The Monks and their trading activities in Ancient Sri Lanka
From 3rd B.C.E. to the 5th C.E.

Conference title and Venue:
5th International Congress of Society of South Asian Archaeology in 2014, Raipur, India

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It is a well-known fact that unlike Brāhmānism, Buddhism looked favourably upon trade activities. As revealed by epigraphic and literary evidences, the earliest donors and important patrons of the Buddhist establishment of South Asia were caravan merchants and wealthy seafaring traders. Teachings of the Buddhist Mahā Sāṅgha say that “pubbhāhāsi” (be first to receive the other with a smile) “pubbhāhāsi” (first to talk courteously to the others). Most probably these qualities may have been the base of the trade in the harbours. Some donors of the caves, the earliest dwellings of the Buddhist monks, were nāvikas (mariners) or vanijjas (traders).

There are instances where the monks themselves have donated caves to the brotherhood. Most of the monks who have donated the caves belong to a higher rank. The Kadurava Brāhma inscription talks of a cave, dedicated by the elder Datta, a professor of the Vīnaya (IC 1976, vol. i. no. 1207.98). The Mulgirigala Brāhma inscription speaks of a cave given by the reciter of the Majjhima Nikāya to the Saṅgha.

The nuns also donated caves to the Saṅgha. The two Brāhma inscriptions of Mihintale speak of caves given by two nuns. These inscriptions show that these nuns were wealthy enough to donate caves. Nearly twelve caves have been donated by the nuns to the Saṅgha during the period of 3rd B.C.E. to the 1st C.E.

The Brāhma inscriptions belonging to the 3rd and the 1st C.E. reveal the economic activities, existed during this period. There were different kinds of professionals and most of them have donated the caves to the Saṅgha. I have identified nearly 51 professions which are in the Brāhma inscriptions.

According to the Buddhist doctrines using money by the monks is considered as a sin. But the monks had to use money to cover their expenses such as the essential requirements for the fellow brotherhood, performances of the rituals and the maintenance of the monastic buildings.

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