



## OBSTETRICS AND THEORIES OF REPRODUCTION IN ANCIENT AND EARLY MEDIEVAL SRI LANKA\*

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Even though both literary testimony and archaeological evidence point to the high priority assigned to the provision of medical care in the civilization which evolved and flourished for more than a millennium in the "Dry Zone" of Sri Lanka, historians have paid only scant attention to the task of assessing the progress made in medical sciences in this civilization. The nature of the available source material on the subject, which is limited as well as scattered and presents formidable problems of interpretation, is obviously a noteworthy factor which has deterred progress in this field of investigation. However, this does not by itself explain the limited interest shown by scholars in a field which is as significant as it is interesting. Of the two main contributions on the subject, the pioneer work of the late Professor S. Paranavitana is the more noteworthy. In a paper entitled "Medicine and Hygiene as Practised in Ancient Ceylon," published in 1953, he brought together data from inscriptions and archaeological remains.<sup>1</sup> In his *Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times*, written much earlier than Paranavitana's paper but published only in 1960, Wilhelm Geiger utilized material elicited from the Pāli chronicles to give a short account of what he termed "Medical Science and Medical Art" as practised in precolonial Sri Lanka.<sup>2</sup> The task of ascertaining the levels attained in the field of medicine and in the allied branches of knowledge on the basis of systematically collected data and with the aid of comparative material from other civilizations remains yet a desideratum of historical scholarship in Sri Lanka. The present paper is only an initial attempt, admittedly limited in its scope, towards the accomplishment of this task.

The *veja* or the medical practitioner was one of the earliest specialists in Sri Lankan society. The term *veja* and its Pāli equivalent *vejja* were used to denote physicians, surgeons as well as veterinarians. The term *veja* occurs in two inscriptions found in the Puttalam and the Hambantota Districts written in the early form of the Brāhmī script and datable in a time between the third and the first century B. C.<sup>3</sup> By the fourth century A. D. the provision

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1. S. Paranavitana, "Medicine and Hygiene as Practised in Ancient Ceylon," *The Ceylon Historical Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1953, pp. 123-35.
2. Wilhelm Geiger, *Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times*, ed. Heinz Bechert, Wiesbaden 1960, pp. 76-8. Professor A. Sinnatamby published the first part of what would have been a third contribution on the subject. ("History of Medicine in Ceylon - Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Ceylon in the 16th Century," *Transactions of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of Peradeniya*, Vol. I, No. 1, November 1966, pp. 1-4). The rest of the paper does not seem to have been published.
3. S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, Colombo, 1970, Vol. I, pp. 51, 83, 98.