 years almost all the stone inscriptions in the island record grants of land and revenue from villages to individual monasteries.

Once the monasteries became land-owning institutions, they had to employ various people to manage the property and collect the revenue. Some monasteries became very rich and employed a large number of people. The following is an example. It is about a single monastery and the information is from one single inscription.

The inscription is in Mihintale and belongs to the tenth century. It refers to a large number of employees who were all paid. It is not possible to list all of them here. But the record gives an insight into the type of jobs that people had in ancient times.

The record first refers to a board of administrators who meet regularly to discuss matters relating to the administration of the monastery and take decisions. The board includes the lay warden of the monastery (he is not a monk), the administrator of rules, the steward, the almoner, the clerk of the monastery, the registrar of caskets and the keeper of caskets. Every month account sheets had to be prepared, which means one or more accountants were employed for this purpose. Of the large number of other employees, we may mention the master of festivals, the watchmen, the

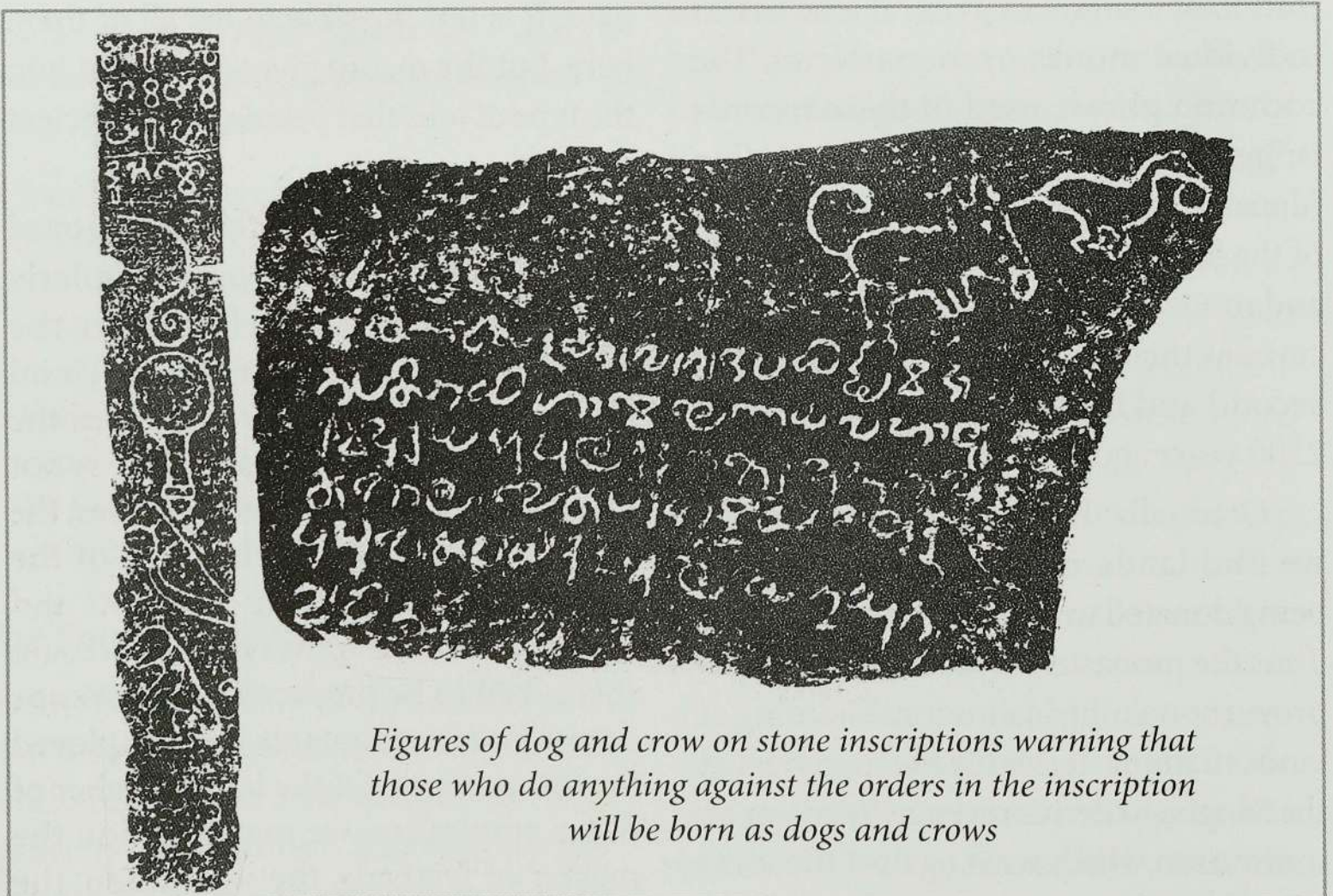
cattle-keeper, a head painter and eleven painters, four servants of the paymaster, head caretaker of the granary, the assistant caretaker of the granary, the warder of the refectory, twelve cooks, head thatcher and eleven thatchers, five potters, one alms-bowl maker, physicians, florists, a barber, an astrologer, three master artisans, eight carvers, two brick-layers, two carpenters, two blacksmiths, lime-burners, six cartmen, two laundrymen and many other servants and serfs.

### Crime and punishment

The stone inscriptions provide much information about crime and punishment in ancient Sri Lanka. The following information from a record of Mahinda IV (tenth century) will give you an idea about crimes and the punishments for them in ancient times. The record relates

to some villages given as endowments to a Tamil monastery (*Demel-veher*) in a village called Kibi-nilam, in the Northern Quarter (*utur-pasa*) of the kingdom. It is interesting to note that villagers had the responsibility to find criminals in their area. They were fined if they failed to do so.

If a murder or robbery with violence was committed, a body consisting of the village headmen and some householders sat in session and inquired into the crime. The proceedings were recorded. The murderer was punished with death. Thieves taking property by violence were hanged and the stolen property was restored to the owner. If the criminals were not found, the villagers were given 45 days to find them and have them punished. If they failed to find them, they were fined.



*Figures of dog and crow on stone inscriptions warning that those who do anything against the orders in the inscription will be born as dogs and crows*

Those who slaughtered buffaloes, oxen and goats were punished with death. Those who stole cattle but did not slaughter them were branded under the armpit. Those who effaced brand-marks were made to stand on red hot iron sandals. Beating and cutting of hands are mentioned among other punishments.

### Curse for criminals

As in most ancient societies, attempts were made to frighten away thieves and other criminals through what are known as imprecations or curses. This was done in ancient Egypt to prevent thieves breaking into the pyramids and stealing the treasures. You may have heard about the curse of Tutankhamun for those who disturbed his tomb. In Sri

Lanka and south India we find such curses in inscriptions. The Sinhala and Tamil inscriptions in Sri Lanka, of about the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, have the following curse:

‘May the persons who violate this (grant or donation) be born as dogs and crows in the next birth.’

පර දන්මයෙ බල කවුඩු වෙව්වයි

‘*Para danmaye balu kavudu vetvayi*’  
(Garandigala)

(May they be born as dogs and crows in their next birth)

இத் தர்மத்துக்கு தீங்கு நின்றார் காக்கையும்  
நாயும் ஆவர்.

‘*Ith tharmaththukku theenku  
ninraar kaakkaiyum naayum aavar*’  
(Anuradhapura)



*Ruins of a hospital, Mihintale (Note the medicinal trough)*

(May those who violate this meritorious act be born as crows and dogs)

A figure of a dog and a crow are also usually drawn at the end of the record.

