

FOREIGN TRADE RELATIONS IN SRI LANKA IN THE ANCIENT PERIOD: WITH SPECIAL REFERECE TO THE PERIOD FROM 6TH CENTURY B.C TO 16TH CENTURY A.D

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Foreign trade is one of the prominent feature of Sri Lankan economy from the ancient times. According to some views ancient Ceylon was inhabited by foreign traders who arrived the country from neighboring countries. According to the chronicles, Ceylon had been populated from the 6th Century B. C. The maritime trade of the Indian Ocean can be traced back to the dawn of civilization when as early as the third millennium B. C., the Harppan merchants of India traded with Mesopotamia through the ports of the Persian Gulf. Up to the time of 8th century A. D. foreign trade activities in the Indian Ocean were carried out by various nations such as Persians, Ethiopians and Chinese and many others. After the 8th century B. C. most trade activities were conducted by Muslim trades in various Islamic Countries. Sri Lanka had been the central point for all these traders. It is apparent that Sri Lanka has engaged in trade with many countries from the ancient times. It includes Greece, Rome, Persia, India, South-East Asian countries and with China, the farthest country towards the east. Accordingly, Sri Lanka had been treated as the main land mark for foreign trade in the Indian Ocean. From ancient times Sri Lanka had been treated as the main meeting point of the traders bringing their goods from the East and the traders coming from the west though Persian bay and Red Sea. The main objective of this research is to investigate the factors contributed become Sri Lanka a popular trading center in international trade activities during the prescribed period under consideration. Primary and secondary sources including information from chronicles, inscriptions and archeological remains were adapted along with foreign documentation and reports. Geographical location of Sri Lanka has substantiated the possibility of maintaining trade relations with foreign countries. As the sea routes towards the east and west were located through Sri Lankan sea, this island had become a popular sea-halt on foreign voyages. Sri Lanka had become so popular among international traders because of the fact that there were several harbors located around the island that can be anchored any vessels. The importance of harbors situated in Sri Lanka had subjected to remarkable charges from time. However the significance of every harbor has remained unchanged at all times. The main harbor during the Anuradhapura period was *Mahathiththa*. It existed up to the 14th century. When Mahathiththa become out of use, the other harbors in the southern and western part of the island become prominent. According to the sources reveals another important factor is that Sri Lanka is situated very close to India. Another fact the foreign traders attracted towards this small island is that the enrichment of the country with many valuable natural resources such as pearls, gems, elephants, ivory, and spices namely cinnamon, pepper, clove including many other varieties which were high demand in international trade.

Keywords: Ancient period, Foreign trade, Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

During much of Ceylonese history, the country had a firm agrarian economy, enjoyed complete political and economic independence and possessed a distinct sense of national awareness and national pride. From as far back as the 6th Century B.C., Ceylon had been engaged in foreign trade. Although foreign trade is a very important factor in the economy presently, it was not a key factor during the very early period.

Ceylon's location in close proximity to the Indian Subcontinent and across the path of the main trade routes of the Indian Ocean was its principal advantage which ensured that the Island became an important link in the maritime network of the Indian Ocean from very early times. Greek writer Cosmas mentions that Ceylon was the main trade market of the world during the 6th Century A.D. For Cosmas, Sielediba was the 'Great Emporium' which was connected by seaways with trading marts 'all over the world'. More specifically, he states that goods from Sindu, Male, Kalliana and other ports in India as well as from China, Persia, Adule and Ethiopia were brought there and then redistributed. While ships from different places were regularly visiting Ceylon for its native products, they also came in quest of goods from other countries, brought in specifically for re-export. The islanders also sent many of their own ships to foreign ports. This trading scene of the Sixth Century that Cosmas records reflects the importance that the Island had achieved as an *entrepot* amidst a vast network of trade routes in the Indian Ocean, a development that he attributed to its 'central location' in that ocean (Gunawardana, 2003: 24).

