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THE FIRST URBANISATION OF SRI LANKA: AN INVESTIGATION INTO NAGARA SITES REFERRED TO IN THE EARLY BRAHMI INSCRIPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses references to nagara (town/urban settlement) sites recorded in Early Brahmi inscriptions from the Early Historical Period (3rd century BC to 1st century AD) in Sri Lanka. It also discusses their attested or probable locations. At least ten such sites are known, none so far subjected to detailed archaeological research.

The first urbanisation of Sri Lanka is widely understood as a development that occurred in the period between the 4th century BC and the 3rd century AD (*Mahavamsa* X: 73-103; Deraniyagala 1972; Seneviratne 1987; Bandaranayake 1987; Manatunga 1987b; Allchin 1989). However, the rise of Anuradhapura, the earliest known urban settlement in Sri Lanka, can now be dated to the 8th-7th centuries BC as a result of recent excavations (Deraniyagala 1992: 710). This site gradually developed as the capital of the Sri Lankan state and marked the culmination of the first period of urbanisation.

Anuradhapura has been a focus of interest since the inception of archaeological studies in Sri Lanka, but few researchers have paid attention to the mechanism of urbanism at this site (Paranavitana 1936; Deraniyagala 1958; Silva 1979). Periodic excavations at the citadel of Anuradhapura have been carried out since 1969 by S. Deraniyagala (1972, 1992).

Apart from Anuradhapura, a few other sites have been identified archaeologically as belonging to the first period of urbanisation in Sri Lanka. These include Mantai, the major port of the Anuradhapura Period; Magama, the principal "city" of the southern territory of Ruhuna; Kantarodai, a site in the Jaffna peninsula of northern Sri

Lanka; Kelaniya, another settlement site situated in close proximity to the present city of Colombo; and Vijitapura, a fortified stronghold close to the 12th century capital city, Polonnaruwa.

Mantai (Matota or Mahatitta) has been sporadically excavated over a period of several years (Carswell *et al.* 1984: 3-80). Magama, which is the present Tissamaharama, was first excavated in the late 19th century (Parker 1884: 1-92); systematic excavations at the site were commenced again recently and are still in progress (S. Deraniyagala, pers. comm.). Kelaniya was found by chance when a large "Black and Red Ware" settlement site was discovered recently at Pilapitiya, near ancient Kelaniya monastery (S. Dissanayake, pers. comm.). Vijitapura has not yet been excavated or explored, although a fortress has been tentatively identified with the help of aerial photographs (Fernando 1984: 115-118).

Other settlements belonging to the first period of urbanisation have not yet been precisely located. However, textual and epigraphic sources which relate to this period indicate the existence of several other possible urban settlements. This paper deals with some of these, which are revealed by Early Brahmi inscriptions dating between the 3rd century BC and the 1st century AD. This is an attempt to draw attention to their existence and to locate them tentatively within the spatial context of the Early Historic landscape of the island.

THE NAGARA SITES

At least ten placenames ending with the term *nagara* or *nakara* occur in the Early Brahmi Inscriptions which have been discovered in different parts of the island.¹ These two words mean "town" or "urban settlement" (Monier-Williams 1986; Sorata 1952). Even though it is not certain whether these words were used in this sense