In India, in the Brahmanical tradition, killing of cows and Brahmins was considered a serious crime, especially if it was committed in a very holy place. So the curses in Indian inscriptions are different. In south India, usually the curse runs like this: 'May the criminal take upon himself the sin of those who kill a cow (or a Brahmin) on the banks of the Ganga river'. In some Sinhala inscriptions there is a similar curse. In those days, Matota (Mantai) was considered a very holy place, even among the Buddhists, because of its

famous Saiva shrine. Killing a cow at such a holy place would have been considered a very serious crime. So we get the following curse in some Sinhala inscriptions of the tenth century:

මහවොටියෙ එළ මරුවා කළ පා කම් ගොහ  
'Mahavotiye ela maruvaa kala paa kam  
gathaaha'

[They shall take upon themselves the sins committed by a killer of cows at Mahavoti (Matota) ]

### Slavery and Caste

Although the caste system had not developed like the rigid Brahmanical Indian system, there were people who



*Ruins of a hospital complex, Polonnaruwa*

were considered to be of low social status. There were outcaste people called *chandalas*. There were slaves, even in monasteries (*veher-dasa*) In the 12th century, Nissanka Malla built a lower terrace at Sri Pada (Adam's Peak) for people of lower caste to worship from, while the others worshipped from a higher terrace.

### Health Care and Hospitals

The kings of Sri Lanka followed the noble example set by Ashoka and devoted some of their attention to health care and building of hospitals. (*vedhal*) Hospitals built of stone were attached mainly to big monasteries or to the palaces (*rajvedhala*)

No doubt there were hospitals which were wooden structures. Similar hospitals were found in south India, too (*aathular-saalai*). Some of the best examples of stone-built hospitals are seen in Anuradhapura, Mihintale, Polonnaruva, Medirigiriya, Dighavapi and other places. In some of them we see rooms for patients, a large stone medicinal trough (in which a patient was immersed in medicinal water prepared with herbs and medicines), steam bath, medicine stores, grinding stone and other equipment. There were also dispensaries (*behet-ge*). Inscriptions record grants for the regular supply of dried ginger and other medicinal herbs.

### Goddess Pattini

The worship of the goddess Kannaki as Pattini was introduced from Kerala in ancient times. Shrines for Pattini are found today throughout Sri Lanka. Beautiful ancient bronze images of this goddess have been found. But there is confusion between Pattini and the Mahayana goddess Tara in the identification of their images.

Pattini is worshipped as a Hindu goddess, Kannaki, in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Separate temples exist for this goddess. In the Eastern Province special rituals and folk dramas are associated with the worship of Kannaki. In south Sri Lanka, the cult of the goddess Pattini is associated with special folk rituals.

The Tamil epic *Silappadikaram* has an introduction (added later) which says that King Kayavaaku (Gajabahu) of Sri Lanka was present in Kerala when the worship of Kannaki was inaugurated. It is believed by some that the worship of Pattini (Kannaki) was introduced by Gajabahu.

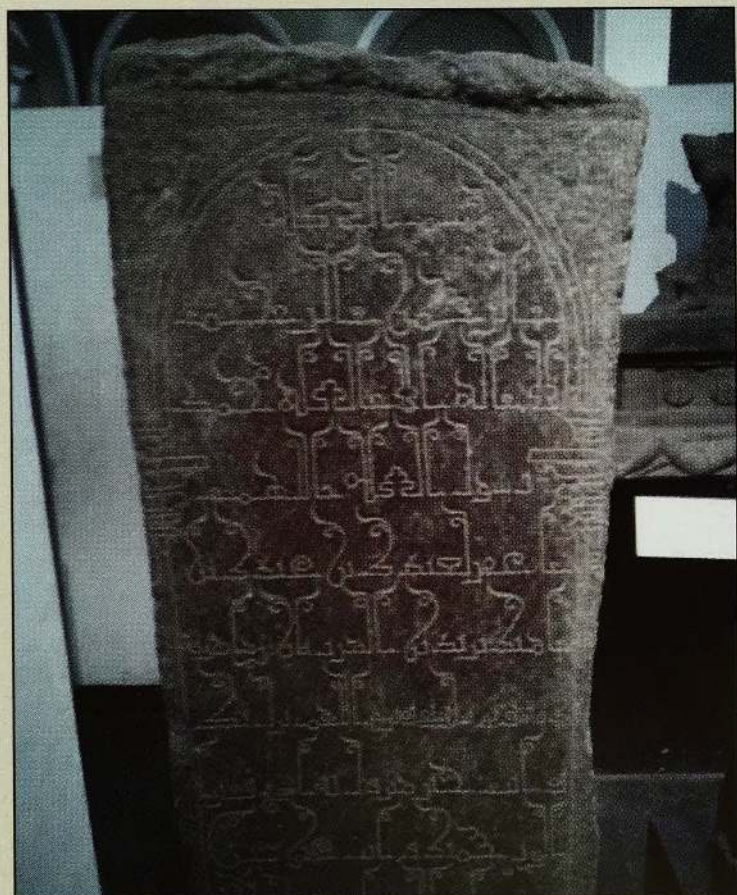
There is no doubt that the cult of the Pattini goddess was introduced in Sri Lanka from Kerala.



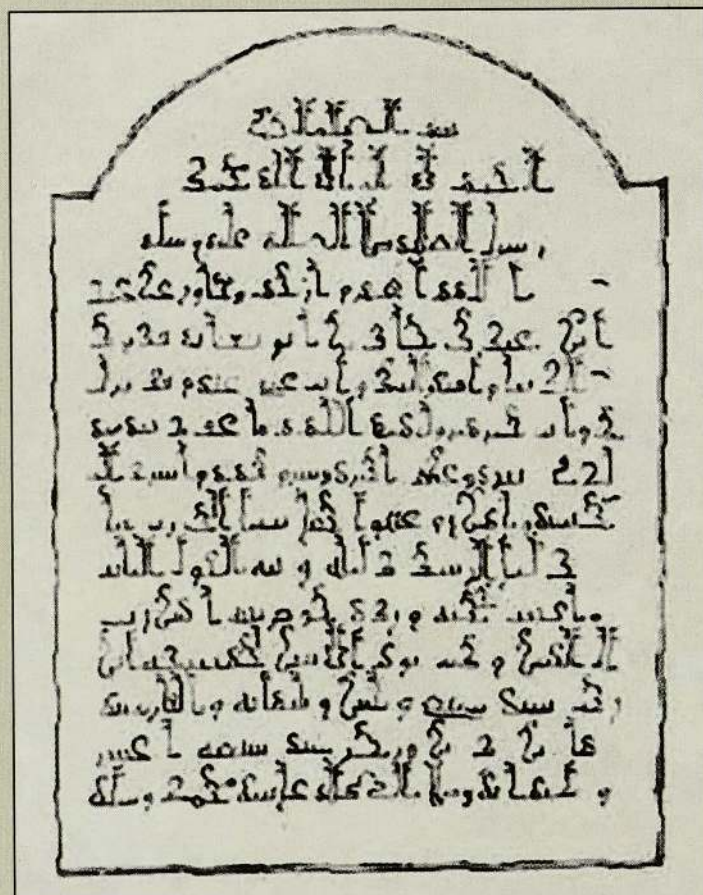


### Ancient Arabic Inscriptions

Adam's Peak/ Siri Pada has attracted pilgrims of all major religions in Sri Lanka for centuries. Muslims have been making the trek to the summit of this mountain ever since West Asian traders adopted Islam. An ancient Arabic inscription, it is reported, has been found in a cave near the summit.



