The Ceylon Press History of Sri Lanka Book 3

# VOYAGING TO WONDERLAND

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"Not all who wander are lost."

THE CHESHIRE CAT
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
LEWIS CARROLL.
1865

# ONE

## BRIDGING THE GAP

Adam's Bridge was a bridge crying out for repair, even before the great storm of 1480 shattered it forever. Unpredictable and uneven, sailing had long been the better option. But for Sri Lanka's first settlers – who had still to master boats – a short walk from India was all it took. And walking was what they did: Palaeolithic and later Mesolithic migrants from the Indian mainland who strolled across, their effortless trek belying the extreme complexity that, hundreds of years later, would colour Sri Lanka's relationship with India – from war and intermarriage to Buddhism itself, to the borrowing of kings and armies.

Since Jurassic times, some 200 million years ago, Sri Lanka, as part of India, had broken off from the great Gondwana supercontinent, which had formed 100 million years earlier in the Triassic era. Adam's Bridge became the sole point of access to the far south, but by 7,500 BCE, it was almost impassable.

As successive mini-ice ages wavered from one direction to another and sea levels rose or fell over the years, the bridge was laid bare at least 17 times. Until then, this roughly 100-kilometre-wide, 50-kilometre-long finger of land had been so effective a crossing that it even bore rivers across it, explaining the similarities between the island's freshwater fish and those of India.

And not just fish. Plants, animals, all flocked over, whilst they still could. Some were doomed to become extinct in their new home: the Sri Lankan Lion, and possibly an ancient variant of cheetah too; the unique Sri Lankan hippopotamus; two dissimilar subspecies of Rhinoceros: Sinhaleyus and Kagavena; and the bison-like Ceylon Gaur, the last recorded one living a miserable and solitary existence in the zoo of the Kandyan King, Rajasinghe II.

And with them all came unknown numbers of prehistoric men and women, sauntering south in search of a better life – an ambition not that dissimilar to that of the many tourists who decant into Colombo's Bandaranaike airport today.

Beguiling hints of these earliest inhabitants are still only just emerging. Excavations conducted in 1984 by Prof. S. Krishnarajah near Point Pedro, northeast of Jaffna, revealed Stone Age tools and axes dating to between 500,000 and 1.6 million years ago. As the fossil record demonstrates, the land they inhabited was ecologically richer and more dramatic than it is today, teeming with wildlife still found

found in Sri Lanka.

Hundreds of millennia later, one of their Stone Age descendants left behind the most anatomically perfect modern human remains yet uncovered on the island.

Balangoda Man, as he was to be named, was found in the hills south of Horton Plains inland from Matara, a short walk from the birthplace of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the “weeping widow” who ran independent Sri Lanka with steely determination for almost 20 years. His complete 30,000-year-old skeleton is bewitchingly life-like.

Probing his remains, scientists have concluded that Balangoda Man and his heirs were eager consumers of raw meat, from snails and snakes to elephants. And artistic, too, as evidenced by the ornamental fish bones, seashell beads, and pendants left behind.

Across the island, similar finds are being uncovered, pointing to a sparse but widespread population of hunter-gatherers living in caves — such as Batadomba and Aliga.

The tools and weapons found in these caves, made of quartz crystal and flint, are well ahead of such technological developments in Europe, which date from around 10,000 BCE, compared to 29,000 BCE in Sri Lanka.

# TWO

## Stories of The First Nation

The island's Stone Age hunter-gatherers made the transition to a more settled lifestyle well ahead of time.

By at least 17,000-15,000 BCE, Sri Lanka's original hunter-gatherers had taken to growing oats and barley on what is now Horton Plains, thousands of years before it even began in that fulcrum of early global civilisation - Mesopotamia.

Astonishingly, their direct descendants, the Veddas, are still alive today, making up less than 1% of the island's total population, an aboriginal community with strong animist beliefs that has, against all odds, retained a distinctive identity. Leaner, and darker than modern Sri Lankans, their original religion - cherishing demons, and deities - was associated with the dead and the certainty that the spirits of relatives killed can cause good or bad outcomes. Their language, unique to them, is now almost – but not quite - extinct. Their DNA almost exactly matches that of Balangoda Man.

