

***The Settlement patterns of the Protohistoric-Early
Historic interface in Sri Lanka***

p. 15-23

in

South Asian Archaeology 1989

***Jarrige, Catherine. ed.
Wisconsin: Prehistory Press***

1992

***Monographs in World Archaeology No. 14
10th International Conference of South Asian
Archaeologists in Western Europe***

(3-7 July, 1989: Paris)

The Settlement Patterns of the Protohistoric–Early Historic Interface in Sri Lanka

Senake Bandaranayake

One of the significant features of Sri Lanka's historical trajectory, distinguishing it from the developmental patterns of subcontinental South Asia as a whole, is its relatively late and extremely rapid transition from stone-age hunting and gathering to advanced, and literate, agrarian civilization. This transformation appears to have taken place—as far as we can see today—more or less within the boundaries of the first millennium B.C. What we seem to have is some kind of historical leap, a society moving very fast and by-passing many of the complex stages of technological and social development that are found, for instance, in the protohistoric cultures of the Indus or the Ganges, or in the developed regions of the Deccan.

At the beginning of the first millennium B.C., many areas of Sri Lanka—from the coastal plains to the high plateaux—were occupied by hunter-gatherers, using a sophisticated microlithic technology, whose origins are now firmly dated to a surprisingly early period, predating the Pleistocene-Holocene boundary by more than 10,000 years (Deraniyagala 1988).

If that was the situation around the beginning of the first millennium, before the end of that millennium most parts of the island had advanced dramatically into the full light of written history. We find a centralized state, bringing the entire country under its purview; a major religious tradition, Buddhism, as a unifying ideology; and a general level of development matching that of the advanced cultures of the subcontinent.

In a problematic sense, this phenomenon—taking place within the confines of a small but clearly defined island territory of some 25,000 square miles—would appear to provide an ideal focus for the study of 'historical dynamics' in the early South Asian Iron Age. What is almost as remarkable as the phenomenon itself is the fact that hitherto it has not attracted the attention of archaeologists to any great extent.

Only in recent years have Sri Lankan archaeologists placed the investigation of the country's relatively brief protohistoric period as an important item on the agenda of national research. This research, I must emphasize, is still at a very early and inconclusive stage. Unlike the subcontinent, we know almost nothing about the transitions and transformations of this period in Sri Lanka. The rapid transformation that ushers in the historical epoch has been hitherto explained—or explained away—by the ready acceptance of the traditional model put forward more than fifteen hundred years ago by the ancient Sri Lankan chronicles—themselves a unique phenomenon in the South Asian context. The 'migration hypothesis' contained in the well-known Vijaya legend has so far found general acceptance among contemporary historians and archaeologists both at home and abroad. It describes the peopling, settlement, and acculturation of the island by migrants, or a migrant elite, speaking an Indo-Aryan dialect or dialects, and coming from the northwestern or northeastern regions of the subcontinent. "Thus, the general view is that a society of advanced, socially-differentiated, literate, iron-using