

SRI LANKA'S COMMERICAL RELATIONS WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD FROM EARLIEST TIMES TO 8TH CENTUARY A. D.

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SRI Lanka is an island in the Indian ocean and naturally the sea played an important role in her history. The numerous bays, anchorages and roadsteads offered adequate shelter for the sailing ships of ancient and medieval times and her situation in the Indian ocean astride the great sea routes between the east and the west gave an advantage of a port of call and an emporium of sea-borne trade between these two worlds. Moreover, is situation, halfway between these sea routes made it a stepping stone for the ships which were sailing between the west and east. Furthermore, the natural wealth of the island such as pearls, precious stones and forest products naturally attracted the merchants who in olden days were carrying on trade in luxury commodities. Thus Sri Lanka was important with regard to 'transit trade' due to her strategical situation and aso with regard to 'terminal trade' due to her natural resources.

The proximity of Sri Lanka to the sub-continent of India paved the way for trade relations between the two counries before Sri Lanka had contacts with any other country. The discovery of the island and its Aryanization would have been a result of the trade relations that Sri Lanka had with the mainland for centuries and the stories which have faint memories of the Indian colonization show that at the beginning this island was considered as a sort of 'El-Dorado', inhabited by man-eating *yaksas* and *raksasas*.³ It has been explained that this view would have been due to the desire of the traders who knew the wealth of the country to keep the trade a monopoly by discouraging others from visiting it.

It was many centuries before the Christian era that the people of India started venturing into the sea in search of fortune in other lands. The spread of Indian cultural influence outside the sub-continent shows the nature and extent of their relations and such contacts started due to their

interest in commerce. Sri Lanka too would have attracted these people for trade purposes and the adventurous Indian traders, having found that this was suitable for their enterprise, evidently established trading posts which was the beginning of Aryan settlements in Sri Lanka.⁵

Some ancient traditions suggest that there were trade relations between India and Sri Lanka from the dawn of the history of trade. The *Valahassa Jataka* has a story which shows that Sri Lanka was frequented by traders. According to this story, *yakkhins* of Sri Lanka were in the practice of turning into their city Sirisavatthu, the merchants who got stranded by ship wrecks, promising marriages and eating them.⁵ Though this story is mixed with myth and legend, it may be important as showing that the shores of Sri Lanka were frequented by foreign ships and merchants. The *Divyavadana* also contains a story of merchants from India who came in search of precious stones and their contacts with the *raksasas* of Sri Lanka, which was then known as Ratnadipa, "the island of gems".⁶

The popularity of Sri Lanka among the foreign merchants in early times is also preserved in a tradition recorded by Fa-hsien, a Chinese pilgrim in the fifth century A.D. He says:

(Sri Lanka) had originally no inhabitants but only demons and dragons dwelt in it. Merchants of different countries came here to trade. At the time of traffic the demons did not appear in person, but only exposed their commodities with the value affixed. Thus the merchants made their purchases according to the price; and took things away. Through the coming and going of merchants in this way the people of their various countries heard how pleasant the land was, and flocked to it in numbers till it became a great nation.⁷

These stories and the foreign accounts would suggest that the intrinsic resources offered by the island attracted many Indians and these were obtained through its indigenous folk. The foreign merchants, therefore, had only to establish entrepots on the coast. The Indians who thus visited Sri Lanka in pursuit of trade realising the advantages settled in various parts of the country. Indian sea-faring merchants would have continued to frequent the shores of the island even after their predecessors founded permanent settlements.⁸

The people who settled in Sri Lanka as a result of such commerce continued their activities with the mainland as well as other foreign countries. The early Sinhalese literature has various references which show the nature and extent of trade relations of people of Sri Lanka of the early days and epigraphy provides us with meagre evidence for trade and traders of ancient Sri Lanka.