Barely a couple of competent arrow shots away from where Balangoda Man lay down and died is Kiripokunahela, a flat-topped rocky hill. The spot, at first sight apparently wholly unremarkable, presents to the adventurous traveller (for to get to the site requires a willingness to hike far in hot sun whilst constantly checking a compass), what is quite possibly the island's first and most eminent art gallery.

Hidden in a shallow cave, the most minimalist of minimalist salons, a leopard faces off against a man riding an elephant. Painted in a thick white paste, this infinitely ageless portraiture has defied most scientific analysis. All its admirers seem to agree that it is the work of tribes that predated and, most likely, gave rise to the Veddas of Lenama.

This most singular of all Vedda tribes is famous for having been later annihilated by the Lenama leopards, as a punishment ordered by the Murugan god of Kataragama for crimes and wickedness now long since forgotten. Only one person is said to have survived the devastation; his testament, passed down through his ancestors, recalls leopards far bigger than those familiar to the region, with stripes not just spots, reddish fur, and massive paws.

Curiously, the animal's reddish fur was later also witnessed by Hugh Neville, the impossibly Renaissance civil servant and scholar of anthropology, archaeology, botany, ethnology,

folklore, geography, geology, history, mythology, palaeography, philology, and zoology. Encountering the beast in the 1880s, he observed that it “stood higher than any I have seen before and was remarkably thin. The tail was of the full length and unusually long. While the fur was of a dark tawny orange with no appearance of spots”.

Neville is also the only reliable source for the Nittaewo, said to be a diminutive and still earlier version of the Vedda, standing three to four feet tall, covered in reddish hair like tiny Yetis, and whose language amounted to a sort of burbling or birds' twittering. Neville noted that their name may have derived from the Singhala word "nigadiwa," used to describe the primate tribes that preyed on Prince Vijaya.

Whatever the Nittaewo’s distant ancestral relationship to the Vedda, it was insufficient to secure their ultimate survival.  Neville recounts that the last members of this miniature race were genocidally suffocated by smoke forced into their cave over three days by the Vedda themselves sometime around 1800.

# THREE

## A SLOW RETREAT

Successful for a time, the early Vedda tribes terrified and excited island visitors.

It was the early Vedda tribes of Yaksha and Naga that Fa-Hsien, the 5th-century CE traveller, had in mind when he conjured up his fable of early Sri Lanka in his book "A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms," a colourful travelogue that rivets the early archaeological origins of the country to flamboyant fables and macabre myths.

"The country," wrote Fa-Hsien, in the precise and scholarly prose you might expect of a monk whose name could be literally translated as "Illustrious master of the Law," "initially had no human inhabitants, but was occupied only by spirits and nagas, with which merchants of various countries carried on a trade. When the trafficking was taking place, the spirits did not show themselves. They set forth their precious commodities, with labels of the price attached to them; while the merchants made their purchases according to the price, and took the things away."

Fa-Hsien is said to have stayed on the island, recording all he saw sometime around 408-410 CE, making it, it was rumoured, an unlikely home for himself in a remote cave in Yatagampitiya, miles from Kalutara, that could, most unexpectedly, be twinned with distant Balangoda.

Hidden beneath its floor were found the 37,000-year-old remains of another Stone Age man, boasting the same wide jawbones, extensive palate and teeth as his northerly cousin. But neither kinship nor the unusual size of some of their body parts could ultimately save either Stone Age settler.

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives," wrote an observer compelled to put on paper what Charles Darwin had perhaps thought but never actually said; "nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change." And if the exterminated Nittaewo demonstrated an ultimate deficit of such a capability, the Vedda themselves were to do little better.

As the first tantalising hints of the Stone Age's transition into the Iron Age rippled across the land, new waves of colonisation from India arrived on the island, mixing with the principal Vedda tribes.

Mix — and fight, for as new travellers arrived from the sub-continent,

Balangoda man and his ancestors were pushed into the more inaccessible parts of the country, especially the rainforests, a small part of which, Sinharaja Forest Reserve, miraculously survives in its original state today.

Today, digested and intermarried into Sinhalese culture, forcibly moved on by repeated government development initiatives and water harvesting projects, barricaded from the forests and caves that nurtured them and driven from hunter-gathering into the narrow world of subsistence rice farming, a few still perform their ancient rites, especially for death, when the body is covered by leaves and honey is offered to ancestors and river deities. "We pray," noted one survivor, "for their afterlife so that their souls will belong to the deities; they will look after us."

