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**Looking for Links: Sea Links in Ancient Sri Lanka**

*B. H. M. W. Bohingamuwa*

*Department of History and Archaeology, University of Ruhuna.*

Significance of the Indian Ocean studies for understanding long distance maritime contacts in the pre-modern world has long been established. Though, Sri Lanka is a tiny island in the Indian Ocean, its historical and cultural evolution has been extremely important for comparative studies of maritime contacts because of the island's strategic location at the southern extremity of the Indian subcontinent and in the middle of the Indian Ocean where one of the major trans-oceanic naval routes operated. This geographical positioning with numerous safe and natural harbours along the island's coastline as well as natural commodities such as pearls, precious stones, spices, and tortoise that are highly valued in western markets and 'Theravada Buddhism' drew migrants, merchants, missionaries, scholars and invaders to the Island. Such migrations from prehistoric times and cultural and trade contacts with the shores of East Africa, Southwest Asia, South Asia and the Far East have very strongly influenced the shaping the island's cultural matrix and its identity. Its geographical positioning was considered crucial in the power balance and control of trade and commerce in the Indian Ocean. These various cultural and commercial exchanges which were reciprocal in nature have left lasting imprints on the nation.

Though the earliest settlements so far recorded in the island are dated to 125,000--75,000 BP, the first clear archaeological evidence of maritime contacts is believed to be the proto-historic early Iron Age cultural remains dated to the end of the second millennium BC. They are mostly recorded from the areas close to the northern and the north-western coast, and South Indian migrations are said to have played a pivotal role in the introduction of these iron using cultures. From about the middle of the first millennium BC the archaeological and historical evidence is clearer about the contacts with the cultures beyond the immediately contiguous coastal regions of the South Asian subcontinent, particularly with northern India. Subsequent centuries saw an increasing navigational traffic in the Indian Ocean linking the east with the west through coastal and transoceanic sea routes. Sri Lankan and other eastern and western



historical sources and the archaeological findings recount the role Sri Lanka played in these commercial and cultural contacts.

Though historical sources on such sea contacts of ancient Sri Lanka are already exhausted, archaeological evidence is yet to be objectively examined. Therefore this research paper aims at tracing maritime contacts from an Archaeological perspective and to determine the impact of such interactions on the developments of the Island's cultural trajectory. It will also attempt to re-examine the established theoretical paradigms of sea contacts of ancient Sri Lanka. Recent archaeological findings particularly from the maritime regions of the Island will be interwoven with those of historical sources in drawing conclusions in this paper.