*Arabic inscription from Puliyantivu,  
Mannar*



*A copy of an ancient Arabic inscription  
discovered 200 years ago*

## Section 5 *Decline and Fall of Anuradhapura*

### 1. **Chola Conquest**

From very early times Sri Lanka had close political relations with the neighbouring chiefdoms and kingdoms of south India. But not much information is available about these relations. The information we have relates only to times of conflict. In the second century BCE we hear of Elara, a Chola prince, capturing power at Anuradhapura. From time to time there were princes and others coming from south India and ousting the rulers of Anuradhapura. We also hear of persons opposed to the rulers of Anuradhapura going to south India, raising an army there and returning to capture power. Sometimes a lawful heir to the throne or an ousted ruler from Anuradhapura did the same thing. There is also evidence of a king or a member of the ruling family taking a wife from south India, possibly from a ruling family there. But no king of a south Indian kingdom sent an invading army to Sri Lanka until the seventh century.

The seventh century was a time of internal political troubles in Sri Lanka. The rulers at Anuradhapura had difficulty controlling the northern and southern parts of the island and faced frequent attacks from rivals. Some time in the middle of the seventh century an ambitious prince from Anuradhapura, named Manavarma, went into hiding in the north but was forced to flee from there to Kanchi, the

capital of the Pallava kingdom in south India. He stayed there with his family for several years, waiting for an opportunity to return to Sri Lanka and capture power.

When the chance came, the mighty Pallava king Narasimhavarman I provided Manavarma with an army. Manavarma landed with the army in the north and marched to Anuradhapura but had to hurriedly return with the army to Kanchi. This is the first time that an army of a ruler in a south Indian kingdom invaded Sri Lanka. It was a sign of the times, for more invasions were to follow.

In the seventh century the Tamil-speaking southern region of India was split into four major territories. These were Thondai-mandalam with Kanchi as its capital, Pandi-nadu with Madurai as its capital, Chera-nadu (also known as Kerala) on the western coast, and Chola-nadu (also known as Chola-mandalam). The Pallava ruling family was in control of Thondai-mandalam and was very powerful in the seventh and eighth centuries. The Pandya family was in Pandi-nadu, ruling over a small area in the seventh century. Chera-nadu was under the rule of the Chera family. The ancient Chola family of Chola-nadu had disappeared for a long time and came back into south Indian politics only in the ninth century.

From the time of Manavarma the Anuradhapura rulers were allies of the



Map 3 - South India and Sri Lanka - Seventh Century CE

powerful Pallavas. This alliance saved them from facing invasions from the south Indian side for nearly two centuries; but it also led them to get involved in the power struggles in south India. There is no need to go into the details of these political conflicts. To put it briefly, the Pandyas began to emerge as a new power in the eighth century and supported the enemies of the Pallavas. The Anuradhapura rulers, as allies of the Pallavas, became enemies of the Pandyas. At this point the Cholas re-entered south Indian politics as allies of the Pallavas.

In the ninth century the Pallavas were on the decline and the Pandyas were

gaining new territories and increasing their power. One result of this was the invasion of Sri Lanka by the powerful Pandya king Srimara Srivallabha in the reign of Sena I, some time in the middle of the ninth century. The Pandya ruler himself led the invasion. He landed with his army in the north and marched towards Anuradhapura. In the course of one of the battles, Sena's brother, Yuvaraja Mahinda, died in the battle field. It is interesting to note that, like Gamani Abhaya nearly a thousand years earlier, the Pandya king ordered a royal cremation for Mahinda with all the ceremonies and rites that were usually associated with the funeral of a



Pandya royal family member. After this, the Pandya army entered Anuradhapura and sacked the city. Srimara entered into a treaty with Sena I and left with a large amount of treasure.

This was not the end of the conflict with the Pandyas. Sena I's successor, Sena II, allied with the Pallava ruler and sent an army to the Pandya capital Madurai. Madurai was captured and in the battle that followed the Pandya ruler Srimara was killed. The son of Srimara was then placed on the throne and the Sri Lankan army returned with the treasures taken away by Srimara earlier as well as with some Pandya treasures.

After this we see the end of Pallava power. It was the Cholas who emerged as the new power in south India in the tenth century. They defeated the Pallavas and turned against the Pandyas. The Anuradhapura rulers allied with the Pandyas and the Cheras, but could not contain the power of the Cholas. An army was sent from Sri Lanka to help the Pandyas but it was defeated. After defeating the Pandyas, the Chola ruler Parantaka I turned his attention to Sri Lanka. The first of the Chola invasions took place early in the tenth century.

There were more Chola invasions after this but it was only towards the end of the tenth century that the Cholas were in a position to hold the northern part of the island, including Anuradhapura, firmly under their control. This happened in the reign of Chola Rajaraja I, in or about 993 CE. Mahinda V, who was ruling from

Anuradhapura at that time, escaped to Rohana and stayed there until he and his family were captured in 1017 CE. This was in the reign of Chola Rajendra I, the son of Rajaraja. Mahinda and his family were taken to south India.

The conquest of Sri Lanka was part of a larger naval campaign of the Chola ruler and covered areas as far as Indonesia. On land Rajendra Chola led his armies as far north as Bengal. This was the first time that the armies of an Indian ruler had conquered territories across the seas.

The fall of Anuradhapura was a major event in the history of the island. This city had been a seat of rulers and the most important urban centre in the island for nearly 1500 years. It was a renowned centre of Buddhist learning for many centuries. But after the fifth century, it became the scene of plots, assassinations and battles. On many occasions those who wanted to capture power brought mercenaries from south India and attacked the city. The situation improved when Manavarma captured power with the help of a Pallava army at the end of the seventh century. But after about a century there were again serious problems. The rulers faced not only opposition in Anuradhapura but also revolts in the distant areas of the north and the south. Sometimes they were forced to leave Anuradhapura and seek refuge in Rohana.

There were a few rulers who were able to control the situation and even send armies to south India to help their allies. But on the whole the situation worsened

after about the middle of the tenth century. No ruler was in a position to defend the city. In fact, the last ruler, Mahinda V, abandoned the city and fled to Rohana. His soldiers and mercenaries took control of Anuradhapura. It was at this chaotic time that Rajaraja's army sacked the city.