Even from the start, the Vedda's struggle with the new settlers was a deeply unequal one. Using the advanced technology of the Iron Age, the new colonialists were able to clear land and plant crops, mine for metals like copper, and even establish pearl fisheries, each advance securing them an ever-greater share of the land's resources.

By 1500 BCE, there is evidence of cinnamon being exported to the ancient Egyptians. A series of major excavations in Anuradhapura dating to around 900 BCE has uncovered abundant treasure, including artefacts that show the use of iron, the domestication of horses and cattle, the use of high-quality pottery and possibly even the cultivation of rice. The settlement was significant – even by today's standards: four hectares.

Other equally large settlements undoubtedly still await discovery. One that has already been unearthed and studied is the burial mound at Ibbankutuwa near Dambulla, dating to around 1,000 BCE. Here, a wealth of pottery vessels interred with the dead contain ornaments of bronze and copper, beads, and, most interesting of all, stones such as carnelian and onyx that could only have come to the island from India.

# FOUR

## GILDING THE LILLY

By the early 7th century BCE, evidence of the Brahmi script in an early form of Sinhala appears.

Inventive, adaptive, increasingly sophisticated - urban living was arriving, whether as an independent island-wide development or because of the rapid spread of urbanised culture from India, still using Adam's Bridge as a convenient thoroughfare, is still the stuff of impassioned academic debate. Either way, the evolutionary ball was rolling like never before. From urban living came city-states. And into one of these, in 543 BCE, stepped the Indian Prince, Vijaya.

Prince Vijaya and his band of flowers supercharged the human side of the "natural workshop of evolution" that was the island of Sri Lanka. His arrival, and that of others, now long forgotten, later migrants, ignited the creation of a Singhala culture that would make the land stand out as unmistakably different to any other country as the Rare Vesak Orchid (Dendrobium Maccarthiae) is to the 100,000+ hybridised orchid species worldwide.

This orchid, named for an obscure British Governor and nascent trainspotter from the 1860s, Charles MacCarthy, is found only in the deep forests around Ratnapura and Sinharaja. Here in dark, damp thickets, it produces large pinkish-purple petals picked out with deeper purple borders, very occasionally throwing off a pure white variant that sends orchites and anthophiles into startling bursts of rapture.

Made possible only by its degree of separation from the outside world, the orchid's coloured petals cannot survive the sun, and the plant withers into a modest oblivion when exposed to too much light. Of the country's 74 endemic orchids, it is the one to have the most excellent favour with patriots who have proposed it as the best possible replacement for the blue water lily (Nymphaea nouchali), adopted in 1986 as the country's national flower.

This unfortunate flower choice, made by a government committee that confused it with a violet and a more invasive water lily (Nymphaea × erangae), led to such confusion and consternation that formal stamps, textbooks and presidential greeting cards still sport the rogue lily masquerading as the national flower.

But perhaps the very pandemonium around its symbolism gives it an unlooked-for degree of perfection as

the nation's national flower. Like colonialism itself, migration, ethnicity, national identity and binary perceptions of a pure and perfect past, the torturous and tricky tale of the country's Vesak Orchid and Water Lily is as good a way as any to view Prince Vijaya and the dawning of a Singhala culture, no less dazzling and unique for all it borrowed and transferred.

"We shouldn't be hesitant in selecting a new national flower," remarked Pradeep Rajatewa, founder of the Flora Sri Lanka website, "if the existing one has a confusing identity, the concept of a national flower shouldn't be concrete." "I am," sang Gloria Gaynor, an artist much favoured by Sri Lanka's Dilmah Tea Radio Station, " what I am; I am my own special creation; So come take a look; Give me the hook or the ovation."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer. He was born Cornish, in Colombo and raised with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. He gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as possible.

He worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board directorfor  sales, art, and marketing; at HarperCollins India; Hachette's consumer learning division; and launched Oxford University Press's first online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka to rescue a spice plantation that had gone feral in the jungle. Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams, and overseen by several small schnauzers. It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at sriolankapodcast.com.

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