

The Trade Goods in Ancient Sri Lanka

¹Dr. Geethani Amratunga and ²Dr. Nadeesha Gunawardana

¹Department of Sociology and ²Department of History, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka
Email: ¹geethaniamarathunga@gmail.com, ²nadee@kln.ac.lk

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Abstract: In this paper it is expected to exam few items which have exported and imported during the ancient Sri Lanka. As all these items were potential trade goods during the early historic times, an attempt is made here to understand the level of their industrial production. It was the king who decided the price of the items of royal consumption such as elephants, horses, jewels and gold. The Indian and classical literary sources refer to Sri Lankan exports, especially pearls, precious stones and textiles. They had a good Indian market. In this research paper pearls, textiles, gems, elephants, beads, variety of timber production from the coconut tree are discussed under the exported items. The items like Carnelian, intaglios, Lapis Lazuli, horses and gold are evaluated under the imported items.

Keywords: export, import, trade, items, production.

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The production of trade items like gemstones, spices, forest products, pearls, steel and other related objects requires technical skills. For instance, gemstones need a comprehensive mineral zone and highly specialized artisans; spice production needs a controlled environment; pearl fishing needs specialized divers and favorable sea conditions where pearl oysters can grow; steel production requires a specialized technical know-how (Rajan 2011:183).

Exported items

I. Pearls

Pearl (*mutthu* in Tamil) is considered as the queen among the jewels (N. Athiyaman 2000:1). The *Mahāvamsa* says that the king Vijaya consecrated the daughter of the Pāṇḍu king with solemn ceremony, as his queen; and he bestowed wealth on his ministers. Every year he sent to his wife's father a shell – pearl worth twice hundred thousand pieces of money (MV 1950. 7:72-73). The Sri Lankan products such as precious stones, pearls, chanks, turtle shell and cloth had been in demand from a very early time (Gunawardana 1990:31).

The *Mahāvamsa* refers to eight kinds of pearls, presented to the Emperor Aśoka by the King Dēvānampiyatissa (circa 250-210 B.C.E.). The eight kinds of pearls are horse-pearl, elephant-pearl, waggon-pearl, myrobalan pearl, bracelet pearl, ring pearl, kakūḍha fruit pearl and common pearl. The Pāli literature *Abhidhānappadīpikā* also reports these eight types of pearl as quoted in *Mahāvamsa* (Childers 1976:1061). Devaraj and Ravichandran say about

one million chanks of different varieties are collected each year in the Gulf of Mannar region in recent years (1991:102). According to the *Mahāvamsa* following the demise of the king Mutaseewa, at the time of the consecration of the king Dēvānampiyatissa, these pearls found from the ocean and laid upon the shore in heaps (*MV* 1950. 11:14,15).

During the king Dutthagāmanī's (circa 161-137 B.C.E.) reign in a Westerly direction from the city, at a distance of five yōjanas, near the landing place of Ūruvela, pearls in size like to great myrobalan fruits, mingled with coral, six waggon loads, came forth to the dry land. The king was alerted about a fisherman who piling up in a heap pearls together with corals in a vessals (*MV* 1950. 28:36-37).

Megasthenes (3rd B.C.E.) says that Taprobane (Sri Lanka) is separated from the main land by a river and the inhabitants are called Palaigonoī, and their country is more productive of gold and large pearls than India (Crindle 1972:62). As recorded by the Faxian, in the north of the royal city (Anurādhapura) a great tower with the height of 470 feet had been adorned with gold, silver, and every precious substances (Beal 1993:150-151). Further it is mentioned that at Abhayagiri (the mountain without fear), where 5,000 priests dwelled, there was a hall of the Buddha, which is covered with gold and silver, engraved work, conjoined with all the precious substances. In the midst of this hall was a figure of the Buddha which is of about 22 feet in height. The entire body glitters and sparkles with the seven precious substances (Beal 1993:151). Further it had been recorded that in the right hand, a pearl of inestimable value is found (Beal 1993:151).