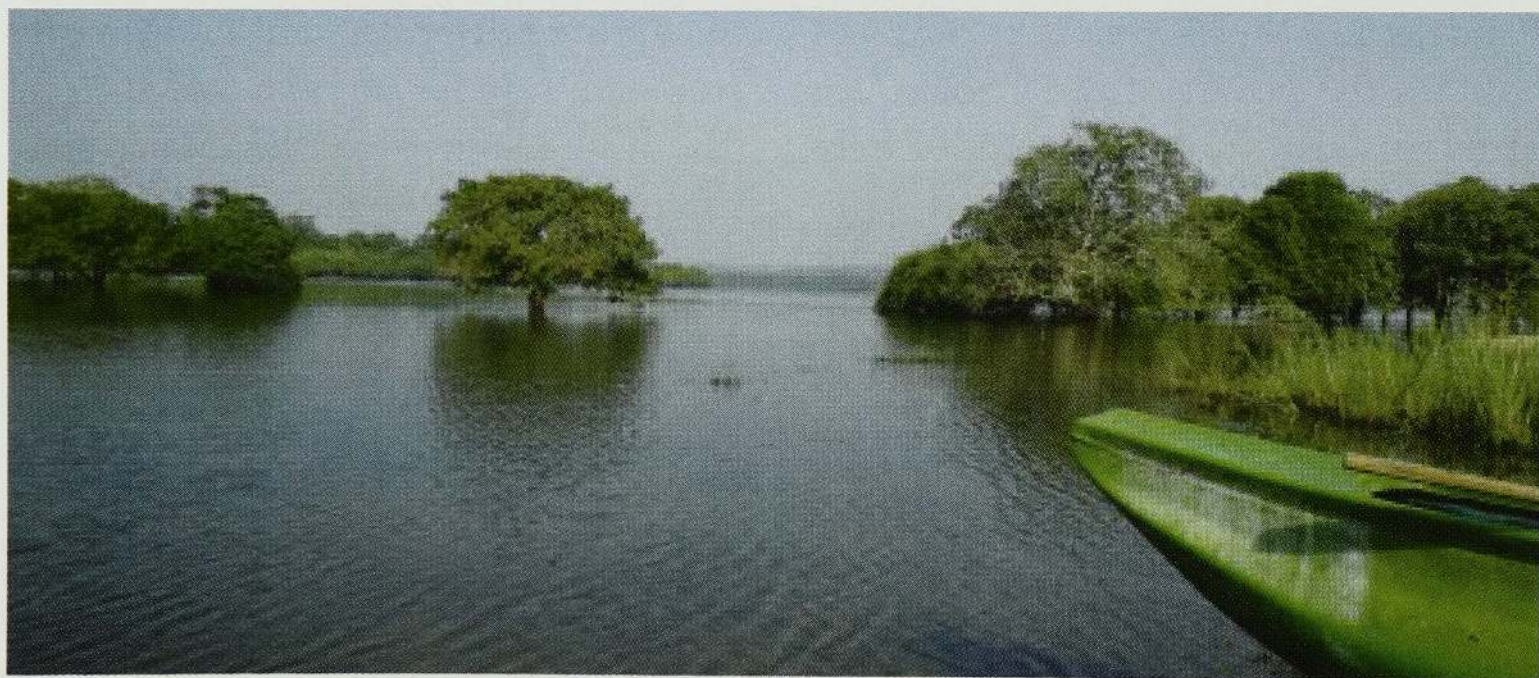
The Chola rulers were aiming to subdue and conquer Sri Lanka for nearly a century. The clash between the rising Chola rulers and the Anuradhapura kings began early in the tenth century. A new Chola prince, Parantaka, became king in 907 CE. He was determined to expand the power of the Cholas over the whole of south India and beyond. He invaded the Pandya kingdom and began his campaign of expansion.

The Pandyas were now allies of the Sri Lankan rulers. When Parantaka invaded the Pandya kingdom, Kassapa V who was

ruler at Anuradhapura, sent an army to help the Pandya ruler Rajasimha. The Cholas were victorious. Rajasimha fled to Anuradhapura taking with him the Pandya crown and other treasures. These were left with the Anuradhapura ruler for safe-keeping.

Parantaka was determined to get the Pandya crown from Sri Lanka and crown himself at the Pandya capital. He invaded Sri Lanka about 923 CE but failed to achieve his aim. A second invasion followed a few years later. These invasions resulted only in the control of parts of northern Sri Lanka.

Towards the end of the tenth century, when Rajaraja I was the Chola ruler, the Chola navy attacked Sri Lanka and conquered more territory. This was about 992 CE. Rajaraja declared in his inscriptions that he had conquered Sri Lanka.



### ***A view of the ancient Kantalai irrigation reservoir***

*Around this grew a flourishing Brahmana settlement (brahmadeya) known early in the 11<sup>th</sup> century as Rajaraja-chaturvedi-mangalam (after Chola Rajaraja I), and later re-named as Vijayaraja-chaturvedi-mangalam (after Vijayabahu I). In the 12th century, it was known also as Chaturveda Brahmapura. The reservoir submerges an area of 2296 hectares*

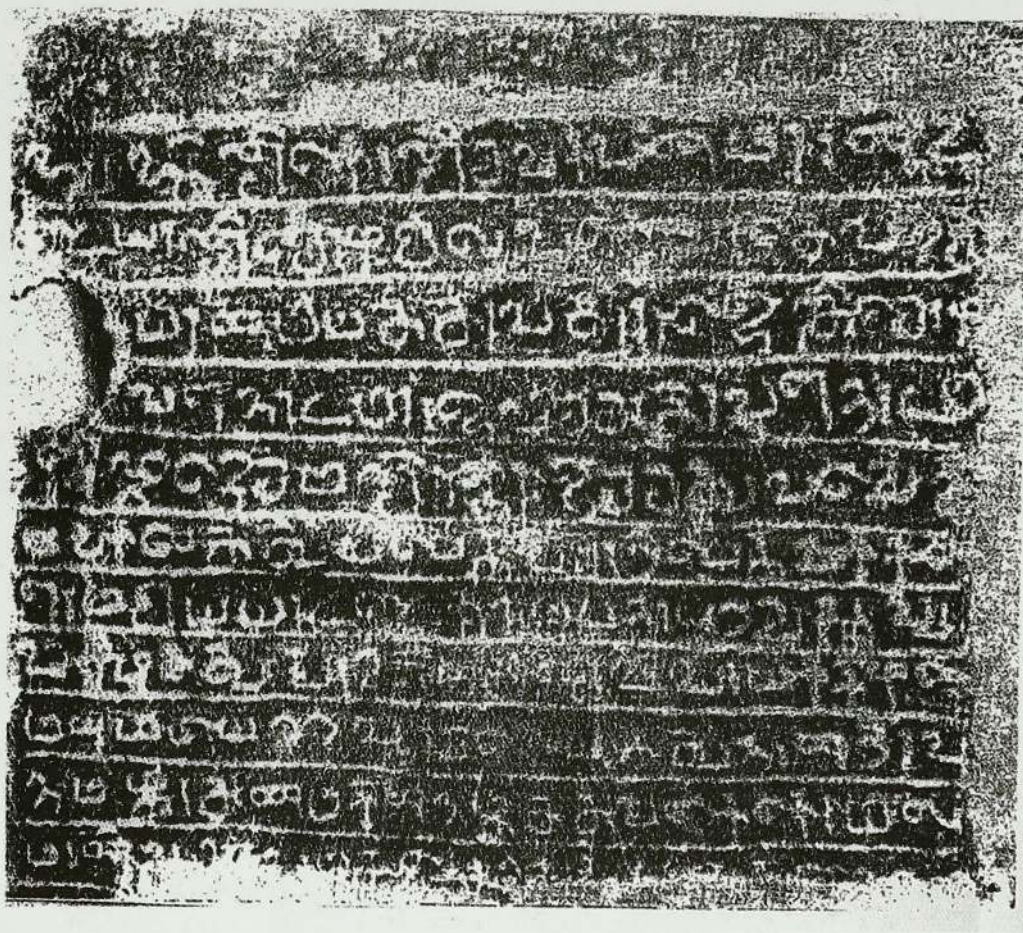
## Section 5 *Decline and Fall of Anuradhapura*

### 2. Chola rule

With the Chola conquest, for the first time Sri Lanka became part of an empire. It was treated as a province (*mandalam*) of the Chola empire and given the name of Mummadi-Chola-mandalam. Polonnaruva became the capital with the name of Jana-natha-puram. A prince of the Chola family was appointed to govern the island almost like an independent ruler. Along with his personal name he had to use the name 'Chola-Lankesvara' and the consecration name (name given at the time of official crowning) used by the Anuradhapura rulers (Abhayasalamegha

and Sirisanghabodhi alternately). He was also allowed to use his regnal years in the records of his reign.

Chola rule lasted till 1070 CE. It is not known how many princes ruled with the title of Chola-Lankesvara during this period. At least three are known from inscriptions in the island. The first was Jayankonda Chola Salamegha. Another had the consecration name of Sirisanghabodhi. A third was Vikrama Salamegha. There is no information about the activities of these rulers.