The Influence of the Geographical Situation of Ceylon on Foreign Trade

Ceylon occupies a strategic position in the Indian Ocean between East and West, located close to the sea routes that connect the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds with East Asia (Liyangamage, 2000: 1). The other geographical factor is that Ceylon is situated very close to the Indian mainland. The Island is separated from its neighbor by a shallow stretch of sea called the Palk Strait, which is just twenty-two miles wide at its narrowest point. There were numerous bays and anchorages dotted along the coastline of Ceylon, capable of providing adequate protection and facilities for ships. The wind pattern of the Indian Ocean was such that vessels sailing from the West had to necessarily anchor on either the West Coast of India or Ceylon. To proceed further East, a different wind direction was needed and therefore for the ships from the West, the harbours of these two coasts were the journey's end for them. It so happened that one of the attractions of Ceylonese ports was that they offered greater protection to ships than the ports of Western India (Kiribamune, 2000: 436). These factors undoubtedly exerted a profound influence on the course of Ceylon history as a whole, one result of which was that the Island's international commercial importance increased.

Ports of Sri Lanka

A number of harbours were situated along the coastline of Ceylon. When compared with the other harbours of the world, it could be observed that at different periods of history, at least one out of the many Ceylonese harbours had held an important position. Foreigners paid much attention to Ceylon especially because of the ports. The sea port identified as being the most prominent over a long period of history is Mahatittha. It had been the leading sea port from the 6th Century B.C. to the 12th Century A.D. A large number of artifacts of foreign origin including coins and porcelain ware have been excavated at Mahatittha by different groups of archaeologists (Siriweera, 2003: 121). The archeological evidence seems to come out very strongly in favour of a trade emporium (Gunawardana, 2003: 27; Kiribamune, 2000: 435-451; Perera, 1951: 111-113).

In the Jaffna Peninsula too there was an important port called Jambukolapattana which can be identified with the modern Kankesenturai. It is not mentioned as a port that served maritime commercial activities but was widely used as a port of embarkation and landing for travellers in the Anuradhapura

period. Its importance is attested to by the fact that there was a high road connecting Jambukolapattana to the capital City of Anuradhapura (Perera, 1951: 109,110). The port in the Jaffna Peninsula, Uratota (now known as Kayts) attained importance as a port of maritime commercial activity, especially during the time of the Polonnaruwa kings. The Nainativu Tamil inscription dated to the reign of Parakramabahu I suggests that foreign vessels laden with merchandise arrived at the port of Uraturai. This inscription, besides proclaiming that foreign traders should be given due protection, contains regulations detailing how to deal with ships that had been wrecked after bringing in merchandise (Indrapala, 1963: 70).

Gokanna port which was situated close to the present Trincomalee port held an important position in the annals of sea travel from the 6th Century B.C. but it developed as a commercial port only after the 7th Century A.D. As a large volume of Western and Eastern commercial dealings were successfully carried out in the Eastern seaboard by the Bay of Bengal, Gokanna harbour assumed a special position in international trade affairs (Siriweera, 2002: 297). Godapavatha was an important harbour during the Anuradhapura period. In an inscription from the period of Gajabahu I (114-136 A.D.) found at Godavaya near the mouth of the Walawe Ganga, it is mentioned that the customs duties collected at the port there were dedicated to the Godapavatha Vihara (Paranavitana, 1983: 101).

