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The periodization of Sri Lankan history and some related historical and archaeological problems

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The periodization of the history of the various regions of Asia is one of the basic but as yet unfinished tasks of modern historiography. In addressing ourselves to the problems of periodization, we are forced to confront major questions such as: what constitute the critical turning-points or transformations in the history of each country or region; or, how do we understand common patterns of regional or transregional development, on the one hand, and the distinctiveness or 'specificity' of the history of each individual country or unit, on the other.

The present paper has a purely internal focus. It is concerned essentially with the periodization of Sri Lankan history. Although Sri Lanka is a small and relatively marginal country in the Asian spectrum, its pattern of historical evolution holds a considerable degree of interest for comparative studies. From the beginnings of its recorded history in the latter half of the 1st millennium BC, the Sri Lankan civilization is marked by strong internal dynamics of development, combined with a continuing openness to external influence. These interactions are not only with the South Asian subcontinent, to whose broad matrix of cultures the Sri Lankan civilization clearly belongs, but also with regions to both east and west across the Indian Ocean, even as far afield as the Pacific and the Mediterranean.

Located at the southern extremity of the subcontinent and in the centre of the Indian Ocean, the island occupies a pivotal position on one of the major trans-oceanic highways of the pre-modern world. At the same time its historical evolution takes place within clearly defined geo-political boundaries —inherent in its island character — at an advanced level of

cultural development and with distinct patterns of continuity and change over a period of more than two millennia. As we might expect, the Sri Lankan historical trajectory is closely related to, and wholly affected by, broader patterns of change in Asia as a whole. It is surely not accidental that the beginnings of Sri Lanka's historical, iron-age civilization is more or less contemporary with the rise of the Mauryan empire in India or the Qin-Han era in China; that an important transitional horizon in the 6th/7th/8th centuries is coterminous with the rise of Islam in Western Asia, the beginnings of the great post-Gupta empires of the Ganges valley and peninsular India, and of the Tang dynasty in China; or, that Sri Lanka's post-classical period, from the 12th/13th centuries onwards, is paralleled by similar developments in Southeast Asia. While correlations such as these represent significant aspects in the comparative historiography of Asia, strikingly apparent to students of the subject, their investigation must inevitably be preceded by the study of internal periodization.

Paradoxically, the concept of the periodization of Sri Lankan history is both a familiar and an unfamiliar notion. There is a tendency in popular historical consciousness to view the history of the pre-16th century era in monolithic and undifferentiated terms, often subsumed under the rubric 'historical', or 'ancient and mediaeval', or, even more popularly, 'the time of the kings'. Even among specialists, the perception of historical development and change has often been confined to that necessary empirical foundation, the descriptive and critical reconstruction of historical facts. History has often been viewed as an unfolding narrative or a continuous stream, any one or more sections or aspects of which could be usefully and meaningfully studied from the point of view of reconstructing parts of the narrative. With some notable exceptions, the contemporary historiographical preoccupation has been with questions of identity, chronology, dynastic succession, and territorial and institutional form and variation — with the apprehension of historical phenomena rather than with the investigation of patterns of process. Of course, this has also entailed the formulation of some divisions of historical time: the notion of a 'pre-Vijayan' society, that is to say, a prehistory; a dramatic prelude to the historical epoch, the 'Vijayan migrations'; then, the dawn of history with the accession of Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BC) and the coming of the *arahat* Mahinda; a major division of the historical era into a 'Dry Zone period' — a period

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of brilliant achievement¹ — and a 'Wet Zone Period' — 'a period of decline',² and, finally, the concept of a modern or colonial era, consisting of Portuguese, Dutch, British and post-colonial phases. Terms such as 'Anuradhapura Period', 'Polonnaruwa Period', 'Dambadeniya Period', 'Gampola Period', 'Kotte Period', 'Kandy Period', 'Portuguese Period', 'Dutch Period', 'British Period', etc., derived from the principal centres of political power or the occupying colonial power at a given time, are part of a modern convention which has provided us with a ready frame of reference.

The incipient periodization that is expressed in these terms can be found in the work of most contemporary historians. In the main, the period divisions that are commonly employed by us are divisions that have been based on political factors — dynasties, capitals, administrative institutions and territorial divisions, foreign invasions and occupations, and so on. Archaeologists and other specialists have also studied developments in art and architecture and literature, epigraphical and palaeographical data; the growth and the decay of the irrigation system; changes in religion and religious institutions, and have, thereby enriched our knowledge of these various historical phases. Codrington's concept of a mediaeval era,³ Mendis' idea of a so-called 'North Indian' and 'South Indian' Period,⁴ and the five sections into which the *University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon* divides the history of Sri Lanka from its early beginnings to AD 1505, have been derived from such considerations. One of the first attempts by an archaeologist to use changes in material factors as the basis for a division of the Early and Middle Historical period into successive phases was that put forward by Hocart.⁶

A periodization, however, is much more than merely a division of time into convenient historical phases, whose various characteristics are then descriptively enumerated. It involves a theoretical formulation, a concept of historical motion. It is an attempt at a systematic and comprehensive demarcation of successive stages of historical development. These stages or phases would be marked by distinctive social, economic, political and cultural interrelations and by major and minor transitions or transformations. These transitions, while being part of a continual process of change, are seen to be critical periods in history, where profound structural changes are brought about in the character and organization of society. To us, looking at them from a historical distance,

they would appear as sharp changes of direction or watersheds between one distinctive way of life and another. Thus, the society which existed before such a transformation and that which comes into being as a result of it are not merely quantitatively but qualitatively different. To the archaeologist, whose attention is concentrated on material remains and observable environmental changes brought about by man, the appearance or disappearance of characteristic phenomena in a dramatic or concentrated form is often observable in such periods of transformation. The problem posed by such a periodization is the task of locating such transformations, studying their processes, sources and agencies and characterizing the social formations that emerge from them: its fullest implications are the plotting of the paths and dynamics of historical change.

The attempt here, of course, has a much more limited scope. It merely puts forward some preliminary suggestions towards the construction of such a periodization for the history of Sri Lanka. As both a point of departure and a summary of the main proposition of this paper, the chart presented below is a systematization of the existing chronological divisions — in a more comprehensive form, one might venture to say, than has been offered previously — as well as an attempt to move some way toward developing these divisions into an actual periodization. 'The notion of a 'Proto-Historic-Early-Historic' (PHEH) transition, of Early, Middle and Late Historical periods, the subdivisions or phases numbered in the third column, marking significant steps in historical evolution, and the broad — and tentative — social characterization contained in the fourth column, are important aspects of this attempt.

The validity of such a proposal can only be established — or revised, or invalidated — by on-going theoretical and empirical research. What can be offered here is only a series of tentative proposals, or at best, a working hypothesis. The most important aspects of this are the attempts to locate the major transformations and transitions that took place in the history of Sri Lanka and to characterize the distinctive social formations that emerged from each of these major instances of historical change. We may list these transformations as follows:

- (1) The transformation from a primitive, stone-tool using, hunting and foraging society to a society that was based on food production, either followed or accompanied by village settlement.
- (2) The transformation from a socially undifferentiated or pre-class