*An inscription dated in the reign of a Chola ruler, Sangha (bodhi) vanmar Chola- Lankesvara Devar - 11<sup>th</sup> Century (Kantalai)*

*Ruins of the Ravikula-manikka-isvaram temple, Padaviya, Anuradhapura District Ravikula-manikkam was one of the many titles of Chola Rajaraja I*



*The Vanavan-madevi-isvaram temple (named after the mother of Chola Rajendra I), now known as Siva Devale No.2, Polonnaruva (known under the Cholas as Jananathapuram, after Rajaraja I) This temple is counted among the notable historical monuments of the island. This is the oldest surviving, though not functioning, Siva temple in Sri Lanka in a good state of preservation. The more famous older temples along the coast were all destroyed by the Portuguese.*

## Section 6 *The Peak of the Ancient Civilization*

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### 1. End of Chola Rule

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Chola rule did not cover the whole island. It was confined mainly to the north and east. The region of Rohana in the south did not come under the control of the Chola-Lankesvaras. It was here that forces opposed to the Cholas, including some Indian princes (from Kerala, Ayodhya, Kanyakubja and Pandya kingdoms) continued to operate. But they were not a united force. Among the local groups there was one led by the son of the last king of Anuradhapura. Another was led by a prince named Kitti.

The Chola army could not completely suppress the forces opposing them from Rohana, although they launched attacks into that region and killed many of the leaders. Kitti managed to escape from the attacks of the Cholas, overcame the opposition of other local enemies and, in 1055 or 1056, crowned himself king at Kataragama with the name of Vijayabahu. With limited resources, he made several attempts to drive the Chola forces out of the island. But the task was not easy. The Chola emperor kept sending reinforcements to Sri Lanka. Besides, some of the local chiefs in Rohana crossed over to the Chola side. On more than one occasion powerful local leaders plotted against Vijayabahu

and went over to the Chola side. Though facing such serious problems, he was able to advance up to Anuradhapura and fight the Chola troops arriving from south India in or about 1067. But his army was defeated and he lost one of his commanders named Kurukulattaraiyan. At the same time a local chief of Rohana revolted against him. However, Vijayabahu was determined to re-group and fight the Chola forces. Finally, in 1070 he was able to defeat the Cholas.

By this time Chola power was on the decline. There was a new ruler, Kulottunga, and he faced serious challenges in South India. There was no attempt to re-conquer Sri Lanka. This was the only time an Indian empire had annexed a part of Sri Lanka and ruled over it.

Vijayabahu's victory was indeed very remarkable. He had to fight the powerful Cholas with limited resources and did not get the full support of the local chiefs. Some of them betrayed him. If we consider the challenges he faced, his victory was certainly a great achievement. With his reign at Polonnaruva, the history of Sri Lanka enters a new age in which the ancient civilization of the island reaches its peak.

## Section 6 *The Peak of the Ancient Civilization*

### 2. **Developments in Buddhism**

The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw important developments in Buddhism. For nearly a thousand years Theravada Buddhism faced many challenges as a result of the flow of Mahayana influences from India. At one stage the chief Theravada institution, namely the Mahavihara at Anuradhapura, was even closed down. The Sangha was split into three fraternities (*nikaya*) – the Mahavihara, the Abhayagiri and the Jetavana Fraternities. After the sixth century political problems often forced monks to leave the country and find protection in south Indian monasteries. With the Chola conquest royal patronage was lost and the leading monasteries suffered.

After the period of Chola rule, three kings took great efforts to establish a strong and reputable Buddhist Sangha. The first was Vijayabahu. When he began his rule in Polonnaruva, he found that the Buddhist Sangha had declined and was in need of purification. He invited Theravada monks from Ramanna (in Myanmar), conducted a purification ceremony and cleared the way for the progress of Buddhism. But he could not unify the three fraternities.

It was the next great ruler of this period, Parakramabahu I, who was able to achieve the unification of the three fraternities. Like Emperor Ashoka, about 1400 years before him, this ruler was determined to stop any improper behaviour on the part of monks. Like Ashoka, he had the authority



*Polonnaruva : Buddha's Parinirvana*

to tell the monks how they should behave. With the help of renowned elderly monks, he drew up a list of disciplinary rules and even publicly proclaimed them in a stone inscription (just like Ashoka's edicts). This is still there in Polonnaruva.

In Parakramabahu's reign Sri Lanka regained its reputation as a leading Theravada kingdom. By this time the once famous centres of Buddhism, especially those in north India and in the region of Pakistan and Afghanistan, had disappeared. There were still a few Buddhist monasteries in south India, especially in Nagapattinam and Uraiyur in the Chola territory. The Sangha in Sri Lanka maintained close relations with them. But it was with the Sangha in Myanmar that very strong bonds were established in this period. Vijayabahu made a good start by inviting monks from Myanmar to purify the Sangha in his kingdom. In Parakramabahu's time the Sangha in Myanmar looked up to Sri

Lanka as a leading Theravada country and received inspiration from it.

Nissankamalla, a prince from Kalinga (eastern India), was the third great patron of Buddhism in the twelfth century. He continued the work of Parakramabahu by maintaining the unity of the three fraternities and expelling corrupt monks from the Sangha.

The three great kings of Polonnaruva were also responsible for building and restoring many stupas, monasteries and image-houses. Among the many buildings of Parakramabahu in Polonnaruva are the Jetavana and Alahana-parivena which were very grand structures. Of the buildings for which Nissankamalla was responsible the Hatadage and the Nissanka-lata-mandapa are worthy of mention.

Colossal Buddha images were also created in Polonnaruva and elsewhere. The images at Galvihara and Vatadage are among the many large Buddha images created in the twelfth century.



*Polonnaruva : Lotus Bath*

## Section 6 *The Peak of the Ancient Civilization*

### 3. Religious Harmony

This was also a period of remarkable religious harmony. With the achievement of unity among the three fraternities of the Buddhist Sangha the conflicts that were seen for centuries between the Theravada and Mahayana institutions were over. In fact, even some of the doctrines of the Mahayana sect, such as the belief in Bodhisattvas, were now accepted by the Mahavihara fraternity. It is notable that the three great patrons of Buddhism in this period were also patrons of Saiva temples and Brahmanical practices. Some of the other rulers showed great devotion to the Saiva religion. This was also a period in which Muslim traders were settled in the major ports and market-towns and had built their mosques. Since there were Jewish merchants in the country, it is possible that there were also places of Jewish worship. The Arab geographer al Idrisi says that in the twelfth century the king had even Jewish, Christian and Muslim advisers in his court (see page 50)

Early in the eleventh century, when the Cholas were ruling, many new Saiva temples were built in Polonnaruva as well as in other places. Most of them were named after Chola rulers. Even some of the older temples were re-named after the Cholas. In Polonnaruva itself the ruins of a number of Siva and Vishnu temples have been found. Of these, the best

known is the Vanavan-madevi-isvaram (Siva Devale No.2), which was named after the mother of the Chola emperor Rajendra I. In Padaviya are to be found the ruins of the Ravikula-manikka-isvaram, a Siva temple named after Rajaraja I. Among the others were Rajarajesvaram (Mantai), Panditha-Chola-isvaram (Medirigiriya) and Vikrama-calameka-isvaram (Budumuttava). There were also Buddhist monasteries, patronised by Tamil Buddhists, which were named after the Chola rulers. One was the Rajaraja-perumpalli (earlier known as the Velgam-vehera), near Trincomalee, and another was the Vikrama-calamekan-perumpalli.

When Vijayabahu became king, the followers of Saivism seem to have adopted the Chola practice of re-naming religious institutions after the ruling monarch. The Brahmana settlement at Kantalay, known earlier as the Rajaraja-caturvedi-mangalam, was renamed as Vijayaraja-caturvedi-mangalam and a temple there was renamed as Vijayaraja-isvaram. Vijayaraja was the name in Tamil for Vijayabahu. In fact, Polonnaruva itself was renamed in Tamil as Vijayaraja-puram.