Yuwan Chwang (645 C.E) mentions a Sri Lankan tūpa having on its top a brilliant light from the pearl during the clam nights (Athiyaman 2000:26). Iban Khurdadbeh (844-888 C.E.) mentions the established pearl fishery of Sri Lankan coast (Sastri 1972:120). The two Arab writers called Suleiman and Abu Ziad (916 C.E.) mention about the pearl and chank fishery of Sri Lanka. Alberuni (1030 C.E.) states that earlier there were pearl banks in the bay of Serandip (Sri Lanka), but at the time of his visit they had been abandoned (Athiyaman 2000:26).

Though, the pearls were available in the Persian Gulf, a richer source was in the Gulf of Mannar at the tip of the peninsular India, facing the coast of Sri Lanka. This region also has one of the most productive chank fisheries in the world (Ray 1994:14). The chief sources of pearls were located in South India and Ceylon (Verma 2009:73). Pearls from the Pāntiya kingdom were famous from ancient times and are mentioned in the *Rāmāyana*, *Arthaśāstra* and also in the *Periplus*, *Māngulam inscription*, the earliest Tamil Brāhmī inscription datable to 3rd century B.C.E. in South India, provides evidence of the state control over pearl-fishery and trade even from this early date. An inscription from Kīlavalavu (2nd century B.C.E.) refers to Tonti the Pāntiya port on the East Coast, which was involved in pearl fishery and trade from early times (Mahadevan 2003:123). The occurrence of chank and pearl shell remaining all along the North Western Sri Lanka and in Jaffna peninsula indicates an exchange network from the Southern and South Western coast of India to the coastal Sri Lanka (Seneviratne 1985:522; Ray 1994:14). Sūkaratittha or Hūrātota (Kayts) and Ūruvela at the mouth of the Kalā Oya all were intimately associated with the pearl and chank fisheries. Evidence shows that huge quantities of pearl oysters have been collected from the Gulf of Mannar of India and Sri Lankan region even before the Christian era and is continued up to this century with short interruptions (Athiyaman 2000:8). When comparing to the south Indian epigraphy, the Māngulam Brāhmī inscription no. 03, belonged to the 2nd B.C.E. is of great significance.

The superintendent of pearls and kāviti of the merchant guild of Vellarai, caused to be given the cave (Mahadevan 2003:318-319). He was presumably a minister or a high official (as indicated by his title kāviti), entrusted with the responsibility of superintending pearl fisheries (Mahadevan 2003:123). In the *Arthaśāstra*, pearls and chank are described as highly valued products of the Indo- Sri Lankan straits (Ray 1994:19).

II. Textiles

Goods such as textiles, gold, pearls, gems and perfume were of high taxation. The *Rājataranganī*, a Kaśmir Chronicle illustrates the fact that smooth cotton clothes had been exported to India where the consort of the king Mirikula of Huna clan was the recipient (Gunasingha 1961:181). It is mentioned that the silk clothes, brought by the Indian traders were purchased by the Persian traders in Sri Lanka.

III. Gems

The *Mahāvamsa* mentions the effect of Dēvānampiyatissa's merit, the gems of sapphire, beryl and ruby found in Sri Lanka (MV 1950. 11:16-17). From the northerly direction from the city, in a cave opening on the Pelirāpikagāma tank, four gems had found. A hunter having seen the above reported to the king (MV 1950. 28: 36-37). The *Dīpavamsa* also mentions that, because of the merits of Dēvānampiyatissa, the gems were found in Malaya (DV 1992. 11:20). The main income of the kings in the Rōhana kingdom was the gem trade. This is one of the main reasons why Sri Lanka is known as "*Rathnadeepa*".

At the time queen Vihāra Mahādevi bore a son named Duttagāminī, seven ships laden with gems have arrived to the island (MV 1950. 22:60-61). The slab inscription no:1 of Mahinda IV mentions that the beautiful "Denā Vehera" shone with gems of various kinds (EZ 1912. vol. i: 227).

