

Sri Lankan Maritime Trade Relations Towards the East

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ABSTRACT

One of the main indicators of the strong cultural, political, and trade relationship between China and Sri Lanka is the significant amount of Chinese pottery found in archaeological sites in Sri Lanka. Mantai, the main port city of the Anuradhapura kingdom, which spanned from the fourth century BCE to the eleventh century CE, served as the hub for ships from the Indian subcontinent, East Asia, and Rome. Blue, white, and green earthenware, as well as storage jars belonging to the Tang Dynasty, are among the earliest archaeological evidence discovered in Sri Lanka. However, historical evidence dates back even further, to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). Excavation projects at old port sites such as Jaffna, Trincomalee, Kirinda, and Godawaya have revealed new evidence of international trade. Although more interactions with Southeast Asia were evident after the twelfth century, newly discovered regions along the east coast suggest further findings.

The paper discusses the research conducted by marine archaeologists over the past decade, primarily along the east coast of Sri Lanka. Newly discovered port sites and potential port sites reveal more evidence of stabilised maritime trade and cultural connections to the eastern Indian region. Port and settlement sites such as Nilaweli, Lanka Patuna, Kayankerny, and Sasthrawella contain evidence of international trade. The Kayankerny port site and settlement mound, for instance, dates to the third century BCE. An ancient trade route connected Polonnaruwa, the capital city, to a seaport at Kayankerny via the longest stone bridge found in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *East coast of Sri Lanka, Historical port sites, Sea routes, Kayankerny*

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MAU	Maritime Archaeology Unit of Sri Lanka
CCF	Central Cultural Fund
PGIAR	Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology

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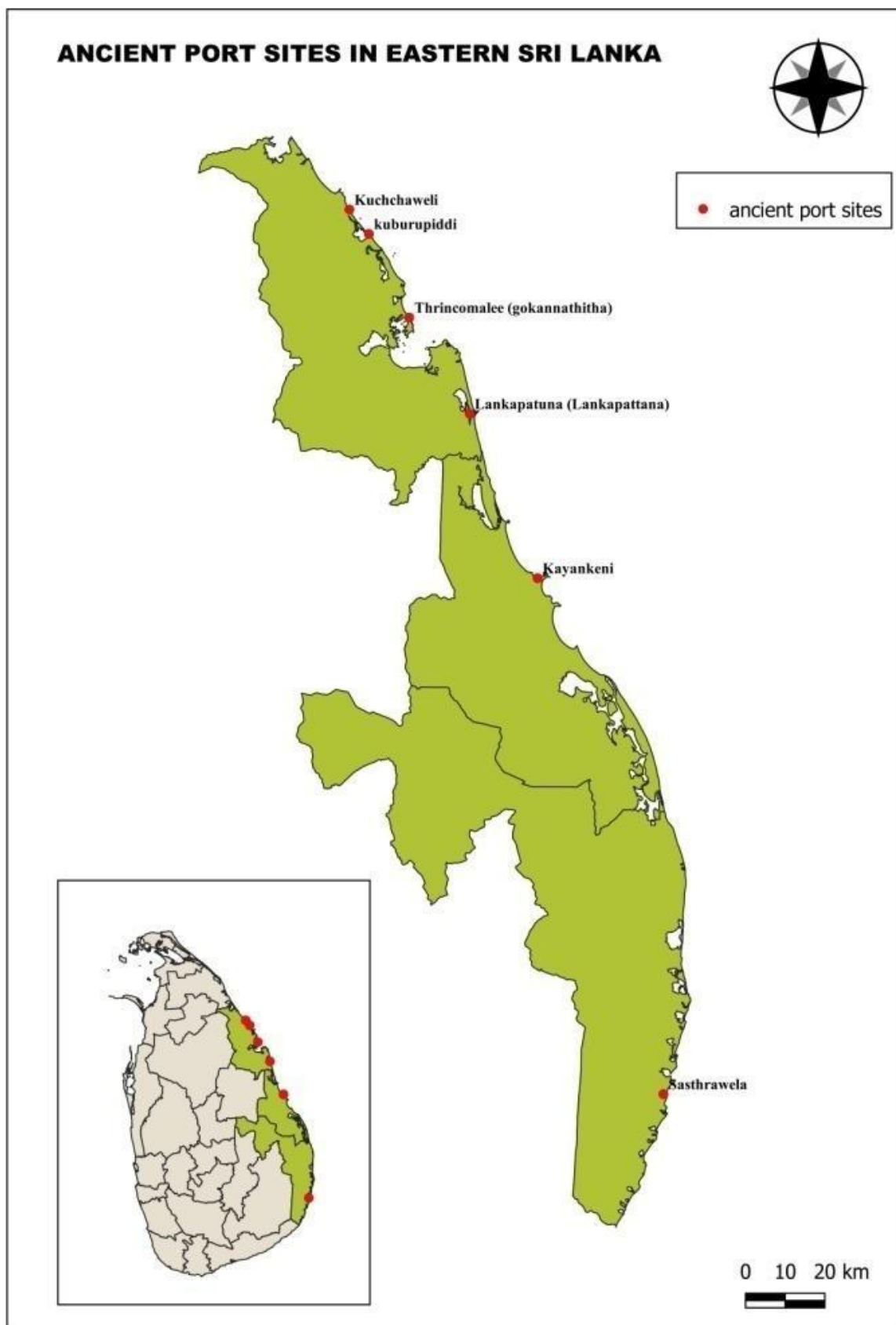
1. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka's cultural and trade relations with South India, the Bay of Bengal, and Southeast Asia have spanned over two millennia. Recent explorations along the eastern coast of Sri Lanka, particularly in the field of maritime archaeology, have unveiled new evidence regarding trade connections with East Asia. These findings have shed light on the existence of two previously unknown port sites and identified two additional potential port sites that may have facilitated land trade routes. This paper reveals the outcomes of these investigations. The information and research data presented in this article, focusing on the Kayankerny area and selected sites in Trincomalee, are based on research undertaken in collaboration with the Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU) and the Batticaloa project of

