

Historical importance of the ancient ports in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean, covering an area of 65,610 km² (25,332 square miles), lying between 5°55' and 9°51' North latitudes and 79°42' and 81°52' Eastern Longitudes. Sri Lanka is located 880 kilometers (547 miles) north of the equator, off the southern tip of India, and has maximum length of 432 kilometers (268 miles) and a maximum width of 224 kilometers (136 miles). The total coastline is 17,000 kilometers. The width of the intervening sea between India and Sri Lanka at the narrowest point (Adams's Bridge) being about 32 kilometers (20 miles). Sri Lanka was formerly known as Ceylon.

The pattern of monsoon winds and oceanic currents appear to have generally worked in favour of the Sri Lankan ports and helped to enhance their importance in the trade between South and Southeast Asia. During the Northeast monsoon, the combined effect of winds and surface currents would have been most favorable for navigation from the Malacca Straits to Sri Lanka and South India, than travelling to ports, like Tāmralipti. Similarly, the patterns of winds and currents, during the Southwestern monsoon would have been ideal for Eastward travel from Sri Lanka towards the Northern end of the Malacca straits (Gunawardana 1990:34).

The list of ports in the *Mahāniddēsa* seems to have pointed out the importance of Sri Lanka, as a halting place in one of the sea routes between India and Southeast Asia (Gunawardana 1990:27). P. Wheatley has recognized three main routes, linking South and Southeast Asia (Wheatley 1966:44).

1. The sea route, taken by Fah-Hian, linked Sri Lanka with the Malacca Strait.
2. The second route, linked Kie-Tcha in the Malayan Peninsula with Tāmralipti.
3. The third sea route from Southeast Asia to India which hugged the coastline from the Malayan peninsula to the Eastern India (Gunawardana 1990:32-33).

The Suppāraka Jātaka mentions of a ship which left the Western coast of India and was carried by a storm, across six different seas: the Khuramālin, Dadhimālin, Aggimālin, Kuśamālin, Nalamālin and the Vaḷabhāmukha (Fausboll 1963: vol. iv: 134-143). It seems that the early South Asian navigators understood that there were different oceans. On the basis of the

colour of the water, they might have differentiated the Ocean. For example: the Western part of the Indian Ocean was called the Erythraean Sea (Red sea) while the Southern part of the Indian Ocean was called the Mare Prasodum (Green sea) by the Greek writers (Toussaint 1966:4.5; Gunawardana 1990:25). Sri Lankan texts, such as the *Mahāvamsa* and the *Sahassavattupakarana* refer to the sea around the island as “Goṭhasamudda” (Gunawardana 1990:25).

The port of Mahātittha

The port Mānthai is situated at a very strategic position at the Northwest tip of the island and of the closest point to the Indian subcontinent is known as Mahātittha (Pāli), Māntōṭṭam (Tamil) or Mātota (Sinhalese) (Bopearachchi 1997:x; Nicholas 1990:272) It has been argued that the only navigable seaway between the Gulf of Maṇṇār and the Palk Strait was the Maṇṇār passage, and it must have been much deeper in antiquity than in recent times. D. P. M. Weerakkody has discussed in detail as the existence of the popular traditional sea route that connected Mannar straits and Adam’s Bridge for a long period. However it is very difficult to believe that the passage through the Mannar Straits was the only route known to Mariners in Ancient times (Bopearachchi 1997: x).

The ancient port of Mahātittha (Māntota / Māntai) was the main harbour that played a dynamic role in the Silk Route. The main port of Country’s export and import economy were organized by it. The Mahātittha and Jambukōla could be introduced as two ancient sea ports in Sri Lanka which were used in the foreign trade. The exact period of time, in which these two sea ports were operated cannot be clearly stated. Mahātittha is the port, which *Mahāvamsa* states initially. This particular port, as it is stated in the *Mahāvamsa*, had been more prominent and of great use during the process of trade, carried out with India. It could be noted that this port would have been used even before the arrival of Aryans into Sri Lanka.

The location of Thirukethiśwarm Dēvālaya demonstrates its age-old history. The ancient city of this Dēvalaya comprised of 300 acres in extent. And also, a main road, excavated from the said city is 40 feet in width. The Roman pottery and the coins, unearthed in this premises, demonstrate that it had been an ancient sea port. Even Cosmus had also reported the significance of this particular sea port. Sundaramurthi Nayanar, a Hindu and saint lyric who lived in the 6th century C.E. has mentioned that it is a port where many ships were able to be anchored.