The Faxian the Chinese monk who visited Sri Lanka in the 5th century, recorded that most of the people in Sri Lanka produced precious stones and pearls. Further it is recorded that, the king sent a guard to protect the place. If any gem is found, the king used to claim three out of ten of its value (Beal 1993:148). The *mani* (gem) is a famous one in Buddhist formulae, e.g. in the well known Tibetan invocation, "Om mani padmē, Hum!". Although generally it is rendered by the English "pearl", it probably carbuncle (Beal 1993:148). The finding of two rings of Greek style in the ancient Greek city of Ai Khanum is of great significance in this regard, because each of them was mounted with a precious stone, only attested in Sri Lanka; one with a blue sapphire and the other with a star ruby (Bopearachchi & Flandrin 2005:209; Bopearachchi 2006:43).

One of the biggest industrial sites, actively involved in gemstone production and steel industry in South India is Kodumanal. The terracotta figuring of Mediterranean, Roman coins and a shard of rouletted ware have been unearthed from this place (Rajan 2011:192). Besides, several inscribed potsherds accounting more than 300 were reported at Kodumanal. Most of them carry personal names. Among them, a few sherds carry names of Sinhala origin thereby indicating their close relationship. The site Alagankulam has also yielded such evidences. Kāvēripattinam is one of the sites in Tamil Nadu met with potsherd engraved in Brāhmī script with Prākṛit language.

IV. Elephants

Strabo and *Megasthenes* mention that elephant tusks, turtle shells as well as elephants were sent to India from Sri Lanka. It is understood that the king had a monopoly on the collection

of taxes from the elephants, pearls and gems. Among the taxes, incurred by the foreign trade, a tax called "*Hathipathi*" may have existed and it had been collected by trading the elephants (Siriwardana 1961:201). This particular tax had apparently been collected when exporting of elephants.

V. Beads

Hundreds of beads, made of crystal, glass, stone, ivory, bone, shell and clay and above all semiprecious and precious stones were found at Ridiyagama and *Kālaniya*. Among the beads of semiprecious and precious stones, carnelian, lapis lazuli, rock crystals, agate and amethysts were found in hundreds (Bopearachchi 2008:10-11).

The discovery of unperforated beads together with fragments of semiprecious stones confirms beyond doubt, the existence of a bead making industry at Ridiyagama, Tissamahārāma and Giribāwa (Bopearachchi 2008:12). The presence of raw glass, unfinished beads, remains of melting furnaces and alumina sand source at Giribawa and its proximity, enable us to think of this site as glass producing workshop (Bopearachchi 2008:12).

Beads constitute an important class of finds in most of the South Indian sites. These sites include Amarāvati, Dhulikatta, Kōtalingala, Peddabankūr and Yelēswarm (in Andhra Pradesh), Arikamēdu (Pondicherry), Kañchipuram, Appukallu, Tiruvāmāthūr, Kāraikādu, Mallapādi, Perūr, Thāndikudi, Porunthal, Kodumanal, Karūr, Uraiyūr and Alagankulam (in Tamil Nadu). Among the sites, Kodumanal is one of the best known sites for gem stone industry (Rajan 1997:79). Some of these sites, especially the Tamil Nadu sties, have yielded coins (both Roman and indigenous) ceramics and especially beads, similar to those reported from Mānthai, Anurādhapura, Kālaniya, Ridiyagama, Tissamahārāma and other early sites of Sri Lanka. The beads from Ridiyagma are very similar, in colour and shape, to the types, recovered from four five major sites of South India, Arikamēdu, Kāraikādu, Uraiyūr, Kodumanal and Alagankulam (Nagaswamy 1991: 247-254; Bopearachchi 2008:12). The glass bead making industry at Arikamēdu was large and productive (Francis 1987:29). The majority of the beads found here are spheroid or pear-shaped similar to those from Ridiyagama. The Lug-collared beads are identical to the ones from Ridiyagama (Bopearachchi 2008:13). Recently, glass re-working furnace along with several thousands of glass beads were recovered at Porunthal in Tamil Nadu (Rajan 2010:82-102).

It is now clear that most of the beads, collected in the excavations or from the surface explorations at Ridiyagama, Kālaniya and Giribāwa are also attested in all the important settlement sites of South India. The conclusion to be drawn from these discoveries is that they belonged to the same trade network (Bopearachchi 2008:14).

