

Archaeological Landscape of the Lower Montane Region of Sri Lanka: Socio-cultural Aspects of Archaeological Sites

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Archaeological and historical studies of ancient Sri Lanka portray a frame of independent characteristics and cultural features of its own. However, it has been subjected to various trends due to its proximate situation to the Indian sub-continent, and being a centre and a junction of the east-west trade routes, together with its environmental attractiveness. Sri Lanka, being a limited geographic mass, possesses the ability of grasping or capturing and spreading of all external and internal trends with great ease. Accordingly, the geo-physical and environmental features as well as different historical trends manifest various influences to its existence. Even though these conditions are considered to be a very important background in studying the history of Sri Lanka, it is fruitful to consider definitions outside those parameters pertaining to its history.

The Geo-physical background of the area

According to its relief features, Sri Lanka can arbitrarily be divided into three geo-physical zones namely (Vitanage 1970: 391- 406):

- a). costal low lands
- b). central high lands (uplands)
- c). highlands

The central high lands or uplands or the montane region could be identified as a special geo-physical region in Sri Lanka. The study area of this research is confined to the plateau of Kandy and its suburbs which are located in the central high lands and has a bio-diversity specific to the region. The geo-physical and environmental set-up of this area could be identified as with areas that consist of:

- a). rock and minerals in highland series
- b). various types of soil such as red yellow podsollic, alluvial, reddish brown latosols, immature brown soil, brown loams soil etc.
- c). diverse flora and fauna which are endemic for the region
- d). varied temperatures and rain falls

Archaeological and historical background in the area

The textual information and cursory observation suggest that the middle Mahaveli basin has a great potential of cultural continuity from the pre-historic period up to the late historic period. This could be demonstrated by the accumulation of remnants in archaeological sites belonging to different cultural phases as shown below:

- a). stone stools of the Pre-historic period (from ca. 28,000 BP)
- b). black and red ware and suspected megalithic graffiti marks etc. of the Proto-historic period (from ca. 900-300BC)
- c). early and late Brahmi inscriptions etc. of the Early historic period (from ca. 300BC-300AD)
- d). late Brahmi inscriptions, ancient monuments and artifacts etc. of the historic period (from ca. 300-13AD) late historic period (from ca. 14-18AD)
- e). various kinds of archaeological evidences of the modern period (from ca. 18AD onwards)

Internal trends

When considering the historical trends of this region, the discovery of information pertaining to the pre-historic man, especially Mesolithic man, is very significant. Stone tools associated with Mesolithic man are found from places in the vicinity of Kandy city (Deraniyagala 1992) such as Primrose hills (Kandy-Katukalle area), Peradeniya and Gampola region are very vital to understand the past trends in the region. Non-subjection to proper excavation of caves in the region and the probable disappearance of data due to the clearing of caves for the needs of *Bhikkus* (priests) towards the early historic period may have been responsible for the loss of definite evidence regarding the existence of the pre-historic man in the region around Kandy. However, the discovery of definite evidence of the prehistoric man from the sites of the upper valley of river Maha oya, the adjacent lower montane region, confirms the existence of the above trends in the adjacent regions. In this respect archeological sites such as Alu-lena and Dorawaka-kanda situated in Kegalle area are significant.

It is also important to mention that the definite factors regarding the Proto-historic period have not been revealed from the Kandy region. Therefore, it has to be inquired whether this is due to the studies being limited in the area or otherwise due to the non-arrival of this culture or the community diffusion into the region. The proto-historic period of Sri Lanka, which we have identified as the early stage of Early Iron Age (EIA) has extraordinary cultural features such as paddy cultivation, iron technology, black and red ware, horse domestication, megalithic burial sites and institutional formation etc. (Deraniyagala 1992; Seneviratne 1984: 247-307). It is important to note that the evidence of black and red ware in the region was revealed by some scholars around suburbs in the Kandy area recently (Dissanayake 1997).

The most significant feature in the study area is the uncovering of a lot of archaeological

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evidence belonging to the early historic period (Rambukwella 1998, 1998/1999: 207 -215). The discovery of many cave shelters with or without Early Brahmi Inscriptions (EBI), Late Brahmi Inscriptions (LBI), Drip- ledge caves, Ancient bricks with Brahmi letters, Early Historic Buddhist sites (stupas), and other archaeological remnants are important with regard to the early historic period of this region. Therefore, in this research study the researcher tries to understand the locational significance and the spatial distribution pattern of the early historic sites as an important factor in the demographic shift or the cultural diffusion.

The field survey of the research revealed the following chronological pattern of the inscriptions within the area:

- a). the quantitative increase of EBI in the 3/2BC to 1AD
- b). the quantitative decrease of LBI towards 1AD to 8AD
- c). the quantitative increase of Historic period inscriptions in the 9AD to 14AD
- d). the quantitative decrease of Late historic period inscriptions towards 14AD to 18 AD

In addition, the research study revealed a unique distribution pattern of the archaeological sites within the Kandy area as follows:

- a). concentration of sites on either side of the main river
- b). sites are associated with tributaries
- c). some sites are established in isolation

This location and spatial distribution pattern of the archaeological sites in the area seems to have occurred based on various reasons, such as route of communication, trade and commerce, resource requirements, linking zones and exchange routes etc. Moreover, the socio-cultural basis of the region is precisely revealed by the information found in the early Brahmi inscriptions (Paranavitana 1970: 62-65) pertaining to the study area. Accordingly the social groups such as *Parumaka*, *Gamika*, *Gapati* and *Bata/Barata* were distinctive elite. Apart from the main groups mentioned above, various other significant social names and title names are identified. Among them *Datika* (ivory-worker), *Kubakara* (potter), *Manikara* (lapidary), *Pocani* king, *Naga*, *Siva*, *Kumara*, *Upasaka*, *Brahmana*, *Thera*, *Raja*, *Gamani* are significant. Moreover, trade activities are also revealed in the area. The *Bagawalena* inscription which is situated close to the Galagedara pass, 10 kilometers from Kandy city, mentions a *Parumaka* who went to Bharukaccha (Baruka[ca]ga), probably for a trade activity because, according to Paranavitana's view, Bharukaccha might be the main harbor situated on the west coast near the Gujarat in India (for details: see Inscription of Ceylon, vol. 1 by Paranavitana, page 95, and no. 1183).