The ports of the South and South Western coast became important in international commerce only after the political centers drifted to the South-Western region of the Island. One of the natural ports in the South, Galle had gained prominence by around the middle of the 13th Century. It was an important port of call and rendezvous for Chinese and Arabian ships which navigated the Indian Ocean. Galle appears to have been a point of embarkation for travellers to China and the countries of the Far East (Perera, 1951: 116). The port of Weligama too had come into prominence from the 12th Century A. D. It was first mentioned in the Mahavamsa in the passages referring to the origin of King Parakramabahu I, as a port city where rich merchants lived (Mv., LXXV: 45). The Kalyani inscriptions state that a ship sent by the Burmese King to Sri Lanka arrived at Weligama (Buddhadatta, 1924: 23). From the various descriptions given in the Sandesa Poems we may infer that this was an important port during the Kotte period and that among its exports were gems and elephants (Perera, 1951: 118). Beruwala was another important commercial port in the South. It was a busy settlement of Muslim merchants who owned many beautiful mansions and large permanent shops (Thisara Sandesa, v. 76; Gira Sandesa, v. 104). In the Fourteenth Century, John De Marignolli arrived by ship at the port of *Perivils* in Sri Lanka on his way to China. According to many scholars *Perivils* was the present port of Beruwala (Siriweera, 2003: 123).

Colombo, Halawatha or Chilaw, Wattala, Negombo and Panadura were also important landing places from the 13th Century onwards. Colombo is the largest as well as most important port of the country today. As per Nicholas (1959: 121), the City of Colombo was largely inhabited by Muslims. Their presence there can be traced as far back as the 10th Century A.D. According to Ibn Batuta, Colombo was the greatest city of Serendib. Further, according to him it was controlled by a certain 'Jalasti' who had five hundred Abyssinians working under him. Batuta describes the Jalasti as a 'prince of the sea' which indicates that Jalasti had been actively engaged in foreign trade (Batuta, 1953: 223-224). Colombo was the main port of the country when the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka at the beginning of 16th Century (Siriweera, 2003: 117-125; Perera, 1951: 109-119).

Ceylon Becomes Prominent for Exporting Goods

History has recorded that there was a great demand from other countries for the rare types of commercial items that were produced, harvested or mined in Ceylon. Those coveted products were several varieties of Spices, Gems, Pearls, Ivory, Elephants, Chanks, Turtle Shells and Cloth. There is more information in foreign publications about the gems of Ceylon than in the local records. Many of these documents had noted that no other country in the world possessed such a wide variety of precious stones (Tennent, 2006: 448, 541, 542, 567, 573, 574; Marco Polo, 1958: 231; Sastri, 1939: 296,302). One of the nations that began to trade with Ceylon from the earliest times was Arabia, which identified the country as 'Jazirat ul Yaqut' or the 'Island of Rubies' (Shukri, 2000: 35). Ceylon was famous for sapphires and pearls as well.

According to Mahavamsa, eight varieties of pearls were miraculously found on the seashore on the day of Devanampiyatissa's accession to the throne of Anuradhapura (Mv., XI: 14,15). There are many foreign references to the pearls of Ceylon. Among them Marco Polo's description mentions as follows: "Pearls found in the Gulf of Mannar are round and illustrious," "beyond computation" and "are sought after all over the world" (Marco Polo, 1958: 233,234). According to Megasthenes, Ceylon exported elephants to India as early as the 3rd Century B.C. He said that elephants from the island were more powerful than those of the mainland; they were larger in size and could be pronounced as being more intelligent in all aspects. The islanders shipped them to the neighbouring mainland in boats that were constructed expressly for this traffic with timber felled from the forests of the island; they mostly disposed of their cargoes to the King of Kalinga (Sastri, 1939: 42). The elephant trade had been conducted from ancient times till the end of the 15th Century A.D., under the authority of the king. Various spices such as cardamom were exported from early times, but cinnamon came to play an important role only from the medieval period. Aja Ib al Hind or the 'Wonders of India' written in the Tenth Century by Buzurg b. Shariyar makes perhaps the earliest foreign reference to cinnamon as a product of Ceylon (Siriweera, 2003: 120). Ibn Batuta stated in the 14th Century that people from Malabar took away cinnamon from the island by gifting cloth to the king (Batuta, 1953: 217). All these luxury commodities that were exported were used by eminent and esteemed people around the world. Besides these, basic products such as ropes and timber which were necessary for many purposes were also exported to other lands. A wide variety of timber used for making the framework of hulls, planking, masts, spars and oars of boats and ships was available in Ceylon, particularly in the South Western part of the Island (Sastri, 1939: 303). Cordage was made out of fibers extracted from coconut husks and from the creepers and barks of trees. Coconut oil was perhaps another product that was in demand at the ports. The ropes used to tie up the planking had to be oiled regularly (Gunawardhana, 2003: 23; Sastri, 1939: 303). All these raw materials were important for the foreign naval and merchant ships apart from being valuable trade items.