The port Mahātittha was involved with trading, done with the Western and the Eastern coasts of peninsular India. When the *Samantapāsādika* was written in the fifth century C.E., the practice of taking ships from Mahātittha to sail upto Tāmralipti or Suvaṇṇabhūmi was quite well-known. The most frequently mentioned Indian ports, are called Kāvēripaṭṭana and Kaṇṭhakasōlapaṭṭana (Gunawardana 1990:26). Most probably, the traders who embarked from the port of Mahātittha, disembarked at the port of the Kāvēripaṭṭana. It is illustrated in the *Samantapāsādika*, that it was quite usual for people to take ships to Tāmralipti from Mahātittha (*Samantapāsādika* 1967:808).

The *Mahāvamsa* mentions that, Vijaya and 700 followers disembarked at Mahātittha; for that very reason itself, the landing place is known as Mahātittha (*MV* 1950. 7:58). As mentioned in Chronicles in Sri Lanka, the first migrant group to the Island from India was Vijaya and his seven hundred companions. They disembarked the shores of Tambapaṇṇi near the port of Mahātittha.

Further, it is mentioned that, during the period of the king Dappula IV (924-935 C.E.) a Paṇḍu king, with the fear of the Cōḷa king, left his country and disembarked at the port of Mahātittha. As mentioned in, the *Mahāvamsa*, the king Dappula IV gave him an abundant income, while granting him with a dwelling situated outside the town (*MV* 1950. 53:5-7).

Modern Māntai, on the mainland, opposite Mannār, now a buried city, has exchanged merchandise and also taken away the pearls, precious stones, cinnamon, elephants and other products of Ceylon (Ray 1959:9). Pliny's specific reference to the ships of Taprobane carrying 3000 amphorae (Weerakkody 1997: 226) in contrast with the Roman Vessels, capable of carrying over 10,000 amphorae, shows that the navigation through the straits of Mannār was undertaken not by the Romans but by the Sri Lankans (Bopearachi 2008:4)

Ūruvelapaṭṭana

The most important port site on the West Coast next to Mānthai is Ūruvelapaṭṭana situated at the mouth of Kalā Oya. Sudarshan Seneviratne (1990: 121-140) shows in one of his recent studies how a variety of resources moved from the montane zone via the upper Kalā Oya region in order to reach the production consumption in the agrarian plains and the port towns of the littoral. He further draws attention to the fact that the area around Kalāvāva became an extremely important link with distribution centers, market towns, corporate bodies or guilds, because of

location precisely on two important routes, that one leading to Anurādhapura and Mānthai along the Malwatu Oya and the other to Ūruvelapaṭṭna along the Kalā Oya.

The port of Gōkaṇṇa

It is referred to as Gōkaṇṇa in Pāli or Gōkaṛṇa in Sanskrit. The port of **Trincomalee** is considered to be (ancient Gokaṇṇa) one of the largest and safest natural harbours in the modern world.

The circulation of currents in the northern parts of the Bay of Bengal were favorable for voyages from Tāmralipti to the ports in Southeast Asia, specially the port of Gōkaṇṇa (Brohier 1935 :12). The sea, off Trincomalee was of sufficient depth at all times to be navigable for small vessels.

It was through this port itself that the delegates of king Dēvānampiyatissa had also visited the court of Emperor Aśoka in the 3rd century B.C.E. According to *Mahāvamsa*, this port had been linked to the city of Anurādhapura.

Trincomalee played an important role as an active sea port, because the **Mahavāli river which flows to the sea at Gōkaṇṇa**. There is sufficient evidence to show that it was known as early as the 4th century to C.E., to merchant who reached the island from the East. The ancient **port site of Lankapaṭṭana** (Illaṅkathuraī) is also situated at the estuary of one of the tributaries of the river Mahavāli. It is believed that princess Hēmamāli and her husband, Prince Dantha on the instructions of her father king Guhasīva hide the tooth relic of the Buddha in her hair ornament and set sail from Tāmralipti, port at the mouth of the river Ganges, and landed in Sri Lanka at the port of Lankapaṭṭana during the reign of King Kirthi Sri Mēghavarṇa (301-328 C.E.) R. L. Brohier was correct to assume that the section of the Mahavāli Gaṅga between the island of Kālinga in Polonnaruwa and the sea off Trincomalee was of sufficient depth at all times to be navigable for small vessels.

The *Mahāvamsa* says during the reign of the *Kitsirimēgha* (555 -573 C.E.), there came a famine. A certain man, clad in the robe of a bhikkhu, while been skilled in magic spells in order to get alms, wanted to beg food from everybody. When the merciful *Mahānāga* saw him, he had pity on him and his upper garment was given. Eventually, he got food. The beggar took Mahānāga to Gōkaṇṇa in order to make him wealthy (*MV* 1950. 41:75-81). Perhaps one may think that the beggar might have introduced some kind of a foreign trade for Mahānāga to be

wealthy. The port Gōkaṇṇa became a flourishing harbour from the eleventh century, when the royal capital was transferred from Anurādhapura to Polonnaruwa.