the Central Cultural Fund (CCF). A significant amount of research data remains unpublished and exists in the form of internal reports.

The island of Sri Lanka's historical connections with the outside world were predominantly established through maritime routes, emphasising the critical role of maritime trade in its history. The exchange of cultures brought forth by sailors, merchants, and monks from diverse regions profoundly influenced the development of Sri Lanka's distinctive cultural heritage. With its natural harbours and monsoon winds, the island served as a significant hub for maritime trade. Extensive historical and archaeological findings indicate that early port sites in Sri Lanka were frequented by seafarers and traders from Rome, the Middle East, China, Southeast Asia, and the South Indian Ocean region. Notably, the writings of Pliny the Elder, Cosmas, and Ptolemy's Map (Gunawardana 2003) provide compelling evidence of Sri Lanka's recognition in the western world during the first century CE.

The ports such as *Mahatittha*, *Jambukolapatthana*, *Uratotta*, *Gokanna*, *Lankapatthana*, Kirinda, Godawaya, and Galle actively participated in these events throughout history (Map 1). Archaeological research has been conducted on ancient ports that were instrumental in Sri Lanka's relations with foreign countries. However, studies on early port sites in Sri Lanka remain limited (Carswell, Deraniyagala and Graham 2013; Bohingamuwa 2017; Bopearachchi 2013; Thanthilage et al. 2013). Comparatively, studies on ports along the east coast have been less extensive than in other parts of the country (Bopearachchi 2013; Thanthilage et al 2013). However, some researchers have discussed the significance of several ports on the east coast based on historical documents (e.g., Siriweera 2003, 117-126). With new archaeological evidence emerging from recent studies in the region, this paper examines the importance of these ports in maintaining relationships with countries in East and Southeast Asia since the first millennium CE.