According to archaeological findings, it is apparent that the people in the vicinity of Kandy were engaged in trade activities even from the period before 1st century BC. This is revealed by an inscription at Vegiriya, near Gampola region, about 16 kilometers off from Kandy city, which gives information regarding the people who were associated with different craft and technologies. Technically efficient gem cutters, potters, ivory workers are significant among them. Moreover, the inscription mentions about the elites such as *Bata*, *Kumara* and *Gapati*.

It is important to pay an attention to the existence of a large cave complex at Vegiriya and the location of drip ledge caves in all directions very close to the site. More than 30 such sites could be seen and the existence of minimum of 3 drip-ledge caves in each of these sites is vital for assessing the quantitative nature of the communities in the early historic period. Heendeniya, Niyamakanda, Gallengolla, Urulewatta, Nikahetya, Werawala, Kutagalakanda, Nikattenna, Petiyagoda, Ketakumbura, Manikbowa, Ganhata, Daskara, Sinhapitiya are some of them to mention here.

Another important early Brahmi inscription site is a Bambaragala situated near Teldeniya, about 20 kilometers off from Kandy city. This revealed regionally important information of socio-economic hegemony by mentioning places Koligama and Cittanagara as a village and a town respectively. Moreover, an inscription portrays their socio-cultural prosperity in the region by mentioning about a *Stupa* and a Mansion. The utilization of a portion to feed *Sangha* and people, and the surplus portion to construct *Stupa* and temples is vital and significant here. Various mineral resources such as copper, iron ore, graphite, mica and gems have also been identified around this site area (Dissanayake and Nawaratne 1981: 733- 738; Fernando 1945: 7; Herath 1980: 42), in recent explorations.

It is also an important factor that there is a revelation of few generations of a royal family in a Gonavatta Brahmi inscription which belongs to the 1st century BC situated 6 km south-west of Bambaragala site. This could be solid evidence to assume that the spread of power may be portrayed as an accumulation of either resources or of controlling the activities of trade and commerce.

The Haragama inscription as well as the discovery of bricks with *Brahmi* letters from ancient stupa sites situated at Kundasala, Galmaduwa, Gurudeniya, Harispattuwe Gurudeniya watta, all are within 12 km radius from Kandy city, indicated the unique role associated in this region with political and religious activities. The researcher argues that the spared of a main roadway towards the north of Mahaveli basin across Gonavatta and connecting Matale area, about 27 km off from Kandy city, may have been important in the ancient time in trade and commerce activities.

Drip ledge cave sites as Degaldoruwa, Amunugama, Buvelikada, Yatiwawala, Uduwawala, Hapugoda, Gonigoda, Botata, Amunewela, Palipana, Molagoda, Weligalla, Galhinna, Chandramukee-gallena, Ankumbura, Tibbotuwawa, Kohona, Weligama, Ovilikanda, Galtannegala, Mahagama, Udurawana, Doragamuwa, Dunuvilla, Gurulawala, Udupihilla, Hulangamuwa are unique associations in this area because the continuous relationship of cultural phases can be revealed when historic and late historic evidences are compared even with the contemporary situation.

It is apparent that the roadways leading along important historical places in Kandy area such as Gurudeniya, Haragama, Gonavatta, Bambaragala and Lihiniyagama stretched along Wilwala to reach from Central Province to the Uva Province because they may also had a unique settlement system at the same ancient period. An insight into this is given by the presence of packed-bull roads and the spread of *Ambalam* sites (wayside Rest-houses) as well as Rajamaha Viharas (King's Temples) mark the use of these roads even up to the recent history. Moreover, the discovery of black and red ware, red ware, punched mark coins, Roman coins of later stages

are associated with the Kandy and adjacent regions could be due to this road network. However to confirm this idea of parallel settlements, a comprehensive archaeological research is yet to be done in the Uva Province.

The significance of the geo-physical background and the cultural trends of this area are revealed by the multitude of late historic inscriptions sites found in lower montane region in addition to the early Brahmi inscription sites. Hindagala, Gadaladeniya, Lankatilake, Gangaramaya, Ampitiya, Sagama, Keulgama and Haragama could be mentioned as some of them (Codrington 1943: 8-15, 1924:1-31; Parnavitana 1943: 90-110, 1943a: 296-312).

Accordingly, it could be assumed that there was a direct human and cultural relationship between middle Mahaveli river basin and other regions in the hill country during different cultural phases. Therefore, it is more appropriate to consider the region not as a retreat zone devoid of communities during different time spans but as an extraordinary geo-physical region which reveals virtual historical trends in the history of Sri Lanka. Consequently it is more practical to recognize the lower montane region, especially Kandy and its suburbs, by the Early Historic Period, as a milestone in the history of Sri Lanka which laid the social and economic base that leads to the emergence of distinct institutional formation.

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