

**An Exploration of the Motherland of Asian Elephants with Special  
Reference to Historical Records from 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC to 15<sup>th</sup> Century  
AD**

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**ABSTRACT**

Elephants, in the Sri Lankan society, are treated with a certain degree of respect and devotion. With the introduction of Buddhism to the country in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC, elephants gained a prominent place in the Sri Lankan culture. Literary sources of ancient Sri Lanka, make reports of instances in which elephants have played a significant role in religious functions as well as political functions such as enthroning the king. This is evidence of the significant role attributed to the elephants in the cultural and religious contexts of the Sinhalese society. Since Sri Lanka was located in the centre of the Indian Ocean with active natural harbours, she was popular among foreign nations as favourable trade centre. This is evident from the entries in the journals of ancient Greek, Roman, Arabic and Chinese travellers since the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Voyagers, historians, merchants, as well as geologists such as Onesicritus (4<sup>th</sup> Century BC), Megasthenes (4<sup>th</sup> Century BC), Solinus Polyhistor (1<sup>st</sup> Century AD), Dionysius Periegetes (1<sup>st</sup> Century AD) e Aelian (170-235 AD), Cosmas (550 AD), Athanasius Nikitin (15<sup>th</sup> Century AD) and Ludovico de Varthema (16<sup>th</sup> century AD) have made such informative records of the Asian elephant. They have also devised some criteria to distinguish Asian elephants from other species. These criteria include their intelligence, efficiency and military calibre. Once all their records are thoroughly examined it can be righteously concluded that Sri Lanka was the motherland of the Asian elephants prior to the Europeans' conquest of Asia. Reports about elephants appearing in the works of the afore mentioned foreign writers ranging from the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century AD have been cited as primary sources for this research.

**Keywords.** *Asian elephant, Historical records, Sri Lanka*

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