Map 1: Historical port sites along the east coast of Sri Lanka

2. RESOURCES

2.1 Recent discoveries along the east coast

Following the end of the 30-year separatist war in 2009, access to Sri Lanka's archaeological heritage in the North and East Provinces gradually improved, allowing a significant amount of research projects. The country's growing economy and tourism industry provided more funding for archaeology, leading to more research efforts. The CCF invested in maritime archaeology after 2010, collaborating with local divers and fishing communities to explore previously untouched heritage sites along the coast.

The MAU of the CCF initiated collaborations in 2011, gradually extending their research to the north and east coasts. They discovered shipwrecks dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including those from World War II. Apart from shipwrecks, ancient harbours, settlements, and temples beneath the cliff of Fort Fredrick in Trincomalee have been discovered. Recent archaeological investigations in Trincomalee, Kayankerny, and Godawaya have focused on uncovering evidence of trade connections with East Asia and exploring ancient port sites and shipwrecks.

3. CASE STUDIES

3.1 Kayankerny

Kayankerny is a quaint fishing village on the east coast. It is situated to the north of Pasikudha beach, a renowned tourist destination with beautiful shallow and calm waters as well as a long stretch of sandy shorelines. Kayankerny is also a small, protected bay with calm water and long sandy beach. As there are few historical shipwrecks around that area, the MAU conducted an exploration in 2012, taking Kayankerny as their camp site.

During the survey, the team conducted underwater explorations and gathered information from the local community. They discovered stone pillars across the lagoon, which were previously unknown to officials. The pillars spanned a 200-metre (m) straight line, suggesting a bridge connecting both sides of the lagoon. It is crossing over the lagoon from its narrowest part of water (Figure 1). Further investigations revealed Buddhist temple complexes, an ancient settlement, and a reservoir along this route. This road was part of an ancient trade route parallel to the east coast, linking the north, south, and the capital of Polonnaruwa. The discovery of these sites led to the establishment of a provincial project office for terrestrial archaeology. The Kayankerny Bridge, extending up to 265m, became the longest historical stone bridge in Sri Lanka. Near each end of the bridge, remnants of two small buildings were also found.



Figure 2: Stone pillars of an ancient bridge at Kayankerny, Sri Lanka

In 2018, the excavation of the east end building revealed a small two-story structure measuring 12x12 meters. Constructed with stone pillars, bricks, and clay tiles, the first floor showed more preservation compared to the wooden second floor. In 2022, the west side building, similar in structure at 11x11 meters, was excavated (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Building remains near the stone bridge at Kayankerny, Sri Lanka

Around 800 m west of the bridge, a large settlement site spanning over 20 acres was discovered. The ongoing investigations unveiled a deep stratigraphic layer of around three metres, containing numerous potsherds and remnants of large storage jars.

On the east side of the bridge, extending to the beach, a monastic site and a small settlement, and a reservoir were found. Excavations in 2022 uncovered a cultural layer of approximately two metres. Rather than evidence of the Polonnaruwa Kingdom period, earlier cultural relationships were identified, with pottery dating back to the second century BCE, including local, Indian, Middle Eastern, and East Asian origins. Notably, a piece of Chinese Stoneware pottery was found nearby in 2017.

The neglected small reservoir between the bridge and monastic complex was strategically placed, likely serving the needs of the nearby port and monastic complex. The name 'Kayankerny' is derived from the presence of Kayan trees surrounding a pond, possibly referring to the reservoir. Nearby, the village of 'Mangkerny' suggests a pond inhabited by spotted deer (*Axis axis ceylonensis*).

