

# Goods and Texts: Creating an Archaeological and Historical Narrative of Sri Lanka's Connectivity with Southeast Asia, China, and Beyond

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## ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Sri Lanka's interactions with Southeast Asia, China, and regions beyond from the beginning to the middle of the thirteenth century CE. Several factors, including its central location in the Indian Ocean, have contributed to connecting the island with these regions. Ceramics, epigraphic, and textual data provide the best evidence for reconstructing such interactions. This paper is primarily based on the analysis of ceramics unearthed from the coastal port-urban centres of Mantai, Kantharodai, and Kirinda. This data is compared with the ceramic data from other sites such as Anuradhapura and Thissamaharama, as well as sites from the Indian Ocean Rim, for comparison. Material analysis results are compared against and supplemented by epigraphic and textual data. The key research question addressed here is: What different patterns of Sri Lanka's connectivity with the eastern segment of the Indian Ocean might emerge through the analysis of material and textual evidence? Research reveals that the material evidence not only predates textual evidence for the beginning of Sri Lanka's interactions with the region under study but also clearly indicates their continuity up to the middle of the thirteenth century CE. Material evidence, including beads and the transfer of iron technology, dates the earliest relationships to the middle of the first millennium BCE. These cultural-commercial connections were regularized and intensified after the fifth and seventh centuries CE, respectively. Sri Lanka's culture- historical developments, in general, have always been influenced by the changing dynamics of the Indian Ocean.

**Keywords:** *Sri Lanka's external connectivity, Southeast Asia, China, Ceramics*

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|      |                              |
|------|------------------------------|
| SEA  | Southeast Asia               |
| SCC1 | Southern Chinese Celadon 1   |
| WWS  | Southern White Wares         |
| SEAW | Southeast Asian Ware         |
| PIOW | Paddle Impressed Orange Ware |
| BGW  | Black Glazed Ware            |
| MTIW | Mica Tempered Impressed Ware |
| PLOW | Pale Light Orange Ware       |

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Map of site locations mentioned in the text.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Several factors appear to have favorably contributed to connecting Sri Lanka with the regions across the Bay of Bengal: its location at a critical point in the Indian Ocean; the annual cycle of monsoon winds; the availability of numerous safe seaports; high-demand trade goods; and its reputation as a centre of *Theravada* Buddhism. The importance of Sri Lankan ports to Indian Ocean trade and naval power prompted several foreign powers to control the island. According to the texts, the religious networks appear to have been the forerunner that linked the island across the Bay of Bengal and were subsequently expanded to include political and economic interactions. Material evidence for trade and exchange, however, appears to predate these historical relations recorded in the texts. Culture-historical developments on the island, therefore, have always been influenced by those in the Indian Ocean.

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTION, OBJECTIVE AND METHODS

The key research question addressed here is: What different patterns of Sri Lanka's connectivity with Southeast Asia (SEA), and China might emerge through the analysis of material and textual evidence? Accordingly, the objective here is to understand the nature of Sri Lanka's interactions with the said region from about the middle of the first millennium BCE to the middle of the thirteenth century CE. For this purpose, ceramics unearthed from the Mantai, Kantharodai, and Kirinda (Map 1) were typologically and statistically analyzed. The origin and provenance of ceramics were determined through comparison with published material from the Indian Ocean region. The material and sequences wherein they were found were dated through radiocarbon dates and typological and inter-site comparisons. When the occurrence of identified material across sites is placed in a chronological framework, the pattern of interactions with various regions and how they change over time is visible, although the form of interactions is not necessarily obvious from artifacts alone, for which reason the textual and epigraphic data were integrated.

