CONTRIBUTION TO THE LATE QUATERNARY STUDIES OF SRI LANKA: INITIAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE PLANT REMAINS FROM PREHISTORIC CAVE SITES AND LATER HISTORICAL SETTLEMENT SITES.

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This paper brings to light rich potentialities of Late Quaternary paleobotanical investigations in Sri Lanka with the help of a couple of examples on plant remains from archaeological sites. The first one deals with the evidence of floral remains from a Mesolithic cave site at Kithulgala (Beli-Lena), district Kegalle, in the sub-humid zone. On the basis of stratigraphical and radiocarbon assay, the site belongs to the Terminal Pleistocene and Early Holocene period. It has yielded carbonized remains of plants such as wild banana (Musa cf acuminata), wild breadfruit (Artocarpus cf nobilis), Carnarium zeylanicum. This constitutes an example of broad spectrum exploitation of natural resources in agreement with the archaeological and faunal data generated by the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka.

The second example deals with the study of Early Historical to Early Medieval plant remains from the site of Mantai, district Mannar in the northwestern dry parts of Sri Lanka. It is assignable to Late Holocene age and has yielded evidence for domestic plant species such as rice (Oryza cf Sativa), barley (Hordeum cf vulgare), great millet (Sorghum cf bicolor), Italiana millet ? (Setaria ? sp.), black gram (Vigna mungo), green gram (Vigna radiata), pepper type (Piper sp.). The wild component includes myrsinaceae, euphorbiaceae and papeveraceae types. This speaks for domesticatory exploitation of plants from Early Historical to Early Medieval times in the dry parts of Sri Lanka.

Similar work is expected to be carried out on Prehistoric sites like Batadomba-Lena, Alu Lena and protohistoric sites like Anuradhapura, Ibbankatuwa, etc. with a view point to trace Late Quaternary Phytogeographical and paleoenvironmental aspects of natural arboreal and cultivated flora in moist and dry parts of Sri Lanka respectively. A suggestion is being made here for initiating multidisciplinary research strategy involving Late Quaternary stratigraphical, paleobotanical and archaeological studies.