Imported Goods

From the earliest periods, the inhabitants of Ceylon imported essential goods as well as luxury items. The main imported item were horses from India and Persia. Sena and Guttika who invaded this country during the 2nd Century B.C. were the sons of a horse dealer from South India who used to export horses to Ceylon (Mv., XXI, 10). Although horses were not an endemic animal to Ceylon, they were used for carrying people, pulling carriages and other purposes during those days. Horses were included in the four-pronged armies of the ancient kings of Ceylon.

Various types of goods were imported from China during the early period including gold, silver, and copper coins, coloured satin material, coloured silk gauzes and white porcelain ware (Sastri, 1939: 296). Chinese ceramics have been found in various parts of the island at archaeological excavation sites. Earthenware items appear to have been imported from China from the 1st Century A.D. upto the 15th Century A.D. During the 1st Century A.D. earthenware items had been imported from countries like Greece, Rome and from the Middle Eastern countries (Siriweera, 2002: 297). Perfumes and wines were treated as luxury items and were imported from India and Persia. Camphor and sandalwood were imported from India and South East Asian countries. Luxury textiles such as silk held a special position among the important items. Textiles had been imported from various countries like India, China and Burma (Siriweera, 2003: 120,121). All of the luxury commodities were intended mainly for the use of royalty and nobles.

Ceylon Based Sea Routes

Ceylon proved to be an embarkation hub for voyages to the East and West for foreign traders. This status was achieved due to the favourable influence of the regional wind pattern of the Indian Ocean. Monsoon

winds of the Persian Bay would not favour ships for voyages beyond Sumatra at the most. Ships had to stop to replenish supplies at the harbours of India or Ceylon. There were two main sea routes which connected the East and West. One of these sea routes ran from China to Europe across the Pacific Ocean. The other sea route from Europe passed through the Persian Bay and the Red Sea. Ships sailed from Ceylon along the Western coast of India, then across the Persian Bay upto Basra passing Muscat, Oman and from there to Constantinople. They proceeded from there to Baghdad and Levant. An alternative sea route led to Venice and Genoa from Constantinople, passing through Jerusalem, Damascus, Anatolia and Alexandria after sailing across Socotra, Aden and the Red Sea passing the outfall of Persian Bay, then following the West Indian Coast to Ceylon. These are the two main sea routes linking the West and the East. Ceylon also holds a special position in travels towards the East. According to Pliny, Strabo and *Periplus of the Erythrian Sea*, Ceylon played an active and significant role in East-West trade by the 1st Century A.D. (Ponnampereuma, 1961: 44,45). Various sea routes had been used in travelling to the East from Ceylon all the way to China. Starting from Thamralipthi Port of Bengal, they passed along the Coromandel Coast, then the Eastern Coast of Ceylon. From there they sailed East, went through the Malacca Strait and eventually reached Canton port in China. The descriptions of the travelling Buddhist Monk Fa-Hien or Fahien mention that the trade ships had used this sea route during the Fifth Century A.D. Fa-Hien came to Sri Lanka on board a large trading ship from Thamralipthi after spending many days at sea. On his return journey he had boarded a trade ship sailing with 200 people from Ceylon and travelled eastward spending 90 days at sea. Then he landed at Ye-Po-Ti (Java or Sumatra) after passing through the Malacca Strait. There he had boarded another trade ship and returned to China (Beal, 1957: 51-54). Ships sailed from Ceylon to China using other routes too. They used to follow the Coromandel coast, coastline of the Bay of Bengal, Myanmar Coast, Malacca Strait and sail to Hanoi; from there they reached the Canton Port in China. Descriptions of the sea routes are given in the official chronicle of the Han dynasty of Western China, named the Book of Han (Han Shu) (206 B.C.–23 A.D.). According to Han Shu, the sea route from Ceylon to China appears to have been along the Coromandel Coast, following the coastline of the Bay of Bengal, Burmese Coast, through the Straits of Malacca and along the Vietnam Coast on to Canton. During the period of Monsoon winds ships sailed directly from Ceylon to the Malacca Strait without any difficulty.