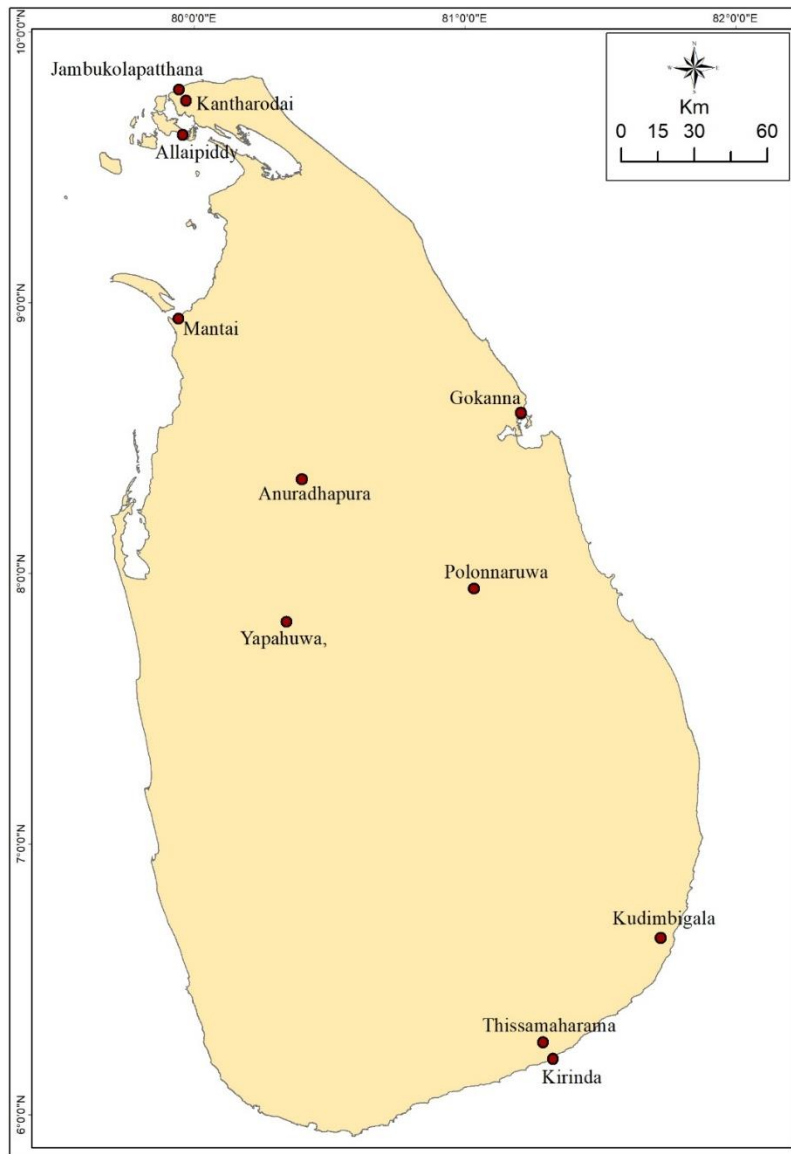


Figure 1: Map of site locations mentioned in the text (Drawing credit: Wasantha Senadeera).

### 3. SITES, ASSEMBLAGES AND THEIR CHRONOLOGIES

Mantai, the key site discussed here, was the main seaport of the capital, Anuradhapura, for more than 1500 years. Its excavated cultural sequence dates from the second century BCE to the twelfth /thirteenth century CE (Bohingamuwa 2017, 65–71). Kantharodai was the urban/ religious centre attached to *Jambukolapattana* seaport. The excavated sequence here dates from ca. 500 BCE to the early or mid-first century BCE (Bohingamuwa 2017, 475–480). Kirinda is located close to Tissamaharama, the ancient capital of the southern kingdom. Based on radiocarbon dates and diagnostic ceramics, Bohingamuwa (2017, 499–505) dated this sequence from ca. the late third–fourth to the early ninth centuries CE.

Kantharodai has the oldest sequence, but the site declined before the start of the Common Era. Although historical sources link *Jambukolapattana* to various ports in India and the SEA at least since the third century BCE (Mv. 19, 23–43), Kantharodai contains 99.58 per cent local and Indian material. Similarly, Kirinda too contains only a limited number of SEA or Chinese artifacts. Both sites, however, have a large number of sherds identified as "Imported.Unknown" of which the majority are considered to be Southeast Asian based on surface treatment (Bohingamuwa 2017, 194–202). Therefore, Mantai, the longest surviving site with its diverse assemblage, is discussed, while material from the other three sites is used as supplementary evidence.

### 4. CHINESE CONNECTIONS

Of the three sites studied, only the Mantai and Kirinda assemblages contained clearly identifiable Chinese ceramics, amounting to 452 sherds. Kirinda's had only two Dusun ware (Dusun) sherds datable to the late seventh to early/ mid-eighth centuries. Since Chinese ceramics, representing 18 wares, were recovered from Mantai<sup>1</sup> (Bohingamuwa 2017, 341; Catalogue Table: C3.9.28), Sino-Sri Lanka connections traceable from ceramics are discussed based on selected key wares (94 per cent of total Chinese sherds) while comparing with other assemblages from the island and overseas.

