

Ceramic ecology: The varying significance of imported ceramics in Sri Lankan sites

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During the past few decades, anthropologically oriented archaeologists have introduced the concept of *ceramic ecology*, the study and interpretation of the nature of an archaeological site and the specific find contexts within which trade ceramics are found. This approach has greatly enriched trade studies by providing additional information on the actors and end-users and on the varying mechanisms involved in the movement of foreign goods into and within a society. Such studies shift the focus beyond the art historical appreciation of the trade objects themselves and the identification of their precise locations of manufacture to the activities involved in the movement and use of the imported goods. This approach is not restricted to ceramics, but has been fruitfully used by various scholars in the study of numismatics, beads, glass and other trade items.

The archaeological port site of Mantai, a double moated 50ha mound just east of Mannar Island on the northwestern coast of Sri Lanka, has been excavated by seven expeditions during the past century. Most recently the site was explored by a joint excavation of the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago in 1980, 1982, and 1984. Following a prehistoric occupation during in the second millennium BC, Mantai served as the major port for Anuradhapura from about the time of Christ until the 11th century, with more limited evidence of foreign coins and a few trade items continuing until the 13th century.

Mantai lies about midway in the 10,000km journey between the Persian Gulf and South China. The ceramic remains from the limited recent excavations show slightly higher percentages of Near Eastern than Chinese imports, although none of the Near Eastern ceramics post date the 11th century. In contrast, a few pieces of Northern Celadons indicate a limited continuation of Chinese imports until the 13th century. Imported trade materials begin as early as the first century AD in the form of Mediterranean Sigillata and Indian Rouletted Ware, although the major evidence of imported materials are the Yue, Changsha and Guangdong ceramics of 9th and 10th century China, and contemporary Near Eastern ceramics and glass vessels, largely from the Persian Gulf.

Scrutiny of the changing pattern of Chinese imported ceramics at Mantai and ten other Sri Lankan sites with contemporary Chinese ceramics indicates a major change in the trade patterns. In the 8th-11th centuries the density of imports indicates that Mantai functioned as a trans-shipment center or entrepot in the long distance trade between the Near East and China. So far, the available evidence indicates that Mantai was the single major trans-shipment locality of the Anuradhapura Period. However, Mantai also acted as the gateway to the interior for both imported and exported goods. The same 9th-11th century ceramic assemblages (but in much restricted numbers) have been reported from 4 other localities representing elite end-users in the palaces and monasteries of the capitals at Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa.

In comparison with Mantai, the 10 other sites with similar Chinese imported ceramics of the 9th to 14th centuries show a very different trade pattern by the 12th century. By then there is no single major transshipment center, but rather there appears to be a proliferation of small "sand dune" ports with remains of high value cargoes near Nilaveli, and at Allaippiddi, Vankalai and Galle Harbour. Beyond the ports, the very limited usage associations of these valuable imported ceramics were, like in the earlier period, restricted to royal and monastic contexts.

A few imported sherds in an elite domestic context or in the residential area of a royal monastery or even in the crypt of a stupa indicate very different things concerning the movement of goods than would large numbers of very similar sherds in the same localities -- or in the ports themselves. Imported ceramics and other materials at different sites do not necessarily all indicate the same aspect of trade. Most of the 11 sites with imported Chinese green wares of the 9th to 14th centuries are not emporia or trade centers. The site contexts must be carefully examined to determine whether we are seeing the evidence of the middlemen of a long distance or local trade in foreign goods, other causes of commodity movement, or only the remains left by the end-users themselves.