

**The fluvial and maritime trade centres of ancient Sri Lanka: Results of the explorations and excavations conducted by the French-Sri Lanka Archaeological Mission**

O. Bopearuchchi<sup>1</sup> and W. Wijayapala<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chargé de recherche French-Sri Lanka Archaeological Mission for Scientific Research, (C.N.R.S. Paris)

<sup>2</sup> Director of Excavations, Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka

The main aim of this paper is to present the results of our research on the organization of maritime trade connected with the ancient ports on the western and southern coasts of Sri Lanka and to discuss to what extent they throw light on the role played by both local and foreign maritime communities of the island, during different periods of its history. We have made an attempt in this paper to highlight the activities of some maritime communities whose existence, in relation to Sri Lanka, is relatively little-known.

The starting point of our investigations carried out by the Archaeological Department and the French Mission of Archaeological Co-operation in Sri Lanka was to explore the ports on the western and southern coasts of Sri Lanka and to trace the earliest phases of occupation of these sites. The necessity to launch such a program became a top priority because, apart from the limited or exploratory excavations conducted at Manthai, Kantarodai and Kuchchaveli, no other serious attempt to explore the ancient harbours of Sri Lanka was made until our initiative. The most important characteristic of all the ancient ports of the western and southern coast and many others around the island is their geographical situation at the estuaries or rivers. The location of emporia along rivers must have facilitated transactions with the interior regions. Similarly the following sea ports subjected to our investigations are all situated at the estuaries of rivers: Salavattota (Chilaw) at the Deduru-oya, Wattala at the Kelani-ganga, Kalalittha (Kalutara) at the Kalu-ganga, Bhimatittha (Bentota) at the Bentota-ganga, Gimhatittha (Gintota) at the Gin-ganga, Mahavalukagama (Weligama) at the Polwatta-ganga, Nilvalittha (Matara) at the Nilwala-ganga, and Gothapabbata (Godavaya) at the Walave-ganga.

The results we have obtained from our first explorations enable us to make two important observations. Firstly, the discovery of hinterland trading centres, associated with the rivers which have easy access to the sea, reflects one of the aspects of this maritime and inland trade. The concentration of both imports and exports, such as ceramics, beads and coins occur at points of trans-shipment or distribution. Secondly, archaeological material denoting clear commercial transactions, found at the river mouths and along the rivers, must have reached the western and southern coasts as a result of the maritime trade. So one cannot neglect the fact that the mariners as early as the 3rd century BC had some notions about the coastal navigation. Our attempt here is neither to underestimate the role played by Manthai, Sri Lanka's most important ancient port, nor to overestimate the importance of the sea ports in the western and southern coasts of the island. The mariners of Antiquity would not have certainly preferred to reach the east coast of India through the Mannar Pass, as long as it remained practicable. However purely indigenous or Indian crafts used equally on river or sea would have certainly reached the emporia along the rivers in the west and south coasts of the island in search of spices, precious stones and other commodities. The finding of both imported and local ceramics, beads, intaglios, coins, dating back at least to 3rd century before our era, in the river mouths and along the river banks, is the result of these extensive commercial activities of the island. The results we have so far obtained from our initial investigations oblige us to re-examine the question of maritime trade and communities of proto-historic and early historic Sri Lanka. They put most of the hypotheses, based solely on literary evidence, put forward by some eminent historians on the organization of trade activities in the island.