

Sri Lanka's fauna and flora as known to Greek and Latin authors

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This paper brings together and discusses the references to animals and plants which occur in the Greek and Roman notices of Sri Lanka. They include not only direct descriptions given with the object of entertaining the reader and satisfying his curiosity, but also indirect references gleaned from accounts of the island's products.

Greek and Roman notices of Sri Lanka are spread over a period of more than eight hundred years, ranging in date from the end of the fourth century B.C. to the middle of the sixth century A.D. Though often scrappy, derivative and lacking in precision, they are among the earliest foreign reports of the island and constitute an important witness to the prominence of the island with regard to the international maritime trade of those days. As historical sources, these notices supplement other writings, both local and foreign, as well as archaeological, epigraphical and numismatic evidence. They thus constitute without doubt a valuable complement to our picture of life on the island during the Early Anuradhapura Period. Sri Lanka was known to the Greeks and the Romans mainly by the name of Taprobanē.

The information about the animals should perhaps apply to India in general and not specifically to Taprobanē. There is here no genuine acquaintance with the island; poetic imagination and the demands of rhetoric have negated exploration and research; Taprobanē is once more relegated to a realm of myth and fantasy, which the Greeks, a thousand years before, had gone a long way towards establishing as a realistic geographical entity for the scientific curiosity of the Western world.

Whereas the Greek and Latin writers highlighted and sometimes even exaggerated the significance of the animals of Taprobanē, they largely neglected or under-estimated its plants. They speak in glowing terms of the unusual size of its elephants and turtles and of the renown of its ivory and tortoise-shell. But none of them even mentions its pepper and cinnamon. Their descriptions of the island's vegetation is mainly calculated to stress its providential climate. Even so this vegetation, no less than the awe-inspiring wild beasts, doubtless symbolized for them the island's blessed and bountiful existence.