Shedding light on this mystery, an inscription on a stone pillar was discovered at the Buddhist monastic site. This type of inscription, '*AttaniParihara Kanu*' refers to a document granting special privileges and exemptions from state laws to specific individuals or institutions carved onto a stone pillar. The inscription mentions an offering to the monastery (Sangasena Pirivena) and tax collection (Pallethanna 2018) though the exact location remains uncertain. Potential tax collection areas include a market near the bridge and a nearby port connected to trade routes. Further research and investigation are needed to confirm these theories.

Kayankerny Bay provides a safe anchorage for maritime activities, offering protection from adverse weather conditions. The bay's connection to the Maduru Oya River and Kayankerny Lagoon enhances its significance. The lagoon, influenced by the river, supports local livelihoods, and serves as a fishing harbour. The MAU has conducted seabed explorations but found no evidence of shipwrecks or a port site. A systematic survey and remote sensing are required. A nearby stone quarry may have provided the stone pillars for the bridge, which could have been transported via the river and lagoon.

Research since 2012 suggests the existence of an ancient port site at Kayankerny, with settlements, a stone bridge, inscriptions, buildings, and the bay area. The bridge's end buildings may have served various purposes, while the nearby settlements and the large site at the west end could have been marketplaces. Potsherds indicate foreign connections to the port. Ongoing excavations and expanded maritime archaeological explorations are required to validate these hypotheses. The purpose of the bridge and the source of the tax mentioned in the inscription remain unclear.

3.2 Trincomalee

Trincomalee, a historically significant port on Sri Lanka's east coast, offers valuable insights into early trade patterns and the importance of port cities. The Port of Trincomalee, also known as Gokanna Port, was active from the fourth century BCE to the colonial period. Like other ancient port sites, Trincomalee was associated with temples that served the spiritual needs of sailors and fishermen. Swami Rock, located at Fort Fredrick, was the site of an ancient Buddhist temple that later became a Hindu temple. Although the temples were demolished during the colonial era, a new Shiva temple was constructed in the 1960s, preserving the religious significance of Trincomalee. The presence of these temples reflects the enduring cultural and religious heritage of the region. After the civil war ended in 2009, both marine and terrestrial archaeological explorations were facilitated, uncovering shipwreck sites and ancient settlements. The preservation and study of Dutch buildings within Fort Fredrick were also undertaken by CCF and the Department of Archaeology shedding light on the formation and distribution of early settlements and fortifications (Pushpakumara 2017).

3.2.1 The ancient watering point and the remains found from underwater surveys

Within Fort Fredrick, a significant watering point used by the Dutch to supply ships with clean drinking water was found. Strategically positioned with direct access to the sea, a small jetty-like structure was built on the beach to facilitate this water source. The well, ingeniously constructed using a natural spring source, provided salt-free water for consumption. Nearby wells also contributed to the

availability of drinking water. The layers of deposited soil surrounding these wells contain archaeological remains from the ancient to mediaeval periods.

The jetty-like structure was created using large stones from the beach and remnants of old stone or granite buildings. Stone pillars, basement parts with railings, and repurposed stairs were used to construct and level the platform. Sir Arthur C. Clarke's leisure diving activities in 1960 led to the discovery of intriguing remains near the Thirukonashwaram cliff, including stone pillars, basement stones, and a Shivalinga. In 2017, the MAU uncovered additional stone pillars, stone sculptures, slabs with symbols, and remnants (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Building remains with stone pillars found underwater in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka

Among the findings was a stone baluster known as *Koravakgala*, stone balustrades, reused to level the jetty-like structure. Another portion of a baluster was found underwater. The archaeological remains suggest the presence of a stairway leading to the cliff, providing access from the seaside to the watering point, the cliff's summit, and the temple located at the north end. This stairway served as a convenient route for mariners and pilgrims visiting the temple or the cliff's summit, highlighting the strategic location of the site.