Disregarding intrusive sherds in early phases, the regular Chinese wares occur from around the late seventh/ early eighth century CE (Bohingamuwa 2017, 177). The assemblage includes both storage and tableware. The profusion of Chinese ceramics is noted in Phase VII, dated to between the early/mid-eighth and late ninth centuries. In this phase, Chinese ceramics rapidly increased and diversified in terms of sherd counts (88), number of wares (13), and their types. They included 41 sherds of Dusun storage/transport jars and 12 tableware, such as Yue Celadon Ware (Yue), Changsha Ware (Changsha) and Southern Chinese Celadon 1 (SCC1). The deposit above Phase VII (a disturbed phase) contained 84 sherds, indicating continuity of cultural-commercial interactions with China. The surface at Mantai has extensive Chinese sherd scatters, and 260 sherds were sampled. Both Phase 'D' and the Surface have 16 wares, which include Ding Kiln White Ware (Ding) and Southern White Wares (WWS) datable to eleventh/ twelfth centuries. A Chinese ceramic dump recovered from Allaipiddy contained Southern Song dynasty period ceramics (Carswell

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<sup>1</sup> Our excavation was confined to 3m X 3m. Carswell et al. (2015) excavated extensively at Mantai, and their ceramic assemblage was strikingly similar to ours.

1985). Similarly, a Chinese sherd dating to the thirteenth/ fourteenth century is housed at the Yapahuwa Museum, indicating the continuity of relations.

#### **4.1 Selected key Chinese wares**

Of the 18 Chinese wares, only Dusun (265) and Changsha (55) and Yue (22) wares have considerable sherd counts. Since they are widely distributed in the Indian Ocean and securely dated, they are discussed here to illustrate Sino-Sri Lankan connections.

##### **4.1.1 Dusun ware**

Dusun is considered to have been made either in Hunan Province (Flecker 2001, 335) or Guangzhou (Guy 2008, 11) and is generally dated to the eighth /ninth centuries CE in the western Indian Ocean region (Whitehouse and Williamson 1973; Tampoe 1989; Kennet 2004, 65). Dusun recovered from Mantai, Allaipiddy, and Anuradhapura has been dated by Carswell (2013, 246) to the ninth–twelfth centuries and by Prickett-Fernando (2003, 74) between the seventh and tenth centuries. Dusun in our assemblage dates from the late seventh/ early eighth century to the late ninth/ tenth century. The majority of Dusun finds in Sri Lanka are from the ancient seaports, indicating their transport role, as suggested earlier (Guy 2008; Flecker 2001).

##### **4.1.2. Changsha ware**

This tableware produced in Hunan province (Hughes-Stangton; Kerr 1981, 57–59) is traded across South Asia to the Persian/Arabian Gulf and to Eastern Africa (Whitehouse and Williamson 1973; Kennet 2004) in the west to Japan and Korea in the east (Carswell et al. 2013, 256). In Sri Lanka, Changsha is found in sites such as Anuradhapura and Mantai, which are dated to the eighth to the tenth centuries (Carswell et al. 2013, 256–266; Prickett-Fernando 2003, 56). Regular occurrences of Changsha in our assemblage date from the early/ mid-eighth to late ninth/ tenth centuries CE (Bohingamuwa 2017, Figure 3.55), which tally with 760–900 CE dates from Shanga (Horton 1996, 303). Whitehouse and Williamson (1973) considered Changsha to represent the earliest phase of Chinese ceramic trade with the West. Sri Lanka was an integral part of this maritime trade network.

##### **4.1.3 Yue Celadon ware**

The occurrence of Yue ware at Mantai is similar to Changsha and hence dates to the same period, with a possible upper date extension up to the eleventh century. Yue ware is widely reported from Sri Lanka, including Anuradhapura, Yapahuwa, and Polonnaruwa (Coningham 2006; Prematilleke 1982), and is generally dated to the ninth and tenth centuries (Prickett-Fernando 2003, 75); however, our Mantai Yue wares date from the eighth to the eleventh centuries. Horton (1996, 307) also reported the continuity of this ware to the thirteenth century at Shanga. Yue ware is also traded up to the Persian and Arab Gulfs and Eastern Africa (Kennet 2004; Horton 1996, 307).

The Sino-Sri Lanka relations apparent in ceramics seem to date between the T'ang (618–907 CE) and Song (960–1279 CE) dynasties.

## 4.2 Sri Lanka- Southeast Asia (SEA) relations

Ceramics identified as Southeast Asian Ware (SEAW) are tentative and are based on their paddle impressions (e.g., Karashima 2004, 3–10; Sasaki 2004, 16–20, 48–50). Lertrit (2004) was certain that such marks were of SEA origin. Similarly, Solheim and Deraniyagala (1972) identified Paddle-impressed sherds recovered from Kudumbigala, as being Southeast Asian. Our SEA assemblage contains both glazed and unglazed tableware and storage / transport wares.