There was an alternative route in which the ships avoided the Coromandel Coast, the Bay of Bengal and Burma. These ships took the route through the Malacca Strait along Ho-Ling, Dvarawathi, and Punan Kingdom up to Canton port (Siriweera, 2004: 229). Ships arriving from China used to stop over in Nicobar Islands after passing through the Malacca strait (Siriweera, 1983: 9). Ceylon held a special position as a transit point when travelling towards the East. According to Pliny, Strabo and Periplus, many ships were plying the South Asian Sea engaged actively in trade between the East and West by the 1st Century A.D. with Ceylon playing a significant role (Ponnampereuma, 1961: 32,38,44).

Trade Relationship Between India and Ceylon

Trade activities between these two countries had been carried on from very ancient times. Such trade relationships had existed even during the 6th Century B.C. when Ceylon became an Aryan colony. This information has been recorded in the chronicles, Fa-Hien's records and Jataka stories etc. (Pujavaliya, 2005: 206; Jatakas, vol. II: 196; Divyavardana, 532). There were two aspects to the trade transactions between the two countries. Firstly, there was the bartering of required items between the countries and secondly the selling of Ceylonese products to foreign merchants by Indian traders at their beach bazaars. This was so because at that time Ceylon had trade relations only with South India. This state of affairs becomes evident after a study of Greek and Roman trade records and history. Greek and Roman literature indicate that in the earlier phase of Rome's trade with the Orient, they did not visit Ceylon but were content to buy the country's wares at the South Indian ports. This situation changed in the 5th Century when Indian ships came to Ceylon to sell their goods to Persian merchants. During the period from the 11th Century to the 13th Century, the Indian Community had established trade centers in this country and

were carrying out trade transactions. Such communities were identified as Ainnurruvar, Nanadesi, Valahciyar and Cetti. Inscriptions show that they conducted their trade activities in Ceylon at the locations named as Vahalkada, Viharahinna, Padaviya and Dambulla (Pathmanathan, 2000: 492-497). During the Kotte reign Indian traders had pursued their commercial activities while residing in towns close to the sea ports of Ceylon (Paravi, 108; Gira, 104; Kokila, 57, 59, 93).

Trade Relationship with China

Ceylon had also maintained trade relations with China, the most distant country in the East. According to the Han literature, trade relationships between the two countries had existed from as far back as the 1st Century A.D. (Urugodawatta, 2012: 168,169). Fa-Hien too reveals through his writings that trade ships sailed from Ceylon to China (Beal, 1957: 51-54). According to Chinese chronicles the sea route from Ceylon to China appears to have been along the Coromandel coast, Bay of Bengal, Burmese coast, then through the Straits of Malacca and along the Vietnam coast to Canton (Werake, 2003: 213). Various types of ceramics imported from China had been discovered during excavations at different places according to archeological sources. The oldest clay ceramic artifacts discovered at these excavations are said to have been made in the 7th Century A.D. The earliest wares dug up at Mantai were products of the Tang dynasty (610-907). These include a variety of ceramics such as stoneware (brown, cream, or white and green coloured), Yueh ware (grey bodied), Dusun type storage jars, Chang-sha stoneware and black glazed ware. Among the finds, the whiteware shards painted with amber-brown and blue lead glaze are considered to be the earliest. The shards came from broken ewers and bowls (Prematilleke, 2003: 225).

