

AND THAT'S HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The Story of Sri Lanka's
Journey Through Prehistory

The Ceylon Press
Pocket Professor

CONTENTS

1

AN ENDING AND A BEGINNING

2

THE GREAT STORM

3

A SHORT WALK

4

HUNTING & GATHERING

5

A TOURIST FROM CHINA

6

THE STRIKE OF IRON

7

FIRST WORDS

8

SEABOURNE SETTLERS

1



AN ENDING
AND A
BEGINNING

“The White Rabbit put on his spectacles. ‘Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?’ he asked. ‘Begin at the beginning,’ the King said gravely, ‘and go on till you come to the end: then stop.’”

Lewis Carroll

A no-nonsense prologue to Sri Lanka's story might carefully begin 1.5 million years ago.

But 1470 offers a much more iconic, and intriguing date. The year is laden with symbolism; and symbolism, like cricket, is something the country does with astonishing ease.

As years ago, 1470 was actually a rather modest year, the world over: little that would matter later, happened then. But for Sri Lanka, it was the year of the Great Storm – a tempest of unforgiving fury. It fell like a guillotine across the Palk Straights, that modest sea channel that separates India from Sri Lanka.

Like longitude or time itself, India, the island's great northern neighbour, is an inescapable reality, its influence felt from pre-history, right the way through such great dynasties like the Guptas, Mauryas, Pandyas, Cheras and Cholas; and into the present day.

The colossal SE Asian trade India helped generate also ensured that Sri Lanka could never, like Japan, simply turn its back on the rest of the world. With an almost mandatory magnetism, its shores, ports, and seas connected it to everything else, everywhere else.

To the east of the Palk Straights stretches the Bay of Bengal; to its west the Laccadive Sea. And running like a vertebra across the Straights are low islands and submerged reefs – a salty oasis of shallow shoals known as Adam's Bridge.

2



THE GREAT STORM

“Humpty Dumpty sat
on the wall
Humpty Dumpty had a
great fall
All the king’s horses
and all the king’s men
Couldn’t put Humpty
together again.”

Lewis Carroll

The storm that raged then across Adam's Bridge's 48 kilometres of partially sunken limestone banks would have a more profoundly symbolic impact on the island than anything since India and Sri Lanka had first separated from the supercontinent of Gondwana, millions of years earlier.

Even the ending of the Ice Ages, and the subsequent rising of sea levels had not been able to effect so great a change. At extreme low tides, and before the limestone stacks had been so eroded, it has still been possible to simply walk from India to Sri Lanka. The Storm of 1470 changed all that.

It ripped into the limestone, shattering it – leaving behind just a few islands and a watery thoroughfare that is still, to this day, too treacherously shallow for most ships to dare a crossing.

Adam's Bridge was a bridge no more. From 1470 onwards you would have to swim, or sail across.

Emblematic of what was or might have been, but is no longer, it sits between the two countries, hinting at a unity that had already, hundreds of years before, fragmented so completely as to be missed by the earliest founding myths of both cultures.

Its destruction made symbolically plain what was already nakedly obvious. Despite their proximity, their shared history and even their similarities, the two lands were different.

As the lost magnetic pull of the sub-continent become more remote, Sri Lanka continued its journey forward, one in which it would continue to put down its own unique roots, to create a history to dwarf that of most other countries, ten times larger.

3



A SHORT WALK

“Then it doesn't matter
which way you
walk... – so long as I
get somewhere.”

Lewis Carroll

Adam's Bridge was a bridge crying out for repair, even before the great storm of 1470 shattered it forever.

Unpredictable, and uneven, sailing had long been the better option. But for Sri Lanka's first settlers - who had still to master boats - a short walk from India was all it took.

And walking was what the island's first settlers did: Palaeolithic and later Mesolithic migrants from the Indian mainland who simply strolled across, their effortless trek belying the extreme complexity that hundreds of years later would colour Sri Lanka's relationship with India - from war, intermarriage, Buddhism itself - and the borrowing of kings.

Since Jurassic times, some two hundred million years ago, Sri Lanka had, as part of India, broken off from the great Gondwana sub continent that had been formed in the Triassic era a hundred million years earlier.

Adam's Bridge was becoming the sole point of access to the far south; but by 7,500 BCE it was almost unwalkable.

4



HUNTING & GATHERING

“A loaf of bread, the
Walrus said, Is what
we chiefly need:
Pepper and vinegar
besides
Are very good indeed –
Now if you’re ready,
Oysters, dear, We can
begin to feed!”

Lewis Carroll

Beguiling hints of these earliest inhabitants are still only just emerging.

