

The Contents and the Historicity of the Sinhala Hatana Poetical Works

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A genre of Sinhala poetic literature – the eulogy (prasasti) that burgeoned During the middle of the fifteenth century exemplified by the Parakumba Sirita (composed in praise of the King Parakramabahu VI) with scanty references to achievements in the field of war transformed itself to yet another – the Hatanna ('battle'), the works of which supply relatively a greater proportion of historical information including the achievements of the fighting forces. They pertain to an era of Sri Lankan history when island was assailed, if partly at first, by the better armed fighting units of the three European nations, one after the other, for a continuous three centuries – the longest period of such travail undergone by any nation that came under their sway. The theme of these literary works has been the description of the victorious battles that the native forces fought against these invaders and their mercenaries. The information supplied by them is unobtainable from any other source, local or foreign, and it may also be emphasized that that record is contemporary and some of it, at least, first-hand.

These works, however do not deal directly with the acts of cruelty and oppression perpetrated on the native population specially by the Portuguese (which incidentally are sketched out by their own contemporary writers) but focus mainly on the battle expeditions and the exploits by the local fighting forces and their victories under tremendous set-backs. There is also one Hatana work that eulogises the invader and extols his exploits.

The earliest of these works (numbering about 10 in all) pertains to the reign of the heroic monarch Rajasinghe I (1581-91) who has been in the field of battle from his sixteenth year. Nevertheless, this extols the prowess of his general, and not the king himself. The last of such importance refers to the defeat of the English in Kandy nearly 225 years later in 1803.

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