Merchants figure among the donors in early Brahmi inscriptions and these records show that sea-faring was known among the people of Sri Lanka. They also have allusions to corporations of merchants. The Ganekanda inscription mentions *Puka Jeta* and *Anu Jeta* which means guild or alterman.⁹ However, it is difficult to decide whether this means a trade guild or an industrial guild.¹⁰ The 'Tamil house-holder's terrace' inscription at Anuradhapura mentions a *navika* who was given a seat of eminence among the Tamil house-holders.¹¹ It is possible to suggest that they were merchants and perhaps organised into a guild which took part in commercial activities. Tiriyay rock inscription records a very early tradition of the foundation of the Girikandu *cetiya*. Though paleographically the inscription could be dated in the seventh century the tradition itself could be fairly old. According to this inscription the *cetiya* was founded by "companies of merchants named Trapussaka and Vallika". About these companies of merchants, the inscription says that they "were skilful in navigating the sea, engaged in buying and selling and who (possessed) a display of goods laden in sailing vessels of diverse sorts." Further it says that they came having crossed the ocean.¹² Since the inscription is fragmentary, it is difficult to say whether these merchants were foreigners or natives of Sri Lanka.¹³ However, the fact remains that there were trade activities going on in the shores of Sri Lanka. Setthi, who was the chief of the merchants, was included in the mission sent by Devanampiyatissa to Asoka and the trade negotiations between the two countries would have been one of the aims of the mission.¹⁴ The Godavaya inscription shows that as early as the first century A.D. custom duties were charged in the port called Godavaya in the south. This would suggest that the rulers also were interested in the income received from commerce.¹⁵ The use of coins in ancient Sri Lanka would have been with regard to trade and the Indian influence in the early coinage of the island may be due to the trade relations between the two countries.¹⁶

This meagre evidence would suggest that trade had aroused the interests of the people of Sri Lanka from the early centuries and their first contacts were with the immediate neighbour, the Indian sub-continent. Since then this island became a centre of trade, although the volume and the nature of trade activities varied at different times due to various factors. Although the trade that went along the overland routes between the east and the west had very little to do with Sri Lanka, she had a role to play in the trade which was carried along the sea routes between these two worlds.

The evidence from the early literary and epigraphical sources shows that there were trade relations between Sri Lanka and South India. The Brahmi inscriptions of South India have references to merchants of Sri Lanka.¹⁷ The Pattinapalai a work of the second century refers to boats laden

with merchandise coming from Sri Lanka to the ports of Kaveripattanam. 18 Sri Lanka also provides us with similar evidence. We have already referred to the Tamil House-Holders' Terrace inscription where we have reference to Tamil merchants. This inscription which belongs to the third century B.C. refers to a *navika*.¹⁹ Some of the early invasions by the South Indian rulers would have been partly motivated by the commercial interest as this island was well-known for trade.²⁰ Sena and Guttika who invaded Sri Lanka for the first time from South India were two Tamil horse dealers. They captured the kingdom of Anuradhapura and ruled for twenty two years according to the *Mahavamsa*.²¹ It is also possible that Elara who invaded in the third century B.C. had some interest in trade although we have no definite evidence. In a Tamil literary work there is a reference to a Elela-singham who was a naval pilot and who belonged to a royal family. He was a friend of Tiruvalluvar, the author of a Tamil work known as the *Kural*.²² St. Ambrose and Paladev records how some Indians came in a small ship to Sri Lanka for trade.²³ The commodities from Sri Lanka were taken first to South Indian ports and from there to the west. The Roman emporium at Arikamedu near Pondicherry would suggest that the centres of Roman trade in this part of the world were South Indian ports.²⁴

The international trade that was carried on westwards to Egypt and Mesopotamia and eastwards towards South-east Asia and China covered very long distances and, as can be imagined, direct trade was not at all possible in those early days. These trade routes ran from port town to port town over many stages and important stopovers developed along these routes. Every coastal principality, with an independent, monarchical, or aristocratic regime along these routes had a share in the trade either participating directly with its own fleet of ships or in the form of levying tolls and compulsory stapling.²⁵ Furthermore, since this trade was carried on through stages, every port town was frequented by foreign merchants who sometimes settled in those towns. Normally these merchants did not cover the whole journey but they sailed between two ports and another batch continued it from there. Therefore settlements were necessary at the stages in foreign lands because of the long duration of these voyages.²⁶ Furthermore, the commodities involved in this trade were luxury products and though the amount of merchandise exchanged or traded was limited, the value of the turnover was very high.²⁷ Thus, inspite of the dangers and risks involved in these long and time-consuming voyages, high profits would have attracted many merchants. This was the nature of the international trade prevailing in the then civilized world and Sri Lanka, too, like similar nations on the sea routes, naturally participated in this trade.

