

Book Review

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Weerakkody, D P M, *Taprobanê: Ancient Sri Lanka as Known to Greeks and Romans* (indicopleustoi - archaeologies of the Indian Ocean) Brepols, 1997, 287pp, 3 plates, Sri Lankan Rs. 5,400.00.

A well-researched treatise marked by outstanding scholarship, *Taprobanê: Ancient Sri Lanka as Known to Greeks and Romans* is a book which will be greatly welcomed by both specialists and laymen interested in the interconnections between early Sri Lanka and the western classical world. There is no mystique about the title. In fact it is a clear statement of what the book is about. This is characteristic of all Weerakkody's writings, direct and uncluttered. There is no jargon which some consider fashionable. This is commendable.

Thematically the book is mostly concerned with the historiography of ancient Sri Lanka and its relevance to the historical development of the country's role and status in the commercial networks of Asia in proto-historic and early historic times. Therefore a striking feature is the author's acute sense of history which prevails through it all.

This review does not attempt a chapter by chapter evaluation of the book but is concerned with bringing out some of the important themes and issues raised by the author. At the very outset it is important to note that Weerakkody has looked at over 40 Greek and Latin texts, few of the better known being Strabo, Pliny, Ptolemy and Cosmas. The recovery of every scrap of information on Taprobane in all known Greek and Roman textual sources is no mean achievement. To all those who are interested

in this area of study, the book will no doubt be an extremely useful reference work.

For the reconstruction of the history of any country or people, one is necessarily dependent on a variety of primary sources. A major concern of this book is to see how a group of non-Sri Lankans, namely the Greeks and Romans perceived Sri Lanka, or Taprobane as it was known to them. Noting the fact that the island was also known as Palaisimoundu, Salike and Silediba, it has been argued that these were but alternative names for Taprobane, the more familiar name. Weerakkody accepts the general assumption that Taprobane is derived from Tambapanni, the name known to the *Mahavamsa* and the Asokan edicts. He leaves us with no doubt that Taprobane of the Greek and Roman writers was indeed the island of Sri Lanka.

Although the focus is on Taprobane, Weerakkody spreads out for us a vast panorama of geographical knowledge culled from Greek and Roman sources. Straddling the west and the east, he tries to elucidate some of the difficult problems of identification regarding place names in the Indian Ocean region. What has been demonstrated is the fact that commercial networks have progressively linked the Greek and Roman lands with India, Sri Lanka and the countries beyond the sub-continent as far as Southeast Asia.

Intertwined in these chapters are not only geographical information but also facets of economic, social and political history as well as aspects of inter-state relations, providing us with a framework in which one can understand how trade networks functioned in those early times. Using some of the Sri Lankan findings of scholars like R A L H Gunawardana, Somasiri Devendra and Osmund Bopearachchi¹, Weerakkody tries to clarify conditions that prevailed in Greek and Roman times. It is on the context of these discussions that the significance of Sri Lanka's position in the commercial networks of the classical world has been analysed.

According to the author, the contents of his book *Taprobanê* have been arranged in the chronological sequence. Beginning with the statements of Onesicritus of the 4th century B.C. and the subsequent 'Alexander historians' as he calls them, the reader is made to traverse

some significant milestones represented by the writings of Strabo to Cosmos of the 6th Century A.D., spanning some 800 years of history. The early Greek notices of writers such as Onesicritus, Megasthenes and Eratosthenes, some of them recovered from the Roman historian Strabo, have been meticulously examined and evaluated. While accepting the fact that there are exaggerations, misconceptions and even some falsifications, the author is able to convince his readers that Sri Lanka was known to the eastern world during these times. This knowledge would have filtered through the Greeks coming into India from the Alexandrian period through the Mauryan epoch. Onesicritus, the commander of Alexander's fleet, and Megasthenes the Greek envoy at the Mauryan court had first hand experience of the Indian sub-continent. Neither of them came to Sri Lanka but appear to have been aware of the island from knowledgeable reports. That Eratosthenes a contemporary of Asoka, had heard of Sri Lanka is not surprising, considering the fact that the Mauryans had extremely close links with the Greek lands on the one hand and with Sri Lanka on the other. After much critical discussion, Weerakkody concludes that by the Mauryan period Greek knowledge of Sri Lanka is clearly demonstrated by the available evidence. According to him it was the Alexander historians who made Sri Lanka known to the western world. To the ancient Greeks Sri Lanka was known as a place of exotic merchandise and a favoured stopover along the maritime trade routes of the Indian Ocean.

It was from these same Greek writings that the educated Romans came to know of the island, Taprobane. Strabo who lived in Roman times relied almost totally on them. But by this time Sri Lanka had become part of the Roman experience. With the expansion of Rome, Weerakkody states that "Taprobane had to be re-discovered by the Romans." The account of Pliny is extremely significant in terms of this experience and the author seems to emphasise this by devoting three whole chapters to the material in this text. The Sri Lankan embassy to Rome is given detailed attention and the impact of Pliny's account on subsequent writers has been critically examined.

Ptolemy the 2nd Century A.D. astronomer, mathematician and geographer is the classical writer who has made available to us the widest

spread of geographical knowledge regarding the Orient. Most scholars are agreed that his account of Sri Lanka is by far the most knowledgeable and scientific account we have of the island. Consequently his account has generated a great deal of discussion and debate. Because of this the author has not felt it necessary to cover the same ground. However, he highlights crucial issues regarding the island's location in the Indian Ocean, its littoral, ports and cities, the river system, its major products and the composition of its people. For this summary of the main issues, Weerakkody's readers will be grateful.