VI. Variety of timber

It appears that Sri Lanka provided certain essential facilities for mariners. A wide variety of timber, used for making frames, planking, masts, spars and oars of boats and ships was available in Sri Lanka, particularly in the Southwestern parts of the Island. Domba (*calophyllum inophyl-lum*), valued for its flexibility and the kos (*Ar-tocarpus heterophyllus*) was also among the varieties of wood, available in Sri Lanka which were in demand among the shipwrights (Gunawardana 1990:31).

VII. Products from the Coconut tree

Coconut oil was perhaps another product which was in demand at the ports. The ropes used to tie up the planking had to be oiled regularly, once in about four to six months (*The Sindbad*

Voyage 1982:68). One of the earliest instances of a coconut plantation, mentioned in an inscription is from a record, set up by *Usāvadāta* at Nasik in Western India. (The inscription is dated in the year 42 of an unspecified era. If it was the Śaka era, the date would be equivalent to 120 C.E. (*EI* 1905-6: vol. viii:82-84). In Sri Lanka, the first reference to a coconut plantation (*nadira arabe*) is in an inscription from the reign of Mahādātika Mahānāga (9-21 C.E.) found at Mihintalē (*IC* 1983:32). In the 5th and the 6th centuries, there are references to extensive coconut plantations, some of which were owned by monasteries (Gunawardana 1979:54-58; 1990:31).

The Samgam literature Pattinappālai mentions that food products (*īlathu unavu*) were imported from Sri Lanka at the port of Kāvēripattanam. But by the end of the 9th century “The people of Serandib pay attention to the cultivation of coconut,” Al Idrisi noted. He further recorded that Arab ships from Oman and Yeman used to come to this Island and to other Islands in its vicinity to obtain rope, trunks of coconut trees, for mats and timber for planking as also to place orders for ships which were constructed there (Gunawardana 1990:31).

Imported Items

There are several items imported from India in exchange of goods. Items which were imported were carnelian, intaglios, lapis lazuli, gold, silver, copper, glass, beads, different kinds of less valuable gems, high quality pottery, liquor and horses.

I. Carnelian

Carnelian belonging to the chalcedony group is not found in Sri Lanka and was certainly imported from Gujarat, where, according to the archaeological evidence, it was produced without interruption from Harappan times down to the early historic period. Even today, the local industries are known for gem stone industry. It is well known that the reddish colour of carnelian is artificially produced by heating dull brown stones with a high iron content (Bopearachchi 2006:42).

The number of carnelian beads, collected as surface finds at Ridiyagama exceeds one hundred. In addition, the perforated beads from Ridiyagam are similar to the ones, found at the Ibbankatuwa megalithic cemetery dated back to 770-395 B.C.E. (Bopearachchi 2006:42). Two of the commodities in demand among the megalithic communities would have been carnelian and horses. Carnelian and etched carnelian beads occur extensively in Megalithic burials, only in Peninsular India but also in Sri Lanka as well. It is however, likely that carnelian, in worked and unworked forms is found in the third century B.C.E. at Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka.

The presence of early historic Black-and-Red ware and North Indian carnelian beads both at Ridiyagama and at the megalithic cemetery of Ibbankatuwa is not accidental (Bopearachchi 2006:42). The most interesting discovery in this respect is a carnelian blank. The same type of carnelian blanks was also found in the recent Jētavanārāma excavations (Ratnayaka 1990:45-49). The majority of intaglios and carved jewels from the Jētavanārāma project were carnelian. One carved carnelian seal, depicting a figure holding a globe is certainly an imitation of Roman prototype (Ratnayaka 1990:50).

II. Intaglios

In addition to the coins, the findings of carnelian and lapis lazuli beads and intaglios, not only at Māntai and Anurādhapura but also from the recent excavations and explorations at

Ridiyagama, is of greatest significance, because both categories of stones were certainly imported to the island from North India and Afghanistan (Bopearachchi 2006:42). The author of the *Periplus* mentions on three occasions that these stones were exported from Barygaza (*Periplus* 48-51). The intaglios, depicting a seated wild bora, unearthed from Akurugoda (Tissamahārāma), is also important in this context (Bopearachchi and Wickremesinhe 1999:124; Bopearachchi 2006:43).