The monastery complexes of Abhayagiri and Jetavanarama in Anuradhapura, the Alahana Pirivena at Polonnaruwa and those at Sigiriya and Kandy have yielded a large mass of Chinese ceramics (Prematilleke, 2003: 226). The Alahana Pirivena monastery complex has returned the largest number of Chinese ceramics originating from the Sung Dynasty (960-1279). Four intact vessels, a Green-yellow glazed greyware jar, a Whiteware dish, a small Whiteware jar and an Olive-green decorated bowl were also discovered from the site (Prematilleke, 2003: 225). Three bowls collected from Yapahuwa, two Whiteware and one Celadon ware, were products of the 13th Century era, which were probably made during the last phase of the Southern Sung period (Prematilleke, 2003: 227). In the early 15th Century Unlo, the 3rd Emperor of the Ming dynasty sent a commander named Chen-Ho to survey China's trade affairs in the Indian Ocean. Chen-Ho had visited Ceylon during his journey with the intention of establishing trade relationships with the country. It is confirmed by the Tri-Lingual (Chinese, Persian and Tamil) slab inscription installed in Galle (EZ., vol. III:331-341). The Chinese translator Ma-huan who accompanied Chen-Ho had mentioned that many items of porcelain ware had been brought to Ceylon and that the first preference of the inhabitants were blue pocelain dishes as they were very fond of that colour (Levi, 1917: 109).

Relationships with South-East Asian Countries

Beginning from the Anuradhapura era, Ceylon had maintained religious (Buddhist) and cultural relationships with South-East Asian countries (Ilangasinghe, 1987: 171-186). But there are only a few facts revealed regarding the commercial relations (Ranawella, 2014: 168-169). But apart from the above, Ceylon had maintained commercial relations with other South-East Asian countries, namely Ramaghghaya (Burma), Siam (Thailand), and Cambodia. The relationships mainly developed with those countries because the ships sailing there from the Western countries used to anchor in the harbours of Ceylon on their long voyages. International trade activities had promoted the development of cultural relationships with other countries. The sea route used by Fa-Hien to travel from China to India via Ceylon could be seen as an example (Beal, 1957: 51-54). From the 6th Century onwards Ceylonese rulers paid more attention to the Eastern ports of the country mainly because the trading ships from the East Asian countries arrived there after crossing the Bay of Bengal, laden with goods from the trade centers of those

countries (Kiribamune, 2000: 451). Likewise, the traders who arrived from the West came to Mahathittha and from there travelled along the Coromandel Coast to the Bay of Bengal and through the Malacca Strait to Sumatra, Java, the Moluccas and finally, China (Dewaraja, 2000: 477).

Trade Relations between Ceylon and the Western Countries

Ceylon had engaged in direct trade transactions with Greece and Rome too but on a limited scale. Much of the Ceylonese commodities taken to Indian ports were transshipped by Indian as well as Greek and Roman merchants to the Graeco-Roman world and this commenced at least from the Fourth Century B.C. Greek and Roman notes and documents about Ceylon can be traced as far back as the Fourth Century B.C. The earliest notes about Ceylon were made by Aristotle. Subsequently, writers like Onesicritus, Megasthenes, Hipparchus, Eratosthenes and Strabo too had recorded brief but important information about the country. They have mentioned that Ceylon is an island situated close to India and that both countries engaged in trade activities with each other involving items ranging all the way from large elephants to little gems (Sastri, 1939: 47-48; Tennent, 2006: 524, 527, 529).