Excavations conducted in 1984 by Prof. S. Krishnarajah near Point Pedro, north east of Jaffna revealed Stone Age tools and axes that are anything from 500,000 to 1.6 million years old.

As the fossil record demonstrates, the land they inhabited was ecologically richer and more dramatic than it is today, teeming not simply with a plenitude of the wildlife still found in Sri Lanka today, but with hippopotamus and rhinoceros as well.

Hundreds of millennia later, one of their Stone Age descendants was to leave behind the most anatomically perfect modern human remains yet uncovered on the island.

Balangoda Man, as he was to be named, was found in the hills south of Horton Plains inland from Matara, a short walk from the birthplace of Sirimavo Bandaranaike. His complete 30,000 year old skeleton is bewitchingly life-like.

Not for nothing has he become a glamorous poster boy, the legate of sophisticated Stone Age living.

Probing his remains, scientists have concluded that Balangoda Man and his heirs were eager consumers of raw meat, from snails and snakes to elephants. And artistic too, as evidenced in the ornamental fish bones, sea shell beads and pendants left behind.

All across the island, similar finds are being uncovered, pointing to a sparse but widespread population of hunter gathers, living in caves – such as Batadomba, Aliga and Beli-lena in Kitulgala.

The tools and weapons found in these caves, made of quartz crystal and flint, are well in advance of such technological developments in Europe, which date from around 10,000 BCE compared to 29,000 BCE in Sri Lanka.

It wasn't just Palaeolithic good looks and winning habits that Balangoda Man demonstrated: he had brains too, and plenty of them.

Later evidence indicates that Stone Age hunter-gathers then made the transition to a more settled lifestyle, growing, at least by 17,000-15,000 BCE, oats, and barley on what is now Horton Plains, thousands of years before it even began in that fulcrum of early global civilization - Mesopotamia. Balangoda Man's DNA was turbo-charged.

Astonishingly, his direct descendants, the Veddas, are still alive today, making up less than 1% of the island's total population, an aboriginal community with strong animist beliefs that has, against the odds, retained a distinctive identity.

Leaner, and darker than modern Sri Lankans, their original religion - cherishing demons, and deities - was associated with the dead and the certainty that the spirits of dead relatives can cause good or bad outcomes.

Their language, unique to them, is now almost - but not quite - extinct, their antique vocabulary centred around the real priorities of life.

5



A TOURIST FROM CHINA

“For, you see, so many out - of - the - way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible.”

Lewis Carroll

And perhaps it was the Vedda or their spirits that Fa-Hsien, the 5th century CE traveller had in mind when he conjured up his fable of early Sri Lanka in his book "A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms:"

"The country originally had no human inhabitants, but was occupied only by spirits and nagas, with which merchants of various countries carried on a trade. When the trafficking was taking place, the spirits did not show themselves. They simply set forth their precious commodities, with labels of the price attached to them; while the merchants made their purchases according to the price; and took the things away."

Fa-Hsien's colourful travelogue shows just how readily the early origins of the country depend on myth and fable.

Centuries passed before there are finally some tantalising hints of the Stone Ages' transition into the Iron Age, and with it more evidence of new waves of colonization into the island from India.

6



THE STRIKE OF IRON

“The time has come
The walrus said To talk
of many things: Of
shoes - and ships -
And sealing wax - Of
cabbages and kings -
And why the sea is
boiling hot - And
whether pigs have
wings.”

Lewis Carroll

As new travellers arrived from the sub-continent, Balangoda man and his ancestors were pushed into the more inaccessible parts of the country, especially the rainforests, a small part of which, Sinharaja Forest Reserve, miraculously survives in its original state today. Using the progressive technology of the iron age, the new colonists were able to clear land and plant crops, mine for metals like copper, and even establish pearl fisheries. By 1500 BCE there is evidence of cinnamon being exported to the ancient Egyptians.