When one surveys the history of Sri Lanka's foreign trade, it appears that apart from her trade relations with India, the island even had an indirect trade with the western world. However, before the discovery of the monsoons in the first century A.D., western merchants who were trading with India had little direct contacts with Sri Lanka. India was known to the Greeks from fairly early times and it was the interest of the westerners in that fascinating land with so much natural resources that led them to look for an easy mode of transport to reach it. From the days of Alexander the Great the Greeks came to know of India better and in his last year Alexander had been busy surveying the possibilities of navigating the Persian Gulf and further towards India.²⁸ According to Arrian, Alexander at the time of his death, was involved in further examining the explorations of Nearchus to proceed from the south of the Euphrates to the head of the Red Sea to divert the profits which came from maritime trade between India and Egypt from the Sabeans to the Greeks.²⁹ Even before the discovery of the monsoons there was regular commerce by sea from the Persian Gulf to the mouth of the Narbada and the towns of South Arabia and Socotra were main entrepots of this trade.³⁰ Furthermore, the kings of Egypt were keen in supervising this Indian trade.³¹

Even before the discovery of the monsoons, Sri Lanka was known to the western world, although their knowledge was very limited and vague. Moreover, we are not sure of direct trade relations between Sri Lanka and the west since this island did not fall on their trade routes. However, the accounts of early Greek writers show that products of Sri Lanka were reaching them in a direct way. Onesicritus of the 4th century B.C. knew about Sri Lanka's elephants.³² Megasthenes of the same period also says that Tabrobane produced gold and larger pearls than India. He says that elephants were exported to India by boats.³³ Eratosthenes of the 3rd century B.C. knew that Sri Lanka was in between the East and the West.³⁴ According to Hipparchus of the 2nd century B.C. no one sailed round Sri Lanka and further he says that it was not an island but a part of a continent.³⁵ Strabo says that Sri Lanka was known for her elephants³⁶ It was the home of Asian elephants says Duonysius Periegestes of the 1st century A.D.³⁷ Furthermore, Solinus Polyhistor of the 1st century A.D. listed elephants and pearls among the products of Sri Lanka and according to him this island was situated between the east and the west.³⁸

All these writers show that they had a limited knowledge of Sri Lanka and there was no direct sailing between this island and the west. The knowledge of Sri Lanka appears to have reached them through Indians and even the trade may have been indirectly via the sub-continent. These writers

themselves support such a suggestion. Onesicritos says that it was twenty days sail from the mainland.³⁹ Megasthenes says that elephants were exported to India.⁴⁰ It was seven days journey from the mainland to Sri Lanka says Eratosthenes.⁴¹ Strabo supports Eratosthenes in this respect.⁴²

There are few references to direct contacts between Sri Lanka and the west. According to Diodoros one lambulos, who was engaged in spice trade of the Somali coast was carried away by winds to Sri Lanka. Having spent some time in this island he went to Palibothra and returned by land.⁴³ Pliny records of a freedman of Annus Plocamus who was a collector of the Red Sea dues during Emperor Claudius's reign, carried away helplessly by winds until he reached Sri Lanka. There he was received by the ruler of that country who much admired the constant weight of the Roman dinarri. Furthermore, he says that as a result of this visit the Sinhalese king sent back to Claudius four ambassadors led by a raja.⁴⁴ There is a mention of a Pubulius Annus Plocamus in an inscription beside the old road from Coptos to Berenice at a distance of about 68 miles from Coptos.⁴⁵ According to the date in the inscription it has been suggested that this Plocamus was in the reign of Augustus and therefore if he was the freedman who came to Sri Lanka, his visit took place even earlier than the reign of Claudius.⁴⁶ The *Mahavamsa tika* says that envoys were sent by King Bhatika Abhaya (B.C.22-A.D.7) to the country of Romanukkha from where he obtained large quantities of coral to make a net to adorn the *mahatupa* at Anuradhapura.⁴⁷ If we identify the country mentioned in the *Mahavamsa tika* to be the Roman empire, this reference could be to the same mission mentioned by Pliny in his work.⁴⁸

The discovery of the monsoons by a Greek called Hippalus in the first century A.D. had far reaching results. This discovery enabled the sailing vessels to make a quick trip instead of the slow coastal voyage directly from the Red Sea to the Malabar coast. Thus these regions became closer and there was a boost for trade activities between India and the west.⁴⁹ However, Sri Lanka was yet to become a centre of this trade and it took place in the following centuries.