The Greeks and early Romans thought of Sri Lanka as a distant land. But by the time of Cosmas in the 6th century A.D. the eyes of the trading community seem to have been focused on Sri Lanka. Cosmas had a long career in overseas trade and his credibility regarding the centrality of Sri Lanka on the silk route to China is not in doubt. Quite apart from the centrality issue, Cosmas provides data on the shipping activities of the island, its trade in local products and the availability of foreign goods involved in the intermediary trade which centered on Sri Lanka. On the issue of the prevalence of Christianity in Sri Lanka, Weerakkody checks out every bit of evidence available to him and carefully examines the issue of the Anuradhapura cross. He favours the conclusion that a Nestorian church in Sri Lanka would only have served the traders of that faith. Certain insights regarding the troubled politics of the country have been gleaned from the evidence of Cosmas. His work is said to be the climax of a long series of notices of the island by Greek and Roman writers.

Trade has often been the prelude to cultural dissemination. On this issue however Weerakkody draws our attention to the paucity of evidence regarding the impact of Greece and Rome on Sri Lankan culture. Merlin Pieris has pointed to the diffusion of Greek motifs in stories like the Vijayan legend but the question of direct transmission needs to be discussed further. It is in this context that we are reminded of the views of van Leur² that traders cannot be effective transmitters of culture. Can this be the answer to the dearth of data in this regard?

With regard to the impact of Classical culture on Sri Lanka, S Paranavitana did make a vain effort to fill the void. Our author has revisited the problem of the so-called inter-linear inscriptions claimed to have been read by Paranavitana. The veracity of this evidence has been called to question by scholars like R A L H Gunawardana, K Indrapala, W M Sirisena and myself.³ But now we have in this volume the most authoritative refutation of Paranavitana's assertion that the literary works of "the Greeks and Romans were known, translated and studied in Sri Lanka and other eastern countries in pre-modern times." Weerakkody remarks that Paranavitana's documents which are said to have been inscribed between the 12th and 15th centuries contain an incredible amount of learning and familiarity with foreign languages including Greek and Latin. This he says is despite the fact that even in India Greek had disappeared by the 3rd century A.D. Weerakkody has shown that Paranavitana through a certain monk Buddhapriya has anticipated many modern scholars such as Sir William Jones on the classification of languages and Girshman regarding Persian names. This monk Buddhapriya is said to have even anticipated Paranavitana on a number of issues such as the original home of Sinhalese, the dating of Sri Lankan embassy to Rome, the Malaysian origin of the Kalinga dynasty and the transformation of Sigiriya to look like mount Kailasa. Weerakkody has pointed out that terms such as "Greeka," "Latina" and "Sammamittika" are but fabrications which have been derived from modern English usage and have very little to do with ancient usage. While recognising Paranavitana's previous scholastic achievements, Professor Weerakkody is forced to dismiss the interlinear inscriptions as mere fiction. How and why this respected scholar began to concoct history is beyond anyone's comprehension. Bopearachchi's verdict in the foreword of this book is that Weerakkody has settled the issue of the interlinear inscriptions once and for all.

A word on Osmund Bopearachchi's Foreword is not out of place in this overview. Deviating from the usual practice of writing a two page Foreword, Bopearachchi indulges in a lengthy essay on the request of the author. He has brought into this essay much of his recent numismatic findings which complement Weerakkody's chapter on Roman Coins and the archaeological discoveries in the southern and south western littoral

of the island. Weerakkody was no doubt conscious of the relevance of these findings for his own studies. Bopearachchi describes of the archaeological investigations at the estuaries of the Daduru, Kelani, Kalu and Walawe rivers demonstrating very clearly the existence of human settlements and commercial activities. The re-examination of the trade patterns of Sri Lanka in the light of these findings will no doubt provide new insights to Weerakkody in his future endeavours.

The meticulous research methodology employed by Weerakkody is amply demonstrated by the original quotations and their translations at the end of the volume. This leaves the reader with no doubt regarding the authenticity of his scholarship. The rigorous evaluation of sources forms part of his armour which very few critics will be able to penetrate. The comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography which lists well over 300 titles in both English and French will enhance its usefulness to specialists as well as lay readers.

An outstanding contribution to knowledge, there is no doubt that this will be a standard work of reference which will stand the test of time.

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Notes

1. R A L H Gunawardana, "Seaways to Siedediba: Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and their Impact on Pre-colonial Sri Lanka," *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road*, 1990, pp 25-45; S Devendra, "The Search for the Maritime Heritage," (in collaboration with G Jayatilake and M Fernando) *Ancient Ceylon*, X, 1990, pp 123-137; O Bopearachchi, "Seafaring in the Indian Ocean: Archaeological Evidence from Sri Lanka" in *Tradition and Archaeology, Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean* (Proceedings of the International Seminar Techno-Archaeological

Perspectives of Seafaring in the Indian Ocean 4th century B.C. - 15th century. A.D., New Delhi, February 28 - March 4 1994) edited by H P Ray and J F Salles, New Delhi, Manohar, 1996, pp 59-78.

2. Van Leur, "On Early Asian Trade" in *Indonesian Trade and Society*, The Hague and Bandung, 1955.
3. R A L H Gunawardana, "Ceylon and Malaysia: A Study of Prof. Paranavitana's Research in the Relations Between the Two Regions," *University of Ceylon Review*, XXV, 1-2, 1967, pp 1-64; K Indrapala, "Review: Ceylon and Malaysia by S Paranavitana," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)*, n.s. xi, 1967, pp 101-106; W M Sirisena, "Sri Lanka's Commercial Relations with the Outside World from Earliest Times to 8th Century A.D., *The Sri Lanka Journal of South Asian Studies* II.1, 1980, pp 12-31; S Kiribamune, "Some Reflections on Prof. Paranavitana's Contribution to History," *Ceylon Journal of Humanities* I.1, 1970, pp 76-92.