

# THE PREHISTORY AND PROTOHISTORY OF SRI LANKA<sup>1</sup>

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## **Transition to the Historical Period**

The Protohistoric Iron Age of Sri Lanka, at ca. 1,000-500 BC, is referred to as protohistoric since there is no evidence of writing in this period. At ca. 600-500 BC, the first appearance of writing (in Brāhmi almost identical to the Asokan script some 200 years later) heralds the commencement of the Early Historic period (Deraniyagala 1992:739-50; Coningham 1999: Deraniyagala and Abeyratne 2000). This writing, radiocarbon dated on charcoal from three locations in the Citadel of Anurādhapura and checked by thermoluminescence dating, is inscribed on potsherds apparently signifying ownership (Figs.14,15). Among the names was *Anuradh...* which, coincidentally or otherwise, is stated in the ancient chronicles to have been the name of a minister of Prince Vijaya, the purported founder leader of the Sinhalese, at ca. 500 BC.

The new chronology for the beginnings of writing has thus revolutionized our concept of the lower boundary of the historical period of South Asia (for

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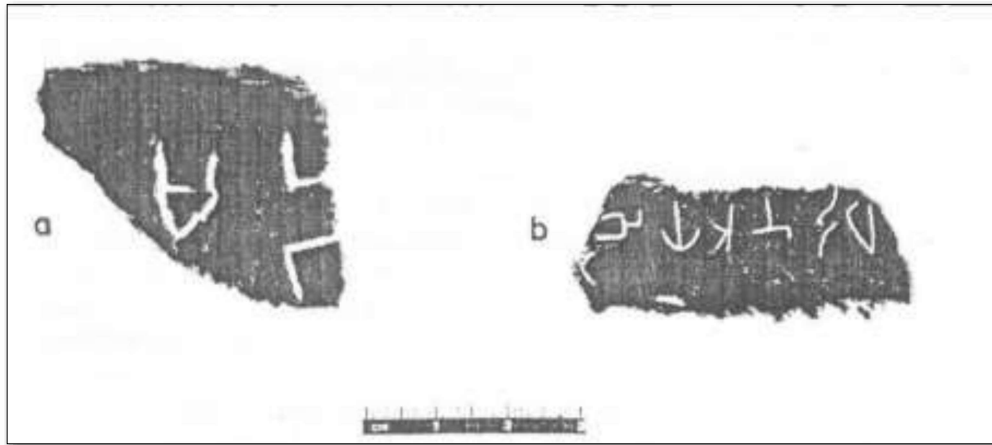
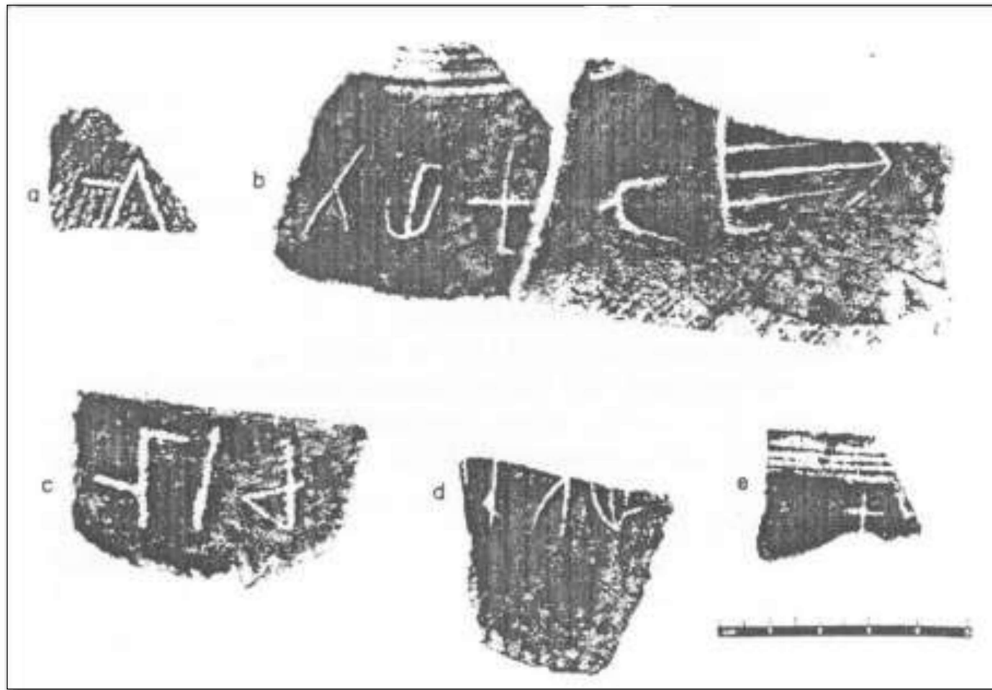
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revised periodization v. Deraniyagala 1992:714). It has pushed it back by at least two centuries, into the times of the Buddha. Coeval with the first appearance of writing at Anurādhapura is the rise of new pottery forms (such as Early Historic BRW) and wares (eg, medium-fine grey ware, possibly a North Indian import), red glass beads (for North India 600-400 BC v. Basa 1992:97) and what appear to be writing styluses made of bone<sup>41</sup> (Deraniyagala 1992:714). One suspects a pan-India wave of cultural impulses that manifested itself in these material transformations. It is possible that some long-distance migrations, as evinced in the legend of Prince Vijaya's arrival in Sri Lanka from North India, were concomitant to this phenomenon.

