

Global Reach: Sri Lankan Travellers during the Pre-Portuguese Period

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The Iberian adventure has been described as Voyages of Discovery, in that they discovered unknown trails and lands. But many of these trails were known to other cultures, and of course, lands were known to their inhabitants. Even the far-flung reach of Iberian lands have been recently challenged by re-examination of travels of Chen Ho's massive fleets. The present paper posits that the Sinhalese had a global reach in the Old World almost as long as those of Iberia, about one thousand years before the Voyages of Discovery. Using Sinhalese, Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Latin sources, the paper examines travels by Sinhalese to all parts of Asia, Africa, South-east Asia, Rome and China. The descriptions begin from the period from the 3rd century B.C. (to the Indus Valley), 1st A. D. (Rome) and the crucial period around the mid millennium when the country was designated the "mediatrix" of trade between the East and West. Paralleling the trade position was Sri Lanka's intellectual position as one of the world's major centres of philosophical and religious thought. Special emphasis is given to travels to South-east Asia from around the 6th century up to the time of the arrival of the Portuguese. Descriptions by travelers including monks, nuns, envoys and traders are briefly recounted, and literary and archeological evidence of the Sinhalese reach illustrated by photographic evidence.

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