The work 'Periplus of the Erythrean Sea' which was written in the First Century A.D. and whose authorship remains a mystery, describes the nature of the goods that were shipped to India from the western coast of Ceylon. The export of goods comprised mainly pearls, gems, textiles and turtle shells (Ponnamparuma, 1961: 45). The famous Roman author Pliny in his book 'Natural History', which he wrote during the 1st Century A.D., provides a description of Ceylon based on the reports submitted by Onesicritus and Eratosthenes (Ponnamparuma, 1961: 38-44). According to Pliny's account, mariners of Taprobane were criss-crossing the Indian Ocean in his time, and they took a number of marine birds out to sea with them. These were released periodically to ascertain the nearest landfall by observing the direction of their flight, as the birds could sense the presence of land from great distances (Ponnamparuma, 1961: 38). The voyage between the Island and the mainland (India) used to take twenty days in the early period, but the duration had dropped to about seven days as a result of improvements to the rigging of ships (Sastri, 1939: 47).

The first reference to a Roman subject's visit to Ceylon is found in the account of Annius Plocamus as given in Pliny's book. According to this story, Annius Plocamus was the collector appointed by Emperor Claudius to collect the Red Sea dues. One day he was carried away by powerful currents until he reached Ceylon. He was received by the Sinhalese King, who subsequently sent four ambassadors to the Roman Emperor (Siriweera, 2003: 117-118). Mahavamsa Tika refers to the direct relations between Ceylon and Rome. It states that King Bhatikabaya (22 B.C.-7 A.D.) sent envoys to the country of Romanukka and obtained large quantities of coral from there to make a net to adorn the Mahathupa at Anuradhapura (Vamsattappakasini, 2001: 630). Although sources mention this transaction, it is apparent that the trade relationship between Ceylon and Graeco-Rome developed with the facilitation of India. Hippalus' discovery in the 1st Century A.D. that sea travel between West and East could be accomplished by following the monsoon winds, enabled navigators to make a relatively quick voyage from the Red Sea to the Malabar coast and back. As a result, there was a rapid growth in the volume of sea-borne trade between India and the West. The theory of Hippalus influenced the supply of goods from Ceylon to the Roman Empire through South India. In fact, as archaeological evidence clearly suggests, the Romans had established an extensive trading emporium at Arikamedu near Pondicherry in South India over the first few centuries of the Christian Era (Siriweera, 2003: 117).

The demand for the products of Ceylon such as pearls, gems, ivory and spices by the Roman Empire had increased considerably by this time. These items were delivered through South Indian merchants. Gold coins had been received in return by Ceylon for the exported items. These gold coins have been discovered in places like Mahathittha, Anuradhapura, Mihintale, Sigiriya, Valaichchenai and Kantharodai (Codrington, 1924: 32,33). Many of these coins belonged to the period from the 2nd Century A.D. to the 6th Century A.D. Although there was no direct contact between the parties, Ceylon had successfully exported her products to Rome according to their requirements. With the fall of the Roman Empire, direct trade between the East and the West came to an end. Thereafter, whatever merchandise found its way to

the western market from the East was taken there by third parties. Persians and Ethiopians functioned as the middlemen. Of them, the Ethiopians commanded authority of the sea routes in the Red Sea and its vicinity. Persians succeeded in capturing the ownership of the Persian Gulf. As both sea routes to the West had been under their control, export of items from Ceylon and India to the West was distributed by them. A similar example of this situation prevailed in which the Egyptians functioned as the intermediaries in the export of Chinese silk textiles to the Byzantines (Kiribamune, 1986: 91).

The 6th Century A.D. Egyptian writer Cosmas, in his *Topographia Christiana*, states that the ports of Ceylon were frequented by ships from India, Persia and Ethiopia (Gunawardana, 2003: 24). This indicates that international trade had not been limited to Indian ports but that it extended to Ceylonese ports too. In the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, practically all of the Ceylonese products were termed as the products of Persia. This was due to the fact that the Persian carriers attributed the place of origin of these goods to their own land (Perera, 1952: 304). In the Seventh Century A.D., an Indian Buddhist monk, Vajrabodhi found a fleet of thirty-five Persian ships at the ports of Ceylon (Siriweera, 2003: 118). The Islamic religion spread during the 7th Century A.D., as the Muslims came forward and attempted to propagate it wherever they went. Within a short period of time the whole of West Asia and Northern Africa up to the shores of the Atlantic had come under the victorious banner of Islam. At the beginning of the Eighth Century Islamic power had extended to the Sind and Multan. The new faith had infused a sense of spiritual unity among the diverse races. With the establishment of the Abbasid Empire (751-1258), which had Baghdad as its capital, the Muslim commercial domination of Asia had commenced. In the Ninth and Tenth Centuries an assortment of Muslim traders, conveniently calling themselves 'Arabs' dominated the international trade from Baghdad to China (Dewaraja, 2000: 576).