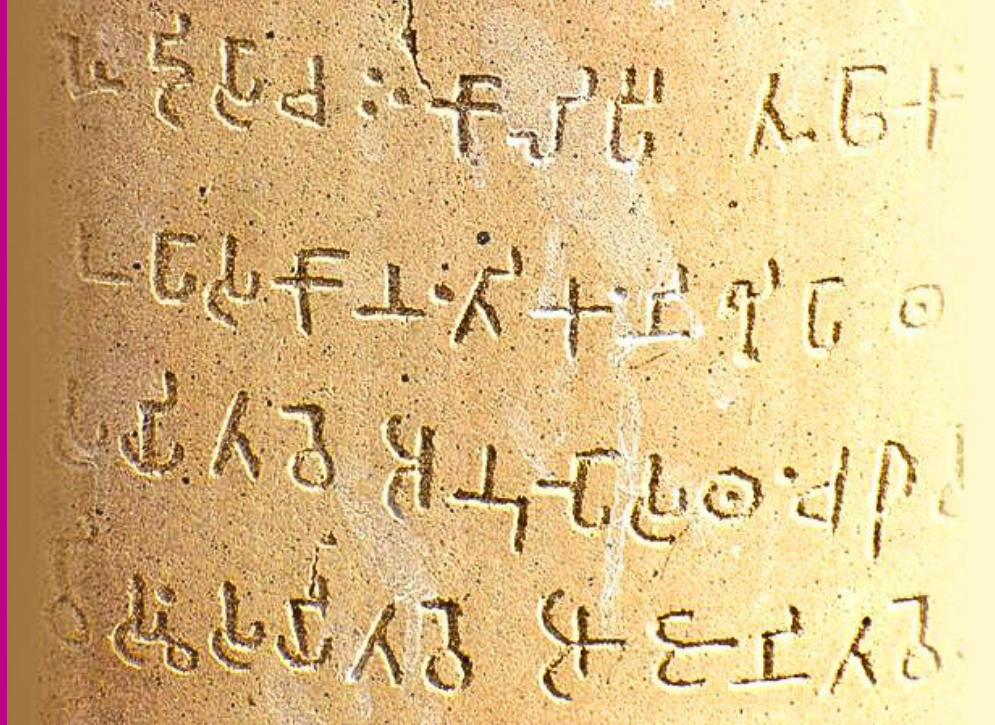
A series of major excavations in Anuradhapura dating to around 900 BCE has uncovered abundant treasure including artefacts that show the use of iron, the domestication of horses and cattle, the use of high-quality pottery and possibly even the cultivation of rice. The settlement was large - even by today's standards: 4 hectares.

Other equally large settlements undoubtedly wait still to be found. One that has already been unearthed and studied are the burial mounds at Ibbankutuwa near Dambulla that date back to around 1,000 BCE.

Here a wealth of pottery vessels interned with the dead contain ornaments of bronze and copper, beads and, most interesting of all, such stones as carnelian and onyx that could only have come to the island from India.

Were they brought in sturdy iron-age suitcases by travellers who stayed; or traded in the nascent commercial flux that was stirring on shores right across the Indian Ocean? Scientists argue - through both are equally possible. Other such sites exist in places like Padiyagampola and Jamburagala in Yala.

7



FIRST WORDS

“For first you write a sentence, And then you chop it small; Then mix the bits and sort them out Just as they chance to fall: The order of the phrases makes no difference at all.”

Lewis Carroll

By the early 7th century BCE evidence comes of the use of the Brahmi script using a language that is an early form of Sinhala.

Inventive, adaptive, increasingly sophisticated – urban living was arriving – whether as an independent island-wide development or because of the rapid spread of urbanised culture from India still using Adam’s Bridge as a convenient thoroughfare, is still the stuff of impassioned academic debate.

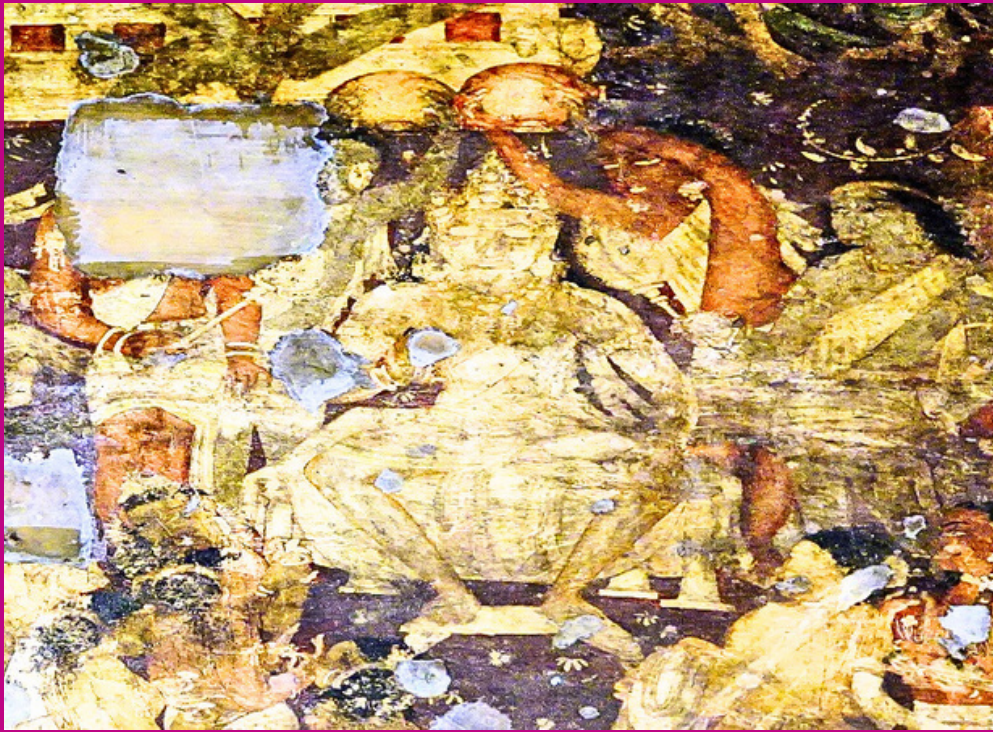
Either way, the evolutionary ball was rolling like never before. From urban living, came mini states. And into one of these, in 543 BCE , stepped the Indian Prince, Vijaya.