There developed a profitable trade between India and the west during the first two centuries of the Roman empire.⁵⁰ The effect of the discovery of the monsoon was strongly felt and the demand for the luxury commodities encouraged the merchants to enter into such trade activities.⁵¹ The *Periplus* of the first century A.D. shows that there were direct sailings from the west to the river Indus and also shows that the South Indian kingdoms and the Roman empire were linked by active trade between the two regions.⁵²

However, Sri Lanka's position in this trade is not very clear because we do not get much information. Probably there were no direct sailings to this island by the western merchants but they were content to find products of Sri Lanka in the markets of the western coast of India.⁶³ Strabo says that in the olden days Sri Lankans sent ivory, tortoise-shell and other ware in quantities to the Indian markets.⁶⁴ However, we do not know who were directly engaged in this trade — whether the merchants of Sri Lanka or those of India. Pliny's account shows that merchants of Sri Lanka were sailing in the Indian ocean.

He says:

In making sea-voyages, the Taprobane mariners make no observation of the stars, and indeed the Greater Bear is not visible to them, but they take birds out to sea with them which they let loose from time to time and follow the direction of their flights as they make for land.⁶⁵ This account suggests that the people of Sri Lanka too were navigating in the Indian Ocean and perhaps they also were participating in this trade. With the Indian merchants they would have taken the products of Sri Lanka to the Indian ports where they had western ships waiting for these merchandise.

Though the knowledge of Sri Lanka in the Roman empire would have increased as a result of the embassy sent in the first century A.D. this mission does not seem to have opened the way for direct commerce because we do not have evidence for such contacts in the first and the second centuries A.D. this would have been partly due to the desire of the Indians to control the foreign trade. They probably discouraged direct contacts between Greek and Roman merchants and Sri Lanka. According to Palladius, at Muziris on inquiry, the Greek merchants were told that the Sinhalese channel was dangerous.⁶⁶ Strabo says that around the shores of Sri Lanka lived Cetaceous which were amphibious and who were in appearance like oxen, horses and other land animals.⁶⁷ The same information is given by Onesicritos.⁶⁸ These writers who did not visit the island seem to have received this information from Indians.

From the description of Sri Lanka by Ptolemy it appears that shortly before he wrote certain merchants had traded directly with Sri Lanka and had coasted round the whole island.⁶⁹ With the increase of the tempo of maritime trade and the expansion of navigation in the Indian ocean, the western merchants ultimately included Sri Lanka within the range of their activity and from Ptolemy we gather that it had come about, not very far from his times.

The Roman coins found in Sri Lanka could be taken as evidence of Sri Lanka's trade relations with the Roman empire. The finds of these coins and their classification would reveal the nature and extent of their trade. The coins have been found in almost every important place in Sri Lanka.⁶⁰ The coins that belong to the period before the discovery of monsoons in the reign of Claudius are very few. From the first century to the third century A.D. the number of coins is limited. Only a few coins of Nero, Vespasian Trajan, Harian and Antonius were found. And moreover, these were coins not struck at Rome but debased tetrachms struck at Alexandria. The occurrence of coins dating to the first two centuries A.D. in India as compared with that in Sri Lanka would suggest that there was direct trade between Indian ports and the Roman empire. Further, as Tamils controlled Sri Lanka's foreign trade during this early century, it appears that they did not allow the high quality of Roman Dinarii to pour into Sri Lanka but that the commodities of Sri Lanka were bought for debased tetrachms.⁶¹ That is probably why we do not get Roman gold and silver coins of the early centuries in Sri Lanka.⁶²

In the 4th century the Roman empire was divided into two parts. From the time of Marcus Aurelius, one could see the decline and breakup of the Western empire. Barbarians conquered the western empire and the centre of the empire and consequently trade shifted to the near east; Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine empire, became an important trade centre. The trade relations with India increased and it had its effect on Sri Lanka as well.

