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Literature evidence of the gem industry in ancient Sri Lanka

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Gems are a very important mineral resource in Sri Lanka. According to the chronicles, Sri Lanka's gem industry has a very long history. It is one of the oldest industries of Sri Lanka which continues to make a major contribution to the Sri Lankan economy. In ancient times, Sri Lanka was known as the "Ratnadeepa" (the island of gems). There is much evidence available on the ancient Sri Lankan gem industry and they are found in the chronicles and records of monks, tourists, explorers, historians and others.

The major objective of this research was to find the age of the Sri Lankan gem industry. The methodology consisted of reference to the literature on gem industry, visits to museums and archaeological sites and personal communication with experts. The first record on Sri Lankan gem industry is found in the Mahawansa (Chapter 1:46). According to that in the 5th century BCE, the Buddha (625-545 BCE) arrived in Sri Lanka to settle a battle between two Naga Kings, Chulodara and Mahodara for a gem-studded throne. Also in the 5th century BCE, King Vijaya sent annually a lot of valuable pearls to his wife's father, the Southern Madura king (Mahawansa Chapter 7:73). King Devanampiyatissa who ruled Sri Lanka in 250 BCE sent three types of beautiful gems and eight types of pearls to King Asoka of India as a gift (Mahawansa Chapter 11:22). King Parakramabahu 1 who ruled in 1153-1186 A.D. sent gems and pearls to foreign countries by ships for trade purposes (Mahawansa Chap 69:33). Apart from the Mahawansa, there are many records on Sri Lankan gem industry found in other chronicles too.

According to the information gathered, the gem industry of Sri Lanka has a very long history and it can be assumed that it is more than 2, 500 years old. It is clear that unlike most other industries royal patronage and government involvement were directly focused on the gem industry. Like today even in ancient times gems were a major export product of the country and Sri Lanka was very popular among foreigners for beautiful gems.

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