### 4.2.1 Southeast Asian Wares (SEAW)

The SEA assemblage contains 87 sherds, of which only eight are from Kirinda and the rest are from Mantai. The former had only one ware, Paddle Impressed Orange Ware (PIOW), which appears to date from the early sixth/ mid-seventh century to the early eighth century. Therefore, the Mantai assemblage is important to illustrate interactions with that region. It had 79 sherds representing nine wares, of which only Black glazed Ware (BLAG) is glazed (Bohingamuwa 2017, 337, Table C3.10.32). Their occurrence before Phase VII is numerically insignificant, but they may indicate the arrival of SEAW from around the late first/ second century, increasing them from the early seventh to eighth/ninth centuries. Their occurrence matches the dates (100–500 CE, with the majority being after 600 CE) assigned by Solheim and Deraniyagala (1972, 31–32). At Mantai, they continued to arrive until about the twelfth/ thirteenth century. Of the non-glazed wares, Paddle Impressed Orange Ware (PIOW) and Mica Tempered Impressed Ware (MTIW) are more certain as being SEAWs for their decorations.

### 4.2.2 ‘Imported.Unknown’ (Imp. Unk) ceramics and Southeast Asian connections

At Mantai, Katharodai, and Kirinda, there are 1772 sherds (4 per cent) that were identified as non-local for their firing and fabric. Since their origin could not be determined, they were termed ‘Imported. Unknown’. This assemblage contains both tableware and storage/ transport ware.

Of the SEA origin ‘Imp.Unk’ sherds, Pale light Orange Ware (PLOW) and PIOW (SEAW) ware resemble a sherd identified by Schenk (2014, 96) as SEAW from Tissamaharama. This identification is based on similar finds in Angkor Borei. Tissamaharama sherd is dated to the fourth/ fifth century CE. However, our SEAWs date from the late first century, and then increased rapidly after the seventh century, making them the earliest SEAWs in Sri Lanka. SEAWs identified by Solheim and Deraniyagala (1972, 31–38) date them from 100–500 CE, while most of them postdate 600 CE. This evidence supports my identification of some ‘Imp.Unk’ wares as SEA. The ‘Imp.Unk’ assemblage collectively dates from ca. mid-fourth/ late third century CE and peaks in the early/mid-eighth century.

## 5. TEXTUAL AND EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

Mahavamsa’s earliest reference to Sri Lanka-SEA relations is the arrival of Suriguttha of Kelasa monastery (Burma) with other monks for a religious event at Anuradhapura in the second century BCE (Mv. 29, 13). Inscriptions datable to the third or second century BCE refer to seafaring, some of which also mention regions to which they sailed. The first century Periyaminikulam inscription mentions a sailor named Naga, who worked for *Aji Saka* of the Javanese tradition (Paranavitana 1970, cxxvii). Somadeva (2006, 57)

identified a '*Javaka naya*' (*Nayaka*), a leader of *Javakas*, in the Mottayakallu inscription. They were all Malay Peninsula traders who traded with Sri Lanka.

The earliest textual evidence for Sino-Sri Lanka are the emissaries sent by the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) (Werake 1978, 64–73). Such early China-Sri Lanka relations are clear from Pliny's record of *Rachia*, the chief Sri Lankan envoy to Claudius court, who described his father's visit to *Seres* (China). This visit is recorded in *Vamsattappakasini* and an inscription at Sasseruwa in Anuradhapura (Abeydheera 2009, 145–165). By the first/ second century CE, *Mahaniddesa* indicates that Sri Lankan ports acted as transit points in sea voyages between India and the SEA. Therefore, the Satavahanas of Deccan, India (230 BCE–220 CE) sent their trading ships to Suvannabhumi *via* Sri Lanka (Gunawardana 2003, 19–20). It is roughly when our SEA wares appear at Mantai.

These interactions appear to have intensified after the arrival of Fa-Xian in the fifth century, as is clear from the 11 religious missions exchanged in the next two centuries (Werake 1978, 64–73). Nandi, who transported Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns to establish the order of nunneries in China in 426 and 429, was a highly experienced sailor on long-distance sea voyages (Grimes 1941, 76–79). Buddhist monks played a significant role in strengthening cultural and commercial relations between the two regions.