The Roman coins belonging to the fourth and fifth centuries are found in larger numbers in Sri Lanka and this may be due to the shifting of trade from Malabar coast southwards to Sri Lanka. Furthermore the Roman coins of this period were brought not only by Roman merchants but also by middlemen like the Persians. The discovery of many small bronze coins which are worn out would further suggest that they formed the currency of the island during that time.⁶³

Both Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia lying on the major maritime trade routes between east and west naturally came into contact with each other through international trade. The situation of Sri Lanka is such that a direct sailing eastward from Sri Lanka would reach Malay Peninsula and Indonesia, having passed Andaman islands. Similarly a sailing westward from Malay Peninsula or Sumatra would touch Sri Lanka.

The early literary works provide evidence relating to the commercial relations between Sri Lanka and the countries of South-east Asia. Pali and Sinhalese literature contains references to Suvannabhumi and stories

about people having trade relations with that region.⁶⁴ In the Vinaya commentary known as the *Samantapasadika*, the commentator Buddhaghosa refers to voyages between Mahatittha in Sri Lanka, Tambalitti in India and Suvannabhumi.⁶⁵ According to the *Manorathapurani*, the distance from Sri Lanka to Suvannabhumi was seven hundred *yojanas*, and it took seven days for a vessel to reach this land sailing day and night under favourable wind.⁶⁶ The *Sihalavathuppakarana*, a Pali work, which seems to have been written even before Buddhaghosa's works speaks of a lay devotee named Mahadeva who went to Suvannabhumi in search of gold to build a golden stupa.⁶⁷ In the same work there is an interesting story about a goldsmith named Kunta of Mahagama who wanted to go to Suvannabhumi to fetch gold in order to repay King Saddhatissa (137-119 B.C.), the gold given to him for a vessel to be fashioned out of it but which he had spent on drinking.⁶⁸ The *Rasavahini* has also allusions to Sinhalese people sailing to Suvannabhumi in search of gold.⁶⁹ Whatever the truth may be regarding the details, these stories suggest that Sri Lanka was already having contacts with South-east Asia, when the Persians started their maritime trade. By that time the Island had become a well-known centre of maritime trade.

Indonesians also were probably visiting this Island by the fifth and the sixth century A.D. Wolters has shown that the shippers of the Persian cargoes were mostly Indonesians and that their ships were sailing to India and Sri Lanka during this period.⁷⁰ However, we have no direct evidence for such a conclusion. It appears that in the 7th century Itsing and other pilgrims travelled to India on vessels sent by the ruler of Srivijaya. This Indonesian seafaring was evidently the result of a long experience of sailing and trading activities in the Indian ocean. The great antiquity of Indonesian voyaging is an assumption familiar to scholars who were aware of the extension of the Austronesian languages to Madagascar.⁷¹ Perhaps trans-Asian maritime trade began to be a permanent and important feature of Asian trade only with the intervention of the Indonesians.⁷²

Earlier the trade voyage from west to east and *vice versa* followed the coastline as much as possible and reached the Malay Peninsula where goods could be trans-shipped across the narrowest part of Isthmus of Kra.⁷³ This was mainly because the journey across the Isthmus was very much shorter than the voyage round the Malay Peninsula.⁷⁴ But it appears that most of the seamen proceeding from South India and Sri Lanka crossed the high seas and sailed direct to Takuapa or Kedah. The archaeological evidence shows that Kedah and Takuapa are two places with many archaeological sites belonging to the early centuries. From these centres it was easy for the merchants to go to Igor and Chaiya crossing the Isthmus. The importance and the antiquity of these routes have been revealed by

archaeological research.⁷⁵ There is no reason to think that the people of Sri Lanka who traded with South-east Asia and China used routes different from these.

