

SEAWAYS TO SIELEDIBA

Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and their Impact on Precolonial Sri Lanka

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"Among the Indians it goes by the name of Sielediba, but the Pagans call it Taprobane... As its position is central, the island is a great resort of ships from all parts of India, and from Persia and Ethiopia, and in like manner it despatches many of its own to foreign ports." (*Kosmas*)

"The Sinhalese people never looked towards the sea, and the navigators whom history records were always foreigners. The outriggers are themselves of foreign origin, and it is not in Ceylon that we shall really comprehend the ocean's story." (*Toussaint*)

It would have indeed been a very curious phenomenon calling for close investigation if the people living in an island located in the middle of the Indian Ocean and known for centuries for its importance as a centre of commerce evinced no interest in navigation as Toussaint has claimed. From a very early period in the history of man the Indian Ocean was traversed by many different types of vessels carrying merchants, migrants and missionaries. These craft varied from the small outrigger canoe to ships described as capable of carrying a thousand men and representing the highest levels of nautical technology of those times. It would have been extremely difficult for the Sri Lankans not to be involved and influenced by these developments in the utilization of the sea around them.

According to the Buddhist cosmology presented in the commentary called *Paramatthajotikā*, the Jambudvīpa, together with three other land-masses which supported human habitation, was located in the Great Ocean.¹ While this conception persisted in cosmological thought, the period of early navigation in the Indian Ocean witnessed the rise of the view that there were several different seas each with its special characteristics, in the vicinity of the Jambudvīpa. The *Suppāraka Jātaka*, for instance, speaks of a ship which left the western coast of India and was carried by storm across six

1. *Paramatthajotikā*, ed. Helmer Smith, London: Pali Text Society, Vol. III, 1917, pp. 442-443.