III. Lapis lazuli

The second category of beads is those made from lapis lazuli, because the only known source for this material in antiquity was Badakshan (in northern Afghanistan). The author of the *Periplus* mentions lapis Lazuli among the products, exported from Barbaricum. This precious material doubtless travelled along the sea route to reach the southern coast of Sri Lanka. Hema Ratnayake has also observed that on a painted slab, belonging to one of the frontispieces (*vāhalkada*) of the Jētavana stūpa, there are traces of lapis lazuli underneath the line of geese (Ratnayake 1993:84). He dates it to the 3rd century C.E., to the reign of king Mahāsēna, who built this feature of the stupa.

IV. Horses

Sri Lanka's location and its wealth and resources were also the promptings, behind many of foreign invasions. The two Damilas, Sēna and Guttaka, sons of a freighter who brought horses hither, conquered the king Sūratissa, at the head of a great army and reigned both (together) twenty-two years justly (*MV* 1950. 21:10-11). As mentioned in the Sri Lankan Chronicles, Tamils came to the island as horse traders. The king Gajabāhu had built a big hall for the horses in the city (*MV* 1950. 35:122).

In *Āvāmadāyikā Vimāna Vannanā* in the *Vimānavatthu Atthakathā* (*Paramattha Dīpanī*) when a dhamma word explained the following example has been given. The gruel dāna is worth than one hundred *kahavanu*, one hundred horses belonging to the clan of Aśwarata, one hundred chariots and the jewelleries of one hundred thousand women (*Vimā.Att* 2008:127, 227). This may give some indications on the trade of horses. The high breed of horses belonged to the *Aśwarata*. One story in the *Vērañja Kānda* in the *Vinayattakathā* (*Samantapāsādikā*) mentions that the horse traders have come from the Uttarāpatha in India with the five hundred horses. It is further mentioned that the Uttarāpatha is good for breeding horses (*Vina.Att* 2009:162).

Strabo on the authority of Megasthenese, states that during the Mauryan period there was a royal monopoly on the ownership of horses (Crindle 1887:88-89). There was an active private trade in horses, though unlike other commodities, it was the king who decided the price of the animal (*Tandulanāli Jātaka*). The horse was not a common possession and only a few chiefs are described as possessing horses and chariots (Gurukkal 1989:159-176, Ray 1994:39). The *Arthaśāstra* describes that the best quality of horses as those from Kāmbōja, Sindhu, Aratta and Vanayu Kāmbōja, identified with the Qandahar region of Afghanistan, continued as a major supplier of horses up to the Pāla period (Ray 1994:38).

The depiction of the Sinhala legend in cave xvii at Ajantā, shows that three ships, carrying an army to Sri Lanka, which include riders on elephants and horses. Owing to the spatial constraints, very little structural detail has been shown in the paintings, what is significant; nevertheless is the transportation of horses and elephants on the maritime route, both to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Ray 1994:39). In this context one has to recall the occurrence of ornaments adorned on horses unearthed in a megalithic grave in Mahārāstra datable to B.C.E.

Likewise, horse stirrups were recovered from a transected cist at Kodumanal and Porunthal in association with large number of antiquities particularly semi-precious stone beads.

V. Gold

The story of the Mahādēva Upāsaka reveals the way he embarked to Swarnabūmi to obtain the gold (*Seehala* 1958:82). The *Mahāvamsa* says that a ship, filled with vessels of gold has arrived and the people announced it to the king (*MV* 1950. 21:64). There are two opinions on the aspect of Swarnabūmi. Ian Glover felt that Thailand is known for high tin bronze which is considered equal to gold. However, several gold objects were recovered from Harappan sites and also in megalithic graves of south India.

Conclusion

The import and export items of Sri Lanka clearly points to the continuous maritime trade interaction with India, West and South East Asia from the time of Iron Age. The evidences are more visible in Early Historic times. The spread of language like Prākṛit, script like Brāhmī, religion like Buddhism and other cultural item that encountered in Sri Lanka and in India particularly in South India has to be seen in this background.

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