The early contacts between Sri Lanka and South-east Asia is attested by some Buddha images of the Amaravati—Sinhalese style found in different parts of South — east Asia. These images show certain features of the Amaravati school in the broad sense of the term but they also portray some peculiar features of the Buddha images belonging to the Anuradhapura period in Sri Lanka.⁷⁶ It has been assumed therefore that some of these could be the images that were taken from Sri Lanka. These images, constituting some of the early evidence for the prevalence of Buddhism in South-east Asia, have been identified as those of the Dipankara Buddha who enjoyed great favour with the seamen frequenting the southern islands⁷⁷ The name Dipankara, which means island-maker, has led the sea-faring merchants to have special devotion to this Buddha.⁷⁸

Some of these early Buddha images in South-east Asia would have reached this part of the world through trade activities. Therefore the images of Dipankara of Amaravati-Sinhalese style may have reached there through Sinhalese merchants who had trade relations with those countries. We have already seen the evidence of early Sinhalese and Pali literature for trade relations between Sri Lanka and Suvannabhumi, which was a vague termed used for South-east Asia. Such trade activities of the early centuries would have continued and the people of Sri Lanka would have participated in this trade from the fifth century onwards.

The Chinese evidence also would suggest that by the 6th century Sinhalese merchants had sailed as far as even China. The following passage in the *T'ai p'ing yü lan* of Y' ang tzu provides an indication regarding the international trade that was carried on via Sri Lanka in the 3rd century A.D.

Shi-tsu country (Ceylon) produces cinnabar, mercury, hsun-lun, tumeric, slorax, costus, and such perfumes.⁷⁹

The author Y' ang tzu lived under the Wu dynasty (222-280). According to Wolters some of these products associated with Sri Lanka were from the Middle east and these articles must have been some of the imports of Sri Lanka 'known by hearsay to the Southern Chinese in the first half of the third century A.D.'⁸⁰ This evidence would suggest that the maritime routes between western Asia and China in which the Wu government was interested "could not fail to involve Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and already by that time Southern China would have been receiving goods which passed through Ceylon (Sri Lanka).⁸¹

Furthermore the Chinese sources contain references to Sinhalese missions sent to China in A.D.405, 429, 435 which show the close relationship between the two countries and the importance assumed by Sri Lanka during this period.⁸² The importance of Sri Lanka on the maritime route between the east and the west was clearly demonstrated when Fa-Hsien and Gunavarman came to Sri Lanka to embark on a ship to go to South-east Asia and China.⁸³

Fa-hsien's account shows that Sri Lanka was a great trading centre. According to him many merchants gathered here to trade and to buy pearls and precious stones of this island. However, he does not mention the presence of Chinese merchants. The Chinese merchants were probably not among those who visited Sri Lanka during the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries. It was the merchants of Sri Lanka and India who brought the Chinese goods there.⁸⁴

Thus by the 6th century A.D. Sri Lanka had established contacts with the west and her eastern trade with South-east Asia and China had become important. This background helped the Persians to make this island one of their centres of activity and they made this a great emporium of their trade between the east and the west.

The early history of the maritime activities of the Sassanids is not very clear. The political position of the Sassanids enabled them to control the trade between China and Western Asia that was carried on along overland trade routes. However, their interests in navigation show that they were aiming at taking an active part in maritime trade as well. The Sassanid dynastic traditions narrate that the first ruler Ardashir I (A.D.226-242) improved some of the ports of the gulf.⁸⁵ The Arabs who were used to navigation and who had trade relations with Indian ports continued their activities even under the Sassanids.⁸⁶ Furthermore the political developments in China compelled the Persians to use the maritime trade routes rather than the overland routes. The early fourth century saw the subjugation of northern China to the barbarians and the massive flight of Chinese to the south. The depression among Sogdian middleman as a result of the sack of Lo-yang by the Huns in 311 made the Sassanids to turn to sea routes for trade with China. Thus the Southern dynasties of China, having lost their links with the overland routes, began to attract sea borne trade to meet the demand for foreign produce.⁸⁷

Furthermore the conditions in Central Asia also forced the Sassanids to use the maritime trade routes more than the age-old continental silk routes. In the 5th century the Hephthalites overran Western Turkistan, Sogdiana and Bactria. In 484 they defeated the Sassanid ruler and killed him. Their attacks contributed towards the downfall of the Gupta empire

in India. Thus by the end of the 5th century they had the control of Sogdiana, Khotan, Kashgar and also Bukhara, as a result of which the Persians were cut off from the trade centres of the east which were linked by the overland routes.⁹⁸ Thus the Hephthalites soon became a big menace to the Sassanids who stopped all trade with them.⁹⁹ In this manner the changes that took place in China and Central Asia led to the blockade of the trade carried on through land traffic and compelled the Persians to look for other routes to continue their trade with the east. All these changes helped to increase the tempo of maritime trade in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. and the centres, such as Sri Lanka, which were along these trade routes benefitted much out of this trade.

