

Problems in the study of the settlement patterns of the PHEH period: towards an archaeological investigation of the Early Brahmi inscriptions

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(Note: This paper is a preliminary report on one aspect of an IFS umbrella research program on the Settlement Archaeology of the Early and Middle Historial period. It has two objectives: it sets out in a brief, schematic form some of the major problematics in the understanding of the prehistoric-to-historic transition in Sri Lanka and then examines, in the context of that broad introduction, the settlement patterns of the Proto Historic-Early Historic (PHEH) Period as indicated by the distribution of the Early Brahmi (EB) inscriptions).

Major transformations in Sri Lankan history that have been relatively little studied in over 100 years of archaeology are (schematically):

- (a) The change from a nomadic, food-collecting economy of pre-historic hunter-gatherers to a sedentary, food-producing economy of primitive farmers-
TRANSITION A;
- (b) The transition from 'primitive' methods of food production to advanced agriculture, principally wet-rice cultivation and small-scale reservoir irrigation-TRANSITION B;

- (c) The subsequent (and perhaps even partly concurrent) process of the emergence of a literate, historical society marked by the emergence of clear social differentiation, early state formation and primary urbanization-TRANSITION C., (Bandaranayake, 1979; see also Senaratne, 1968).

The fact that these transitions may have consisted of several gradual and incremental changes and may have displayed uneven, multilinear and overlapping patterns of development does not prevent us from seeing them in terms of a long-range perspective as transformations, processes of change involving sharp, distinctive changes of course and character.

The dominant and underlying assumption regarding this period has been that these three transitions were somehow concertina-ed into a single, continuous (and rapidly-moving) process. Thus, the popular view is that a society of advanced, socially-differentiated literate, iron-using farmers were interposed over an earlier population of microlith-using, store-age hunter-gatherers¹, and that this took place mostly through processes of migration and absorption rather than through internal development.

The many questions posed by these varying propositions form some of the major problematics facing Sri Lankan archaeological research today. They can only be answered by long-term, field-based research which addresses itself to both horizontal (i.e. regional, spatial, comparative, etc.) and vertical (i.e. sequential, chronological, constituent, etc.) dimensions. Of the three transitions mentioned above, TRANSITION C., or, at any rate, the interface between TRANSITION B and TRANSITION C., seems more readily capable of some immediate study on the basis of existing data. This forms what we now call the Proto-Historic-Early-Historic (PHEH) period.

Apart from the results of some pioneering excavations (Parker 1884; Raja de Silva 1970; Deraniyagala 1972; Begley 1967, 76, 81) which