

Images of Sri Lanka through Bhikku Fa-Hien's Eyes

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From primeval times, because of its location in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has attracted merchants, marine explorers and vagabonds from both the Orient and the Occident. In addition, the treasure of Buddhism, the invigorating climate and the hospitality of the natives, all paved the way to its reputation. While mercantile quests first brought the Chinese and the Sri Lankans together, the interest in Buddhism created a healthy relationship between the two countries from the third century A. D. An interested researcher finds genuine sources in Chinese and Sri Lankan historical chronicles, and in itineraries of Buddhist Pilgrims which are very useful in unearthing the early relations between Sri Lanka and China. The expansion of Buddhism in Central Asia revived and further strengthened the relationship. The Bhikku Fa-Hien (3-4 A. D.) stands out among all these travellers as he had broken away from the shackles of writing a stereotyped travelogue. He did not exhibit the inexorable disingenuousness of the tourist writer who scans a country in a short period of time without a clear idea of its inhabitants. In this study, an attempt has been made to analyse the content of Fa-Hien's famous travelogue in the light of cultural anthropology to discover how in his individual style the author interpreted the country, and its inhabitants. Further it is expected to explore the authenticity of the data extracted from Fa-Hien's travelogue with contemporary historical chronicles and inscriptions.

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