Moreover the central position of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean and her relations with India, South-east Asia and China prior to the 6th century A.D. probably led the Persians to choose this island as their centre as against any place on the massive sub-continent adjoining her. We have already seen the trade relations of Sri Lanka with India, South-east Asia and China.

Before the middle of the 6th century A.D. Persians had not penetrated beyond Sri Lanka.⁹⁰ It is in Cosmas' account written in the middle of the 6th century, that we get a clear idea of their trade activities in the Indian ocean and it is Cosmas who gives a vivid picture of ports of Sri Lanka where the international trade had developed and where the Persian merchants played a considerable role. He says:

The island being, as it is, in a central position, is much frequented by ships from all parts of India and from Persia and Ethiopia, and it likewise sends out many of its own. And from the remotest countries, I mean Tzinista and other trading places, it receives silk, aloes, cloves, sandalwood and other products, and these again are passed on to marts on this side, such as Male, where pepper grows, and to Calliana which exports copper and Sesame-logs, and cloth for making dresses for it is also a great place for business. And to Sindu also where musk and casto is procured and andris and to Persia and Homerite country, and to Adule and the island received importance from all these marts which we have mentioned and passes them on to the remoter parts, while, at the same time, exporting its own produce in both directions.⁹¹ This account of Cosmos illustrates the role of Sri Lanka in the international trade when he wrote his account. In the 6th century A.D. merchants from different countries far and near, came here with their merchandise and exchanged them for commodities.

The account given by Cosmas is corroborated by that of Procopius who wrote in A.D. 530-31. According to this writer, the Roman emperor Justinian wanted to enter into an economic agreement with Hellestheacus,

the ruler of Aethiopians, against the Persians. Justinian sent an ambassador to the Aethiopian ruler and suggested that their religious ties should bring them together against the Persians. Further he 'proposed that the Aethiopians by purchasing silk from India and selling it among the Romans might themselves gain much money while causing the Romans to profit in only one way, namely, that they be no longer compelled to pay over their money to their enemy.'⁹² This account shows that the silk trade between the east and the west was in the hands of the Persians resulting in a drain of Roman money.

However, we learn from Procopius that this agreement could not be put into practice because the Persians who were in the adjoining country (Sri Lanka) came immediately to the Indian harbours when the ships laden with milk arrived and bought the entire load of cargoes leaving nothing for the Aethiopians, who took a longer time to reach India due to the distance of the journey and the difficulties of communication across the desert.⁹³ We thus find that the Persians used Sri Lanka as their base for trading activities in the Indian ocean.

The conditions in Central Asia seem to have contributed much towards the increase of the tempo of Persian maritime trade and it was these conditions, coupled with her situation that helped Sri Lanka to become an emporium of international trade in the 6th century A.D. The conquest of the commercial centres of Sogdiana and Bactria by the Hephthalites and their control of those regions together with Khotan, Kashgar and Bukhara prevented the Persians from depending on trading centres used by the Seras (Chinese).⁹⁴ Therefore, in the fifth century A.D., they turned away from their normal source of silk, namely Northern China, towards the trade centres of Southern China, depending greatly on the maritime trade routes⁹⁵. As a result of the Hephthalite occupation of Central Asia in the first half of the 5th century A.D. Southern China provided the access to the outside world, and by the same time Persians had established in Sri Lanka in order to receive the Far Eastern trade which was arriving at this island. A close contact between Sri Lanka and Persia is reflected in a vague reference in a 4th century Chinese work which says that 'the Possu (Persian) king asked for the hand of a daughter of the king of Sau-t'iac (Sri Lanka) and sent a gold bracelet as a present.'⁹⁶

