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Millions and millions of years ago, the continents of Antarctica, Australia, Africa, South America, and India formed a single landmass, situated somewhere near Antarctica. This landmass, named Gondwanaland, then broke up. India with Sri Lanka and Madagascar attached moved upward into Asia. Today, India and Sri Lanka stand on the same ocean shelf. The continental shelf has an average width of about 12 miles around the island, where the mean depth of water is only about 36 fathoms, and beyond which there is a drop abruptly to 560 fathoms in two miles and 1000 fathoms in about ten miles, plunging eventually to a steep descent of 3000 fathoms and more.

About 12 million years ago, Sri Lanka started to separate from the Indian subcontinent thanks to fluctuations in the sea level. Siran Deraniyagala says that the sea level would have dropped on at least 17 occasions within the last 700,000 years. The last separation from India would have occurred about 9000 years ago. During the Stone Age, Sri Lanka was linked to India by a wide land bridge across Palk Strait. Today, the sea is barely fifteen fathoms deep in the Palk Strait.

Deraniyagala states that India and Sri Lanka would have established human settlements at the same time. The milestones thereafter would also have run parallel. South India has thrown up evidence to indicate an iron age at 1,200 BC. In Sri Lanka the earliest date available at present is 1000-800, BC based on the findings at Anuradhapura and Aligala, Sigiriya. Deraniyagala says that it is likely that further investigations will push back the boundary to match that of South India.

Fossils of animals and plants from the Jurassic period have been found at Tabbowa wewa. Fossil bones of rhinoceros were found in Ratnapura. Tigers inhabited Sri Lanka about 135,000 years ago. Their bones and teeth were found at Batadomba Lena recently. Fossils of hippopotamus, the ridge browed elephant, the Asian elephant, the buffalo, the gaur, and the rhinoceros have also emerged.

Archaeological excavations indicate that there were prehistoric settlements in Sri Lanka about 300,000 or even 500,000 years ago. There is firm evidence at present that there were prehistoric settlements in Sri Lanka about 127,000 years ago. The evidence comes from excavations in coast of Bundala, at Patirajawela,

and Wellegangoda. Settlements of the prehistoric period, known as the Stone Age, dating between 125,000-1000 BC, have been found at Pidurangala, Potana, Dambulla and Mapagala. Settlements of the proto-historic period known as the early Iron Age, dating from 1000-500 BC have emerged at Ibbankatuwa and Pansalgodella.

channels, dig the hard soils and control the dense equatorial forests. This helped to establish permanent settlements. Settled agricultural villages emerged and chena cultivation was started. The rate of immigration appears to have gained rapidly thereafter. The earliest form of cultivation was chena and kurakkan was the

painting. 1957 p 3)

By the beginning of the second century BC if not earlier, the entire dry zone was populated, with a heavy concentration in the north central region. The construction of tanks and other irrigation works had begun. Brahmi inscriptions in places such as Enderagala, Duvegala,

which had iron ore. The district was also adjacent to the major gem deposits. There were gem deposits close to the upper Kelani river as well. Inscriptions indicate that Chilaw and Colombo districts were also populated in pre-Christian times.

The Malvatu oya became the most intensively exploited river

and in the Ratnapura district. The earliest inscription belongs to the tenth century AD. Kalutara district it is said was a great swampy wilderness until Parakramabahu I drained the swamps and marshes and made it habitable in the 12 century.

Excavations at Fa Hien Lena near Bulathsinhala, Batadomba Lena, near Kuruwita, Belli lana, at Kitulgala, Alu Lena at Attanagoda near Kegalle, Bellan Bandi Palassa near Embilipitiya and Bandarawela, provided information on the early settlers and their habits. Fragmentary remains of an extinct race of Neanderthal Man were found. Fa Hien Lena yielded the earliest evidence of anatomically modern man in South Asia.

He was labelled Balangoda Man. Balangoda Man was at an estimated height of 174 cm for males and 166 for females. The bones were robust, with thick skull bones. The teeth were conspicuously large. Balangoda Man appears to have settled practically every nook and corner of Sri Lanka ranging from the damp and cold high plains such as Maha eliya (Horton Plains) to the and lowlands of Mannar and Wilpattu and the steamy equatorial rainforests of Sabaragamuwa.

The camps were invariably small thus suggesting occupation by not more than a couple of nuclear families at most. They have eaten a very wide range of food plants and animals. They ate wild breadfruit and wild bananas.

They have gobbled up every conceivable animal, from elephants to snakes, rats, snails and small fish. Tortoises and terrapins had been a delicacy. The diet has been well balanced judging by the robust skeletal remains. The degeneration of bone which accompanied a specialised starchy diet and sedentary life style was absent. Balangoda man, like stone age man elsewhere, had succeeded in domesticating the dog, about 7500 years ago. (*Island*. 21.09. 05 p 1).

Remains of early iron age man had been found in just one site, Pomparippu. The biological anthropology of this Early Iron Age man is different to that of Balangoda Man.