All this happened because of the patronage extended by Vijayabahu to Saivism. Vijayabahu himself was married to two princesses from India who came from a non-Buddhist background. It was a time when elaborate Brahmanical rituals were



practised at the royal court. Vijayabahu's son Vikramabahu and grandson Gajabahu, who both ruled the kingdom later, were strong devotees of Siva.

Parakramabahu, as a prince, grew up in a court where Brahmanas played an important role in rituals. He probably continued the practice of the Polonnaruva rulers in extending support to Brahmanas and Saiva institutions. As for Nissankamalla, he came from Kalinga

and embraced Buddhism but was also a patron of Saivism and took part in Saiva rituals. In one of the Siva temples (Siva Devale No.1) at Polonnaruva, he took part in the *Navagraha-shanti* (ritual for the nine planetary gods). He took part in ceremonies at the Brahmana settlement in Kantalai. More importantly, he claims to have built a Siva temple at Ramesvaram (south India) and named it the Nissankesvara Devalaya.



*Trincomalee - Rajaraja-perumpalli (Rajaraja - mahavihara/ Great Rajaraja Monastery)*

## Section 6 *The Peak of the Ancient Civilization*

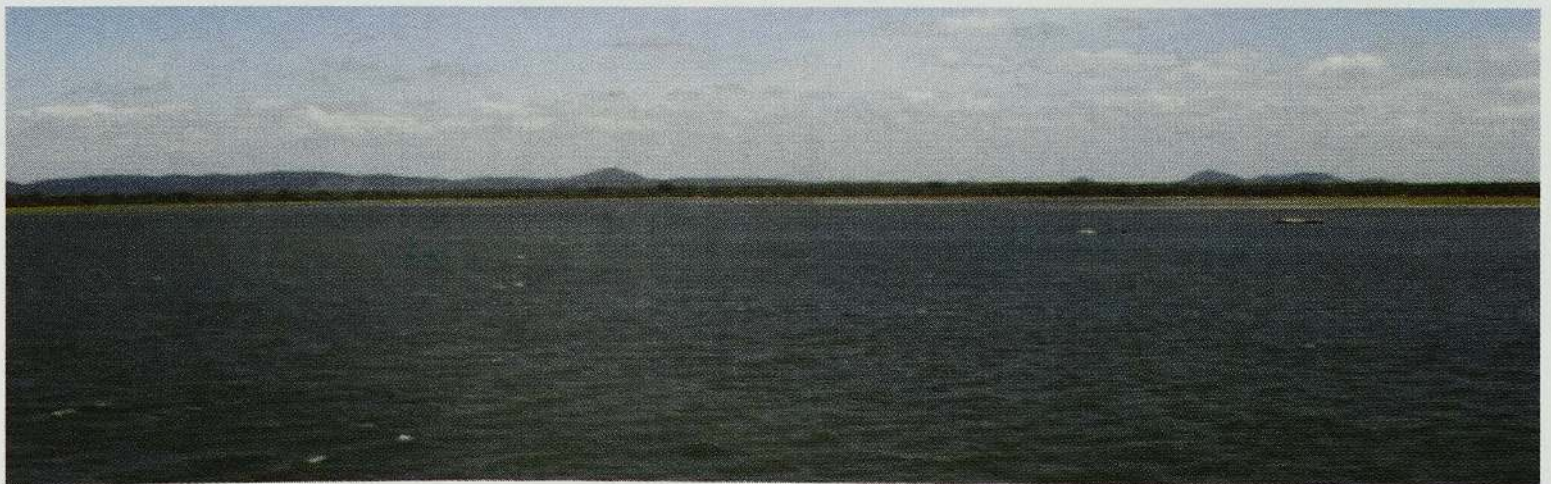
### 4. Tank-Building and Agriculture

Of the major achievements of Sri Lanka's civilization in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, perhaps the most magnificent were in the field of irrigation technology. It could be said that the remarkable developments of over a thousand years reached their peak in this period and then came to a sudden end early in the thirteenth century. And when that happened Sri Lanka had the second, third and fourth largest human-made reservoirs in the world.

Not all the rulers of this period devoted their attention to further develop the irrigation facilities in the island. In fact, neglect and civil wars resulted in damage to the existing canals and tanks. But the three major rulers of the period were conscious of the need to maintain and develop the kingdom's irrigation system. Vijayabahu repaired and restored many canals, dams and tanks. Nissankamalla has claimed that he 'repaired the great tanks, canals and embankments that had been

long disused'. But it was Parakramabahu who made the greatest contribution, with the ideal that 'not even a little water that comes from the rain must flow into the ocean without being made useful to man'. To this day the country benefits from what he did.

Parakramabahu repaired and restored a large number of canals and tanks. He also built new tanks. But the achievement for which he is best remembered is the construction of the enormous Parakramasamudra in Polonnaruwa. It was the last great reservoir to be built in ancient Sri Lanka. It is still in use and covers an area of 5350 acres (22 sq. km). Kalaweva remained the largest (6380 acres/26 sq. km), with the Giant's Tank (4547 acres/18 sq. km) coming behind Parakramasamudra. At that time the largest reservoir in the world was the Viranamkulam (near Jayankonda-cholapuram) in neighbouring Tamil Nadu, covering an area of 22,000 acres (89 sq. km).



*Polonnaruwa - Parakrama Samudra*

## Section 6 *The Peak of the Ancient Civilization*

### 5. Foreign Trade

**S**ri Lanka's geographical position in the middle of an important sea route that connected the countries around the Mediterranean Sea in the west with China and Southeast Asia in the east has given the island a major role in the Indian Ocean trade from the very beginning. Trade brought the cultural influences that shaped the early history of the country. Trade, along with irrigation-based agriculture, led to the prosperity that helped to create the ancient civilization.

First, as already seen, traders came from India more than 2500 years ago. Pearls, chanks and ivory were among the items that they sought. Then came traders from the Mediterranean region and West Asia. Chief among them were the Graeco-Romans. They looked for not only pearls and ivory but also spices such as pepper from south India and Sri Lanka. By that time, traders had come to know of the precious gems of the island and came to buy them. Soon they were joined by Persian (Iranian), Jewish and Arab traders. The Chinese traders, too, sailed up to Sri Lanka, and the island's ports, especially Matota, became a centre for the exchange of goods brought by the traders of different countries.