The Persians are known in the Chinese sources as Po-ssu which is believed to be derived from *Parsa* name used for Southern Persia. They were handling the western produce as far as Sri Lanka from where those were trans-shipped to China to meet the demand of the Southern Chinese. These commodities were known as Po-ssu products and Persia was considered to

be the sources of wealth of the western regions, either as the producer of these luxury products or because its merchants handled western Asian merchandise in general.⁹⁷

Recent researches have shown that these Po-ssu products were not carried by Persians as far as China and that by the 6th century the Chinese had not come as far as this island to take these precious cargoes brought by the Persians to Sri Lanka.⁹⁸ Sri Lanka was the entrepot where trans-shipment of the goods from the east and the west took place. If the Chinese had not come as far as Sri Lanka by the 6th century it would mean that the western goods were taken to China from Sri Lanka by middlemen Indians were probably among the middlemen, for they were no doubt sailing as far as China in this period. Being familiar with the international trade from the early centuries, merchants of Sri Lanka, too, would have had a share, in the eastern trade. A number of considerations lead us to support such a conclusion. We learn from Cosman that at the beginning of the 6th century Sri Lanka sent out here own ships and had trade relations with, among other countries, China. Already in the 5th century A.D. Sri Lanka had diplomatic relations with the Eastern Tsiu.⁹⁹ The Chinese sources show that tribute missions went to the Liu Sung court from Sri Lanka and India and that one such mission went from Sri Lanka in A.D. 527 during the reign of Liang Wu-ti.¹⁰⁰ Although it is difficult to say which ships were in use in the trade with China during the 5th and 6th centuries A.D., the Chinese sources support the suggestion that these were mostly foreign ships.¹⁰¹ In the middle of the T'ang period, among the ships that sailed to China, Sinhalese ships had a reputation for being large. According to the Chinese sources these ships were about 200 feet long and could carry seven to eight hundred men.¹⁰² China-bound Indian pilgrims of this period such as Gunawarman from Kashmir selected the maritime route via Sri Lanka because it was well established during this period. The foregoing evidence indicates that there were regular sailings between Sri Lanka and the Far East in this period.

Activities of Persians in Sri Lanka are attested by their settlements in this island. According to Cosmas, to look after the religious needs of the Persians who had settled in Sri Lanka, a Presbyter had to be appointed.¹⁰³ Writing in the 7th century Vajrabodhi states that he saw 35 Persian ships arriving in this island to trade in precious stones. The association of the Persians with Sri Lanka was so close that Persian works claim that Persians invaded Sri Lanka and that Sri Lanka was included in the territories of the Persian emperor Chosroes Nushirwan.¹⁰⁴ The Arab histories *Tabari Hamza* and *al Thaulabi* narrate the invasion of Sri Lanka by the Persians

in the reign of Chosroes Mushirwan who ascended the throne in A.D. 531 and attribute it to the wrong done to some Persian traders settled in Sri Lanka.¹⁰⁵ Hui-Ch'an, a Chinese writing in A.D. 727 about Persians says

The inhabitants (of Persia) being by nature bent on commerce, they are in the habit of sailing in big crafts on the western sea, and they enter the southern sea to the country of the lions (Sri Lanka), where they got precious stones, for which reason it is said of the country that it produces precious stones. They also go to the K'un-lun country to fetch gold. ¹⁰⁶

This account shows that the Persians continued to have close contacts with Sri Lanka in the 8th century. The foreign quarter at Anuradhapura would have been the settlement of Persians who were engaged in foreign trade.¹⁰⁷ A cross unearthed at the citadel at Anuradhapura similar to a Persian cross found in the Madras presidency, could be one used by these Persian merchants¹⁰⁸

Thus during Persian monopoly of international trade Sri Lanka was on the map of trade routes between the east and the west. People of Sri Lanka also participated in this trade by carrying a part of the cargo as far as China via South-east Asia. On the other hand so many other merchants such as Indians, Indonesians and Malays who were participants of this trade would have visited Sri Lanka in relation to these trade activities.

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18. Pattinapalai, (Madras, 1962), line 220.
19. *JCBRAS*, Vol. XXXV (1940), no. 93, pp. 54—56; Paranavitana, *op. cit* p. xc.
20. Liyanagamage and R. A. L. H. Gunawardane, ed. *Anuradhapura Yugaya* (Kelaniya, 19), p. 114.
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