*The writings and speeches of P. G. Cooray, S. U. Deraniyagala, R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, Rukshan A. Jayawardene, C. W. Nicholas, O. Boparachchi, C. R. Panabokke, Sudharshan Seneviratne and W. I. Siriweera were used for this essay.*

# Human settlements in ancient Sri Lanka

Other possible sites for early iron age settlements are Kadurugoda, Mantota, and Kelaniya. People first settled in the coastal zones, and then moved up to fertile tracts and to localities in the central hills where there were mineral resources. Evidence of settlements could be found in Kitulgala, Karadupone and Ravana Ella, all entry points to the hills.

The central hills were mined for gems in the prehistoric period. There are remnants of camps, and caves in the wet zone. The camps were small, suggesting occupation by not more than a couple of nuclear families at most. Almost all were close to a stream or spring or were at the confluence of the tributaries with the main river. The network of footpaths that link the existing purana villages today, pass through most of the sites identified. So it is possible that many of these footpaths were in existence during early times. The earliest villages may have been about 3 hectares each. The occurrence of marine shells at inland sites such as Batadomba Lena points to an extensive network of contacts between the coast and the hinterland. There is evidence from Belilena that salt had been brought in from the coast at a date more than 32,000 years ago.

The immigrants were probably attracted by the agricultural potential of the island, notably its abundant supplies of water. Other attractions could have been the pearls banks, the major copper ore at Seruvila and the gems. Stone tools were replaced in Sri Lanka by iron ones around 900 BC. Once the settlers acquired iron they were able to construct ponds and

earliest food. Kurakkan came here in 10,000 BC. It is a very hardy grain and was used as a substitute for rice. There was a variety of kurakkans. Rice cultivation can be seen from about 250 BC. Wetland rice cultivation in its early form was an indigenous development.

Settlements had come up in other parts of the island between 1000 BC and 300 BC. One group of immigrants had started from Trincomalee, and settled in the Mahaweli region, spreading into the south-eastern part of the dry zone. Settlements also developed in the Kala-Malvatu basin at places named Anuradha, Upatissa, Udeni and Uruvela. There was also Vijitagama near Mahaweli. The best known prehistoric settlement is Anuradhapura. This settlement was at least 50 hectares in extent by 700-600 BC. It exceeded 10 hectares by 800 BC. Recent excavations at Anuradhapura unearthed a pot dated to 600-500 BC carrying Brahmi writing. The letters were almost identical to the Asokan script used 200 years after this period in India.

The Kelani river had settlements from about the fifth century BC. Recent excavations at Pilapitiya near Kelani, showed that it had been a developed settlement by fourth or third century BC. There were settlements in the Ruhunu area too. Settlements along the Valave Kinndi basin were created at this time or very close to it. Recent excavations at Ridiyagama, showed settlements dated to second century BC. A painting dated 2nd century BC was found at Karambagala, a cave near Ridiyagama. (D. B. Dhanapala. *The story of Sinhalese*

Galkandegama kanda, and Mutugala indicate that there were several settlements in and around Polonnaruwa from third century BC. Polonnaruwa was an important military post due to its strategic location and was known as the Kandavuru Nuvara at this time. Between third first centuries BC, settlements developed in Kataragama, on Menik ganga basin, Bovattagala, and Kott adumuhela in Kumbukkan oya basin, and Kusalan Kanda, Hennanegala and Kaludupotana by the river Muden. Stone inscriptions dating from third century BC to first century AD have been found in the western province, at Pilikuttuwa, Warana, Medabowita and Korathota in Colombo district.

By the first century BC settlements had come up in the Kegalle district and the lower basin of the Kelani river. By the end of this century the lower montane zone at elevations of 1000 to 2000 feet was populated. There were settlements in the Mahaweli ganga valley around Teldeniya, and Gampola, in the lesser hills to north-west of Badulla, and the northern and western slopes of the Matale hills. Inscriptions indicate the route taken from the lowlands into the mountains. These initial settlements were confined to the lowest plains in the region. Water was not a problem in these areas. It could be obtained from small streams and diverted to paddy field via small channels. Rice cultivation was easy. These regions were also suitable for spices such as cardamom, nutmeg, turmeric, and ginger. Some of the settlements in the Kegalle district such as Yatahalena, were close to areas,

system in the island and from the first century AD onwards, the Kala oya-Malvatu oya complex emerged as the most densely populated region. Researchers looking at settlements in the Sigiriya area, found more than 50 settlement sites in just one section of the whole targeted region, a complex of villages, monasteries, iron smelting, pottery and stone quarries and distribution centres, dating not only to early and medieval periods but also to prehistoric times.

The next most populated region was the land around the Mahaweli basin. Five of the great reservoirs Padaviya, Vahalkada, Gantale, Kavudulu and Minneriya were located in this region. The Polonnaruwa region was agriculturally developed by 4 AD. Due to its strategic location on the route to Ruhuna, it was an important military post as well. The third demographic concentration was in the basins of the Valave, Kiringi, Menik and Kumbukkan rivers. Inscriptions dateable to 2nd-4th AD centuries were found in Kurunegala district as well.

There were settlements from seventh century AD at Uma Oya, Nugatalawa, Pattipola, and Kande'ela. The montane zone above 2500 feet was largely unpopulated until the 10th century. However, the ancient footpaths criss-crossing these high plains, such as the one through the Ohiya gap indicate the presence of at least sporadic early settlements in this region. There is no indication of early settlements in the south western regions from the Kalu ganga to Nilvala ganga