After the sixth century, mercantile communities based in south India began

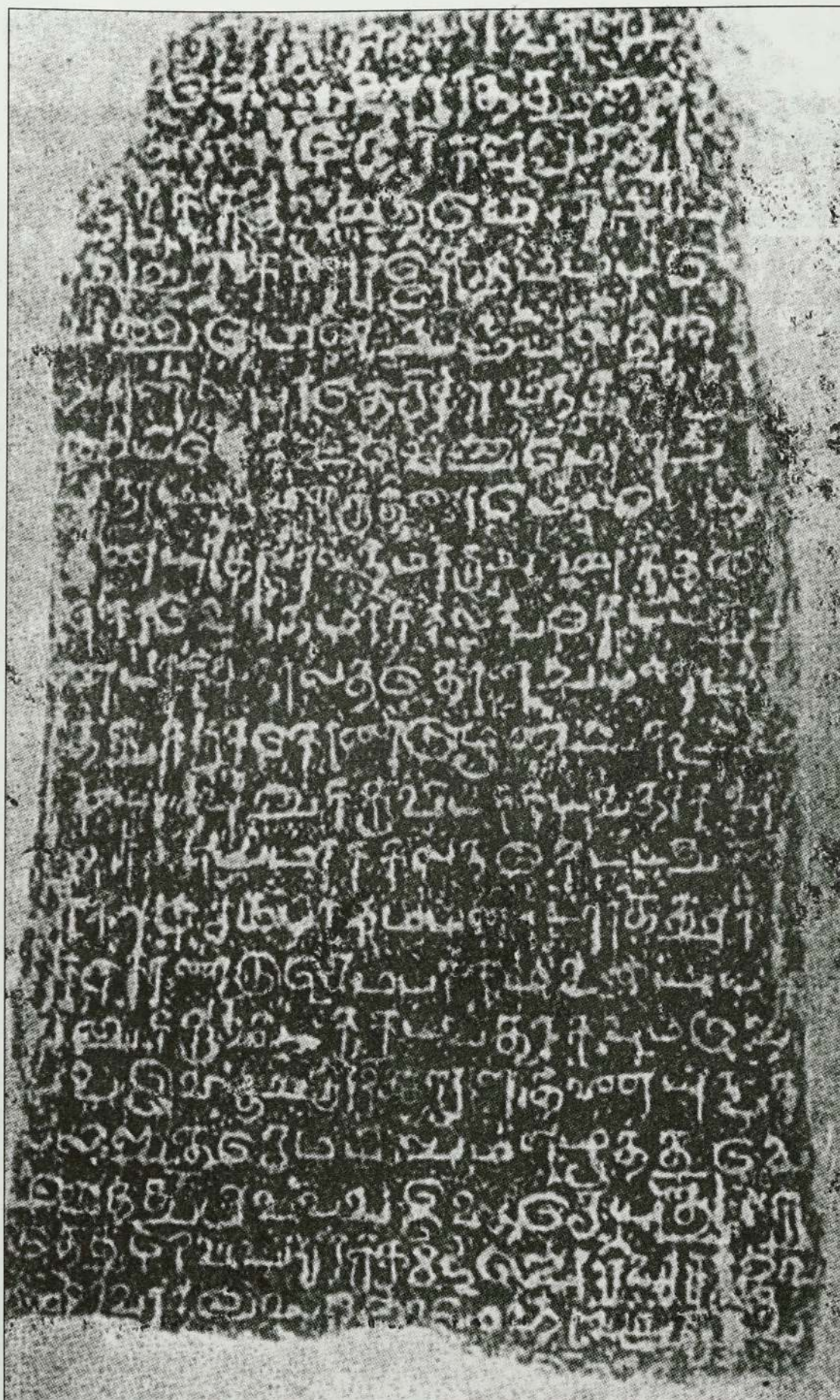


*Ancient Kahapana Coin*

to dominate the trade with Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka played a major role in their activities. One of the earliest of these communities was the Manigramam. By the ninth century there were several others. Among them the most dominant was the Ainnurruvar. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries they were very active in the ports and market towns of Sri Lanka.

There were also Arab and south Indian Muslim traders in the major ports. A community of traders of West Asian origin, called the Anjuvannam, had established itself at the port of Matota.

Traders from Sri Lanka, too, were actively involved in the profitable trade between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Inscriptions in Indonesia mention traders from Sri Lanka among those residing in the ports of the island of Java from the ninth to the twelfth centuries.



*A Proclamation in Tamil, addressed to port officials and overseas merchants, issued by Parakramabahu I, Nainativu (Nagadipa), Jaffna District. This relates to foreign trade, particularly the trade in elephants and horses. 12<sup>th</sup> century. The proclamation is mainly intended to protect merchants who traded in horses and elephants through the ancient port of Uraththurai (now known in English by the Dutch name Kayts)*

## Section 6 *The Peak of the Ancient Civilization*

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### 6. **Developments in the Arts**

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Religion always provided the inspiration for the growth of the arts. Song and dance did not form part of Buddhist worship. For this reason, music and dance did not have much scope for development in Buddhist institutions. Instead, sculpture and architecture and to some extent painting, were the arts that were able to flourish in the Buddhist environment. This is in sharp contrast to the development of music and dancing in the Saiva temples of south India.

In the time of Ashoka and Devanampiya Tissa Buddhist devotees did not worship Buddha in his physical form. In other words, they did not have an image of the Buddha for worship. Instead, the Buddha was represented mainly through the stupa, the Bodhi tree and the Dharma-chakra (Wheel of Law or Dharma). With the growth of Mahayana practices and the creation of the Buddha image in north India, the worship of the Buddha image became common in Sri Lanka.

The earliest inspiration for the making of Buddha images came from Andhra, especially from Amaravathi. This happened in the second and third centuries CE. Some of the earliest Buddha images discovered in the island were in fact brought from Andhra. One of the finest of these was discovered at Maha Illupallama, in the Anuradhapura District. Among the others, there is one from

Chunnakam in Jaffna. Similar standing images were made by sculptors in Sri Lanka in the later centuries. As time went on bigger and bigger standing Buddha images were made. One of the tallest, over 34 feet (10 m) in height, now lies fallen on the ground in Maligavela (Uva Province). Standing Buddha images were cut into rocks, too. The most famous of these is the colossus at Aukana, in a good state of preservation and standing taller than the Maligavela statue. The tallest rock cut Buddha image (over 50 feet/15 m) is in Buduruvegala (Uva Province). More colossal figures were carved till the end of the twelfth century. Those at Galvihara in Polonnaruva are among the best examples of the later colossal images.

With the spread of Mahayana influence many small bronze images were also made, not only depicting the Buddha but also several Bodhisattvas. Among these the bronzes of Avalokiteshvara are common. Some of the Buddha images are in south Indian styles.

Among the many bronze statues of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva the most famous is the gold-gilded Veragala Avalokiteshvara. This has been described as a masterpiece among the Sri Lankan religious sculptures and one of the most extraordinary works of sculpture produced at any time by any culture.

Among the finest bronze sculptures produced in Sri Lanka in the eleventh and twelfth centuries are the Saiva and Vaishnava images from Polonnaruwa. Among these, the images of Nataraja (Shiva as the Lord of Dance) have received much attention. They were found during excavations in Polonnaruwa and are now in the Colombo Museum. Among the

others are images of Ganesha and the Saiva saints. More Saiva bronzes have also been found in Anuradhapura and Trincomalee.

On account of the high quality of the Buddhist and Saiva/Vaishnava bronze sculptures of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, some have described this period as the golden age of Sri Lankan sculpture.



*Gold-gilded Veragala Avalokiteshvara,  
a masterpiece among the religious  
sculptures of Sri Lanka (bronze)*



*Shiva as Nataraja (Lord of Dance), Polonnaruva*



*Shiva as Somaskanda-murthi with consort  
Uma, Polonnaruva*



*Sundaramurthi-nayanar  
(one of the Saiva saints),  
Polonnaruva*

## Section 6 *The Peak of the Ancient Civilization*

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### 7. End of the Ancient Civilization

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The ancient civilization which lasted for more than a thousand years came to an end at the close of the twelfth century. The last great ruler was Nissankamalla. He made valiant efforts to keep the kingdom strong and prevent its decline. He toured different parts of the island to see for himself the problems faced by the people. He was perhaps the only ruler to visit the remotest parts of the country, including Jaffna. He was the only ruler to lead an army of invasion to south India, restore or build a Shiva temple there and set up an inscription in Sinhala (the only Sinhala inscription found outside Sri Lanka). The earlier rulers who took armies to south India did so to help an ally there. Soon after his death, the kingdom literally collapsed.

The causes for the collapse of the ancient Sri Lankan civilization have been the subject of much discussion for decades. Many causes have been given by scholars to explain the fall. One of the main reasons is the large-scale and repeated foreign invasions that took place early in the thirteenth century. Other reasons include weak rulers, civil wars, breakdown of the administration, neglect of the irrigation system, the spread of malaria and climate change. It has also been argued that when decline set in, people were attracted by the prospect of a better life in the Wet Zone

of southern Sri Lanka and moved out of the northern Dry Zone.