Prince Vijaya, the founding father of the nascent Sinhalese nation, did not step into a vacuum – though what was here can still only really be guessed at.

The best scholarly guesses are that the pre-existing communities by now would have coalesced into bantam kingdoms, probably preoccupied with interminable wars. The records list at least 4 different clans: Rakkhaka, Yakkha, Naga and Deva, but draw a dark veil on oversharing any other details.

Nor was Prince Vijay alone. Although the *Mahāvamsa* Chronicle portrays him as the first and only Indian colonist to arrive in early Sri Lanka, it is more than likely that he was but one (albeit the most successful one) of a number of immigrants.

8



SEABOURNE SETTLERS

“Then fill up the
glasses as quick as
you can, And sprinkle
the table with buttons
and bran: Put cats in
the coffee, and mice in
the tea – And welcome
Queen Alice with
thirty – times – three!”

Lewis Carroll

Vijay and his companions colonised the island from the north and west, moving inland along the banks of the Malvata Oya. Other seaborne settlers undoubtedly arrived on the east coast and followed the Mahaweli River inland.

Still others would have landed in the south, following other rivers inland to make settlements that would eventually coalesce into the (often semi) independent kingdom of Ruhana.

The advance of these migrants from the Indian sub-continent would have forced the preexisting tribes to retreat inland – and accept a new status bestowed on them by the migrants, who brought with them a steely sub-continent view on caste.

Nearly all Sinhalese castes derive in some form or another from here.

To survive, all new settlers would have had to quickly master the one force central to make a viable settlement: water.

Ensuring its plentiful supply in all these dry and semi dry zone areas was critical; and the early settlers focused on it almost immediately, cutting irrigation channels from its rivers to feed tanks and reservoirs, so crops, livestock and people could safely multiply.

This preoccupation with water established a premise for success that runs through the country's history, from the time of kings into the present day.

With these latest, modish migrants, Sri Lanka was set to bloom into a series of recognisable kingdoms, the greatest of which,

Anuradhapura, was to develop into a tropical Versailles – destined to become, for 1,500 years, the capital of the island state.

As the Dark Ages fell across the West and society there returned to wattle and daub, the kingdom's engineering, and architectural talents, was nurtured over centuries to endow Anuradhapura with an almost inexhaustible tally of spectacular new temples, pools, domes, parks, palaces, and dwellings; and the unsung utilitarian infrastructure that underpins all great cities.

Sewage pipes and stupas; graveyards and gardens; hospitals and hareems – all flourished together where once the ancestors of Balangoda Man had hunted down his elephants.



DISCOVER MORE

A small island surrounded by large oceans, Sri Lanka is a mystery to many: remote, hard to place; a well-kept secret. The Ceylon Press aims to make its complicated story more accessible.

Its history can be read in *A History of Sri Lanka*, or listened to as a podcast. *The Companion to Sri Lanka* makes visible more of the whole – from its arts to its history. The digital Museum of Sri Lanka aims to unite the island's artefacts – scattered around the world into a single exhibition. Its downloadable Books – the *I Spy*, *Pocket Professor* and *Tiny Guide* series – cover subjects from religion, belief, history, travel, nature, culture, to the arts, language, people, and place. Its podcast, *Poetry from the Jungle* presents the work of 80 poets to reset the literary canon. And in case it all gets too serious, it offers the off-grid *Jungle Diaries* blog, or as a Podcast. All these works are now in progress, added to weekly and available free on theceylonpress.com.