Buddhist pilgrims such as Gunawarman and Vajrabodhi stopped in Sri Lanka in their long journeys (Gunawardana 2003, 24–65) because the island was a *Theravada* Buddhist centre where there were many sacred places/ objects of worship. They sailed on merchant ships that were linked to trade routes and trading ports. Cosmas (XI. 15–16) reports that '*Seeladiba*' (Sri Lanka) acted as the '*mediaex*' in east-west maritime trade, and its ports were linked to trading centres all over the world. The rise of Islam in Arabia and the Tang dynasty in China brought a new dynamic to the Indian Ocean maritime trade by shifting the Arabian sea-centered trade to the Bay of Bengal. Consequently, the southeastern and eastern ports of Sri Lanka gained significance, and an increase in interaction with the SEA is visible in the archaeological record. The influence of Sri Lankan Buddhist statues in the SEA (Dupont 1959, 631–636), as well as *Mahayana* influence on *Bodhisatva* statues in Southeastern Sri Lanka, is clearly noticeable (Ghosh 1937).

Interaction between the *Mahayana* sects in Sri Lanka and those in SEA seems to have further strengthened, as is clear from the eighth century Ratubuka inscription in central Indonesia (Casparis 1961, 241–243), which mentions an Anuradhapura Abhayagiri *Vihara*-affiliated monastery. The continuity of interactions with SEA is also clear from Vijayabahu I's (1055–1110) political and cultural relations with Burma, as well as Parakramabahu I's invasion and subsequent peace negotiations by Buddhist monks (Wickramasinghe 1960, 38–58).

In the texts, Sino-Sri Lankan relations appear to have largely collapsed after the decline of the Tang dynasty and Buddhism in China. However, the continuity of trade relations is clearly visible in the ceramic record up to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing analysis of material, epigraphic and textual evidence dates the island's earliest interactions with SEA and China to the middle of the first millennium BCE. Although not discussed here, the

identification of the transfer of iron smelting furnace technology from Sri Lanka to SEA and up to Japan from around the fourth century BCE (Juleff 2009, 557–77) and the trade of Sri Lankan-made Indo-Pacific glass beads, dated to 400 BCE at Anuradhapura (Conningham 2006, 357), to SEA support this claim. However, such early interactions are not reflected in texts.

By about the third/ second centuries BCE, these interactions seemed to have intensified and expanded up to China. Many early *Brahmi* inscriptions dated to this period refer to seafaring and trading communities, including those from the Malay peninsula. Interestingly, the earliest reference in the Mahavamsa to the arrival of Buddhist monks in Burma dates to the third century BCE. The visit of Han dynasty emissaries to the island this time indicates the trading interests of China.

By the beginning of the Common Era, Sri Lanka's cultural-commercial exchanges had extended from Rome to China, as is clear from the statements of the Sri Lankan envoy to the Claudius court. These interactions increased by the late first/ second century CE, as is clear from the appearance of Paddle-impressed wares and the finding of a piece of Chinese silk at the Kotavehera Buddhist *stupa* (ColomboPage 2011).

By this time, texts are explicit that Sri Lankan ports were linked to ports in India and the SEA. The fifth century marked the expansion of these interactions from China to the Mediterranean, as clear from Procopius (Procopius I.20, 9–13) and the arrival of Buddhist pilgrims such as Faxian in the Island and the 11 religious missions exchanged between China and Sri Lanka. In the next century, Sri Lanka became the center of Indian Ocean trade, and its ports will be linked to ports around the world (Cosmas XI, 15–16). The late seventh/ eighth century witnessed the arrival of Chinese ceramics and then a profusion of Chinese and Southeast Asian wares up to the twelfth/ thirteenth centuries CE. In response to the change of maritime trade from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal in the seventh century, southern and eastern ports gained significance, and close cultural relations with the SEA are clear from the archaeological record, texts, inscriptions, religion, and art.

While it is difficult, archaeologically, to distinguish between trade and other forms of exchange, most of the commodities discussed here appear to be traded. Textual data makes it clear that religious networks were not only the forerunners of these interactions, but they also facilitated political and commercial relations.

## Acknowledgement

This paper is primarily based on my PhD field research. I acknowledge the University of Oxford-based SEALINKS Project of Dr. Nicole Boivin and Prof. Dorian Fuller's NERC Early Rice Project for funding my fieldwork and dating. I thank my supervisors, Dr. Nicole Boivin, Dr. Derek Kennet, Dr. Damian Robinson, and Ms. Kalangi Rodrigo for proofreading.

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