There is no doubt that there was a serious deterioration of the political situation in the island after the death of Parakramabahu. Only one ruler was able to stop this decline for a short period. That was Nissankamalla. With this king's death in 1196, the situation became chaotic. Central authority weakened considerably. Civil wars erupted and rulers were killed or removed from the throne in quick succession. There was a struggle for power among rival factions. A series of foreign invasions added to the chaos.

The rapid deterioration of the political situation culminated in the invasion of a prince from Kalinga, called Magha, with a large army in 1215. He occupied Polonnaruwa. This occupation led to much destruction and was one of the most tragic events in the history of the island. There were more invasions after this occupation. The most important of these was the invasion led by a Javaka (Indonesian) prince called Chandrabhanu about thirty years after Magha's occupation.

All these political troubles led to the breakdown of the vast administrative machinery that was responsible for the maintenance of the irrigation system. Agriculture declined and the population slowly moved out of the Dry Zone. Malaria



spread. It is arguable whether the spread of this disease was the cause or the result of the Dry Zone being abandoned.

Some of you may be interested in investigating the causes that led to the end of the ancient civilization of Sri Lanka. Today there is much discussion and concern about climate change. Was climate change the major factor in the disappearance of this civilization? It is

being put forward as the major cause for the fall of other civilizations such as the Indus Valley civilization. What part did malaria play? Similar civilizations, with large irrigation systems and flourishing rice cultivation collapsed about the same time in Thailand and Cambodia. Was there any relationship with what happened in Sri Lanka? I will leave you with these questions hoping that some of you will find the answers.



*A Polonnaruwa building in ruins*

## For Further Reading

For parents interested in helping their children with more information and explanation

1. A very readable and interesting book on the origins of humans in Africa and their long journey out of that continent to other parts of the world is *The Incredible Human Journey* by Alice Roberts (London 2009). For those interested in greater scientific details, *The Human Past*, edited by the Cambridge archaeologist Chris Scarre (London 2005) is a valuable reference book. It has a section on Sri Lanka, too.
2. For the prehistory of Sri Lanka the most detailed work is *The Prehistory of Sri Lanka: An Ecological Perspective* by the well-known Sri Lankan archaeologist Siran Deraniyagala (Colombo 1992).
3. For the Indian background, from the time of the Indus valley civilization to the period of the Mauryan Empire, Romila Thapar's *The Penguin History of Early India* (London 2001) is an excellent book.
4. To get some details about the laborious work done by scholars to unfold the story of India's great emperor Ashoka and to know about the young British scholars who pioneered this task, a very fascinating book is *Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor* by Charles Allen (London 2012). It is a real labour of love.
5. For those interested in getting more information about the Elara Chetiya, James T. Rutnam's *The Tomb of Elara* (Jaffna Archaeological Society 1988) will be useful.
6. There are many scholarly articles and books for those interested in the bronze sculptures of Sri Lanka. A very useful book for the Buddhist bronzes is Ulrich von Schroeder's *Buddhist Sculptures of Sri Lanka* (Hong Kong 1990). For the Nataraja bronzes C. Sivaramamurti's *Nataraja in Art, Thought and Literature* is a good introduction.
7. For those interested in the causes that led to the fall of the ancient civilization, there is a collection of articles and extracts (published up to the year 1970) in *The Collapse of the Rajarata Civilization in Ceylon and the Drift to the South-West* (edited by K. Indrapala, Peradeniya 1971). This has the views of those who made an in-depth study (like Rhoads Murphy) and others who commented on this subject (like the historians Arnold Toynbee, A. Liyanagamage, W.I. Siriweera, Michael Roberts and the archaeologist S. Paranavitana as well as the Cambridge geography scholar B.H. Farmer).

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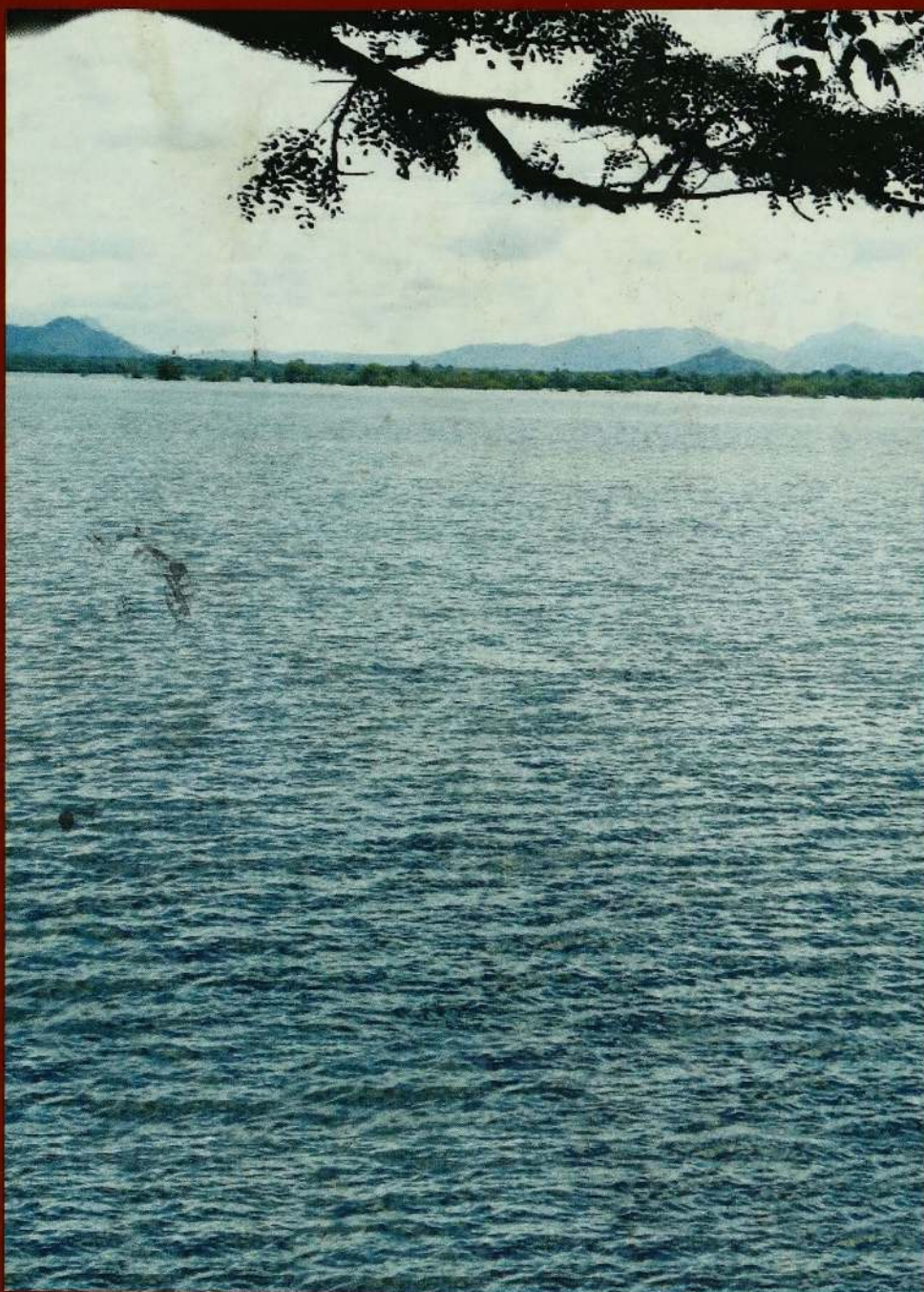




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