The port of Godawāya

The ports in the south were particularly convenient meeting places for mariners, arriving in the island from both the Eastern and Western parts of the Indian Ocean. In an inscription, belonging to either the 1st or the 2nd century C.E., found in the Godawāya mentions, that **a sea port called Godapwata**, situated in the delta of the river Walawē. As stated in this particular inscription, “Suka,” a tax, collected in this port was donated for the maintenance of the Godapavata Vihāraya. Even as early as in the second century, the port of Godapavata in the Hambantota district was yielding an income to the kings of Anurādhapura in the form of the custom duties collected there (Paranavitana 1983 vol. ii:101)



Godawāya Inscription

With the passage of time, the ports in the southern and the eastern parts of the Island became more important in the trade with Southeast Asia. O. Bopearachchi and his team have been found a ship wreck near the sea port of Godavāya very recently.

The port of Jambukōlapaṭṭana

The port of Jambukōla which modern Kaṅkēsanthuraī had been the port which was used by the people who travelled up to the port of Tāmralipti situated at the mouth of the river Gaṅges of North India.

The Tambapaṇṇi is found between Svaṇṇabhūmi and Suppāraka in the *Mahāniddēsa* while Kōlapaṭṭana, has been found between Ālasnada and Svaṇṇabhūmi in the *Milindapañña*.

Rhys Davids who translated the latter text thought that Kōlapaṭṭana was probably located in the Coromandel Coast. Nilakanta Sastri has identified Kōlapaṭṭana with Kāvēripaṭṭana (Sastri 1935:32). However, since no port by the name of Kōlapaṭṭana is known in South India, it appears much more plausible to identify Kōlapaṭṭana with Jambu-Kōlapaṭṭana, the northern Sri Lankan port, located in the Jaffna peninsula (Gunawardana 1990:27).

As mentioned in *Mahāvamsa*, the envoys that were sent to Emperor Aśoka by the Dēvānampiyatissa embarked at Jambukōla and disembarked at the port of Tāmralipta within seven days. This shows that the ships had taken seven days to reach from the port of Jambukōlapaṭṭana to the port of Tāmralipta. It is further mentioned that another seven days had gone by for them to reach at the Tāmralipta to the city of the Pātalīputra (*MV* 1950. 11:23-24).

The prince Aritṭha went to Dambakōlapaṭṭana to sail to the Pālalu Nuwara in India (*Vina. Aṭṭ* 2009:75). The princes Saṅghamittā landed at the Jambukōlapaṭṭana with the sacred Bō tree (*Vina. Aṭṭ* 2009:80). The port of Jambukōlapaṭṭana witnessed the handing over of the sacred Bo-tree sapling by *therī* Saṅghamittā to the king Dēvānampiyatissa. *Mahāvamsa* says the king Dēvānampiyatissa came to the Jambukōlapaṭṭana with the great *thēro* Mahinda and together with the other *thēras* to welcome the sacred Bo-tree. It is further mentioned that the sacred Bo-tree arrived in Sri Lanka within a week (*MV* 1950. 19:28).

The other ancient ports in Sri Lanka

Dondora (Devinuwara) and Nilvalātittha (Mātara) at the Nilwala Gaṅga, Mahāvālukāgāma (Wāligama) at the Polwatta Gaṅga, Bhīmatittha (Bentota) at the Benthota Gaṅga, Gimhatittha (Gintota) at the Gin Gaṅga, Kālatittha (Kalutara) at the Kalu Gaṅga, Wattala at the Kālani Gaṅga, and Salavāthoṭa (Chilaw) at the Deduru Oya are some of the ports attested in different literary sources of the medieval period. It is quite well known that after the decline the Chōla Empire, the Pāṇḍyans made several attempts to control the trade along the Western coast line of Sri Lanka during the reign of King Bhuvanekabāhu I (1284-1291 C.E.) by conquering the ports of Chilaw, Negambo, Wattala and Colombo. Likewise, literary works of the medieval times refer to the revival of commercial activities connected with the Southwestern coast of the island. O. Bopearachchi firmly believes that these commercial centers functioned as ports even prior to this period (Bopearachchi 1997:xi).

The *Mahāvamsa* says the King Vijaya's brother Sumitta's son Paṇḍuvāsudēva came with thirty two sons of the ministers. They landed at the mouth of the Mahakaṇḍarā river. When the people saw those people, they received them with due respect (*MV 1950*. 8:12). This shows that there was a port near to the river of Mahakaṇḍarā in the 5th B.C.E. They came to Sri Lanka as monks. Sometimes in the early period traders might have visited disguising themselves as monks due to security reasons. *Dīpavamsa* says a finely constructed city was situated near the Kadambaka river (*DV 1992*. 15:39). The location of emporia along the rivers must have facilitated the transaction with the interior regions (Bopearachchi 2008: 2).

According to the *Mahāvamsa*, the Ūruwela alias Kaites, situated in the West coast is another important international port involved in the exportation of pearls.

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