The earliest (600-500 BC) inscriptions on pottery at Anurādhapura, whenever adequately complete being linguistically diagnostic, are in Indo-European Prakrit. This situation is repeated in the earliest inscription found in Megalithic Kodumanal, and possibly in the lowermost levels of Arikamedu as well, in South India (ibid.:745-6; Casal 1949; Rajan 1990). (The Kodumanal inscription has not been dated (Rajan 2000:pers comm.) So far, none of them are in Dravidian. It appears to corroborate the view that Indo-European was predominant from at least as early as 500 BC in Sri Lanka, as affirmed in the chronicles concerning an Aryan impulse associated with Vijaya. The views of Parpola (1984; 1988; v. Deraniyagala 1992:749-8) are relevant in this regard. They are bold and provocative, and they merit serious consideration. He postulates long-distance southward migrations of ruling Indo-European elites at ca. 500 BC and argues his case well.

The prime mover for these impulses is difficult to isolate. The urban centers of the Ganges plains could well have constituted the nodes from which they went out, centrifugally, to be developed in the periphery and returned centripetally to those original nodes as a feedback phenomenon, thus creating a relatively closed interactive system. On the other hand, one cannot discount the possibility of inputs at the same time from West Asia, the Mediterranean and China. It is probable that this latter aspect has been greatly underestimated. The idea of devising the Brahmi script might have arisen through contact with Semitic trading scripts from West Asia (Deraniyagala 1992:744; note that long-distance trade (in spices?) could have occurred during the Protohistoric Iron Age extending into Southeast Asia and West Asia). Whatever the mechanism for the onset of urbanism in Sri Lanka, by 500 BC it was ready to accelerate into the Early Historic period.

By the time of Emperor Asoka in the third century BC, the city of Anurādhapura was nearly 100ha in extent (ibid.:712-3), making it (on present estimates) the tenth largest city in India/Sri Lanka at that time and the largest South of Ujjain in northern India (Allchin 1989:3,12). Buddhism had by then taken root as the formal belief system of the island, coinage introduced and the concept of irrigated agriculture, probably heralded during the Protohistoric Iron Age, developed into sophisticated and large-scale systems which served as the economic foundation of the correspondingly complex settlement configurations of the Early Historic period.



*Early Brahmi inscriptions on potsherds from Anuradhapura Citadel ASW-88(88):ca.600-500*

It is noteworthy that ceramics of Hellenistic origin and their local derivatives (perhaps the fabric of Rouletted Ware) appeared in Sri Lanka at this time, as they undoubtedly would have in India as well, the contacts between India and the Hellenistic culture sphere being historically an established fact. Somewhat later on, Roman influences became apparent, particularly during the latter phase of the Roman Empire, as amply attested by numerous finds of Roman coins in various

locations. The upper chronological boundary of the Early Historic period in Sri Lanka may be defined at ca. 300 AD, which historically saw the end of the Mahavamsa dynastic line which in turn appears to have coincided with the demise of the BRW ceramic tradition. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's socio-economic organization, based primarily on both the intensification and extensification of wet-rice cultivation in the Dry Zone, had acquired a full-fledged urban status by the first few centuries AD, perhaps much earlier (?250-0 BC), with a concomitant increase in social stratification (cf. Hole 1974:276). The optimization of the sub-system of Sinhalese culture would have conflicted with that of the hunter-gatherer Yakkas (Väddas) (cf. Henderson 1973:30) forcing the latter into a relict status. This has been maintained in partial symbiosis with the Sinhalese (Deraniyagala 1992:chap.6.3.6; cf. Barth 1956:1088). It appears probable that culturally the Vädda resistance to adopting an economy geared to food production was at least in part due to the ability of their effective environment to maintain a relatively high crude density of population (ca. 0.4 individuals per km; cf. Butzer 1971:583), whereas this same environment was not conducive towards the wet-rice cultivation that provided the basis of Sinhalese settlement (v. Sherratt 1972:512). It is significant that the Väddas were not in the least interested in adopting the simple domestication procedures used by the Sinhalese in noosing and taming wild buffaloes with their high potential for maintaining a pastoral economy. The effects of acculturation of the Väddas as a result of Sinhalese, and to a lesser degree Tamil, influences appear to have been primarily confined to the technological supersession of stone with iron. However, the degree of cultural and genetic identity that they have contrived to retain through the ages is quite remarkable (cf. Kadar), probably as a function of the acceptance of the group as part of a larger community – but not of the individual with any degree of intimacy – running very deep in Indian and Sri Lankan society (v. Leshnik 1973:68; Allchin and Allchin 1974:48).

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