Accordingly, the trade functions conducted by Persian intermediaries until then were taken over by Muslims gradually. In fact, most of the writers who wrote about Ceylon from the 9th Century A.D. were Muslims. According to the available records, Muslims had settled down in this country and carried on their trade activities. It is believed that the rulers of this country had taken action to deport the daughters of Muslim traders who died in this country, after the 9th Century (Tennent, 2006: 555). Muslims established the first Muslim Colony in Beruwala in the 11th Century A.D. (Dewaraja, 1994: 43). Most of the 'Sandesa Kavyas' composed during the 14th and 15th centuries A.D. made references to the trade activities in Beruwala Town and its prosperity (Tisara Sandesaya, 76; Kokila Sandesaya, 93; Mayura Sandesaya, 76; Gira Sandesaya, 104). Besides Beruwala they had carried out business in other locations close to the ports such as Dondra, Galle, Weligama, Colombo, Chilaw, Kalpitiya, etc. Ibn Batuta when he came to the Island in 1344 A.D. visited some of the above ports. According to his chronicles he had visited Devinuvara (Devundara) and noticed many Muslim merchants there. Ships of Muslim traders seem to have called at the port of Galle, for here he had met a ship's captain named Ibrahim, who had a residence in the town. When Ibn Batuta visited Colombo, there lived a minister and admiral named Jalasti who had with him 500 Abyssinians (Batuta, 1953: 217). The triangular Slab Inscription set up in Galle by Cheng Ho is inscribed in Persian, Tamil and Chinese. This inscription may have been carved by Persians who were actively participating in the trade transactions close to these ports, especially Galle and other places along the southern coast (EZ., vol. III: 335-337).

Many Muslim writers have mentioned about the export goods of Ceylon. Albatani who lived in the 9th Century A.D. had mentioned the beautiful waterfalls cascading down the mountains and about the valuable gemstones such as Sapphires, Amethysts, Cat's Eyes and many others (Tennent, 2006: 542,567). Ibn Khurdadben and Ibn Wahab were other writers who had written about the country (Tennent, 2006: 542, 567). Ibn Batuta had also mentioned about the pearls and gems of Sri Lanka (Batuta, 1953: 215,220). He also mentioned about the presence of Muslim traders.

Conclusion

Although Persians held the authority on sea routes from time to time, they continued their trade functions along the Red Sea and Persian Bay up to the Mediterranean Coast. In the East, they actively traded from

the sea ports of Ceylon as from the beginning, without any change. The most distinguishing feature was that Ceylon exercised influence on sea trade out of all proportion to the size of the country. Ceylon possessed many attributes that found favour with those engaged in sea trade. It provided safe ports for the vessels travelling around the island and offered essential facilities to mariners such as basic provisions and other supplies. It had most of the rare trade goods much in demand in the West for export, while there was also the demand from Ceylonese for the commercial products of the Eastern and Western countries. Ceylon, although an island, was not considered as a solitary country because it was situated at a central point in the Indian Ocean close to India. As such, it became a very attractive destination for the commercial traders of the East and West from the 6th Century A.D. According to the Greek writer Cosmas, 'Sieleidiba' was the 'Great Emporium' which was connected by popular sea routes to trading marts all over the world. Over the entire period that was researched for this study, Ceylon had proved to be a great commercial trade center well frequented by foreign trading vessels and merchants.

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