3.2.2 The ports of Trincomalee

Extensive excavations, explorations, and marine archaeology projects in Trincomalee have unearthed significant historical artefacts and structures, including brick buildings, stone constructions, inscriptions, statues, pottery, glass beads, and coins from the Anuradhapura period. Excavations at the playground outside the fort suggest it was a Buddhist monastic complex rather than a residential settlement mound. The discovery of pottery and objects of Indian origin indicates trade and cultural connections between Trincomalee and India, supported by the coins found at the site.

Trincomalee harbour's natural bay area provided anchorage points for boats throughout history, contributing to its role as a centre of religious activity and its connections to extensive trade networks. The pottery predominantly consists of Longquan celadon and glazed earthenware, similar to the findings in Singapore and the Middle East. Inscriptions at the site highlight Gokanna's importance as a port for the Polonnaruwa Kingdom.

Research and exploration continue to identify actual port sites and ancient settlements along the Trincomalee beaches, yielding valuable archaeological material and shedding light on early trading activities. Ongoing research aims to understand the history of Trincomalee, its significance as a hub for religious and commercial activities, and its maritime history and connections with other regions.

3.3 Revisiting the port sites discovered thirty years ago

3.3.1 Kumburupiddi

The discovery of Arab tombstones in the naval dock area of Trincomalee provides evidence of Arab traders being present in the vicinity during the fourteenth century. Additionally, Chinese potshards from the same era were found near Nilaweli, specifically in a rural coastal area known as 'Kumburupiddi' located north of Trincomalee. Previous explorations conducted three decades ago reported the abundance of Chinese ceramics along the beach in this area. John Carswell, in his publication 'Chinese ceramics from Allapiddy in Sri Lanka' suggested that these ceramics may have been deposited on land from a sunken ship near the site (Carswell 1985). A similar paper by the same author was published in The Oriental Ceramic Society of France in 2000.

Recent explorations in the past few years have revisited the area known as 'Kumburupiddi,' and researchers have observed scattered ceramic fragments in various locations. This suggests that Kumburupiddi may have functioned as an old port site. Furthermore, numerous local potshards from the Anuradhapura period can still be found in this area, alongside the remains of a Buddhist monastery and an ancient stupa mound.

The presence of a significant amount of Chinese pottery strewn across the beach at Kumburupiddi, primarily dating to the fourteenth century, indicates its connection to international trade during that era. Similar evidence has been found at fourteenth century port sites in Egypt, the Middle East, India, Vietnam, Singapore, and Korea. Therefore, if a shipwreck were to be discovered in this vicinity, it is highly likely that it would have a connection to the nearby harbour and the thriving maritime trade of the time. Another similar place assumed to have a shipwreck is 'Allapiddy' in North Province.

3.3.2 Lanka Patuna

Lanka Patuna has been considered an ancient port since Chinese pottery was first discovered by Deraniyagala in 1972 (Solheim and Deraniyagala 1972). Recently, the Post Graduate Institute of Archaeology (PGIAR), University of Kelaniya reported finding Chinese pottery during their excavations at the site (Thanthilage et al. 2013). Most of the pottery were identified as the Polonnaruwa Kingdom period and later.

4. CONCLUSION

Although significant progress has been made in exploring and preserving Sri Lanka's maritime heritage, much work remains to be done. The fieldwork and research conducted have revealed a substantial presence of potential port sites and associated settlements along the eastern coast of Sri Lanka. These sites are intertwined with maritime trade networks as well as inland road networks, reflecting their multifaceted roles in historical interactions. The Kayankerny site presents a complex

combination of sea and land trade routes, a monastic complex, and a settlement site. Studying, excavating, and conserving these remains will be a long-term undertaking, requiring extensive time and resources.

Ongoing excavation and research at the shipwreck site in Godawaya, South Sri Lanka, dating back to the second century BCE, are uncovering valuable evidence of maritime trade relations. The shipwreck, identified as a cargo ship, provides insights into trade routes heading east or returning from the east. The newly discovered port sites also require archaeological investigations both at sea and on land, which will take several years to bring forth new evidence for scholarly discussions.

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