

SERENDIPITY: THE ROMAN DISCOVERY OF TAPROBANE³

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Taprobane (Serendip, Sri Lanka) was accidentally discovered by the Romans when a ship, sailing around Arabia, was swept astray by a storm. The story of the discovery can be found in Pliny the Elder's (1st century author, army officer, statesman) *Natural History*. Based on the analysis of written accounts and physical sources my paper focuses on the island's integration into the Roman economy and long-distance trade from its discovery until the late Roman period.

Key words: Annius Plocamus, Natural History, Pliny the Elder, Roman – Indian Trade, Sri Lanka/Taprobane

Sri Lanka (Ceylon) was known by many names in Antiquity; one of these is the Sanskrit 'Lion Island' (Sihala-dipa, Sielediva, Serendiva, Serendippa), but it was also referred to as the 'Isle of Pearls' or the 'Isle of Gemstones' (*Schwarz 1974 JAH, 21–48*). Greek and Roman authors used the name Taprobane, on the basis of Sanskrit Tamraparni. The first Western accounts about the island come from authors who never visited the area, so the data they provide are remarkably discordant and contain a host of fabulous elements. Pliny is our first Roman *auctor* who, in his *Natural History*, does not only lean on the descriptions by earlier Greek and Roman authors, but also on the accounts provided by the envoys from Taprobane to Rome.

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“Hactenus a priscis memorata. Nobis diligentior notitia Claudii principatu contigit legatis etiam ex ea insula advectis.⁴ Id accidit hoc modo. Anni Plocami, qui maris Rubri⁵ vectigal a fisco redemerat, libertus circa Arabiam⁶ navigans aquilonibus⁷ raptus praeter Carmaniam,⁸ XV die Hippuros⁹ portum eius invectus, hospitali regis clementia sex mensum tempore inbutus adloquio percunctanti postea narravit Romanos et Caesarem. Mirum in modum in auditis iustitiam ille suspexit, quod pari pondere denarii¹⁰ essent in captiva pecunia, cum diversae imagine indicarent a pluribus factos,¹¹ et hoc maxime sollicitatus ad amicitiam legatos¹² quattuor misit principe eorum Rachia.¹³ Ex iis cognitum, D esse

- 4 Claudius – Roman emperor between AD 41–54. Cf. Solin. 53, 8–9: *In Claudii principatum de Taprobane haec tantum noveramus: tunc enim fortuna patefecit scientiae viam latiore. Nam libertus Anni Plocami, qui tunc Rubri maris vectigal administrabat, Arabiam petens, aquilonibus praeter Carmaniam raptus, quinto decimo demum die adpulsus est ad hoc litus portumque advectus qui Hippuros nominatur. Sex deinde mensibus sermonem perdoctus admissusque ad conloquia regis quae compererat reportavit.*
- 5 Mare Rubrum (Red Sea) – the term was used in a wider sense in the ancient world, as it included the greater part of the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf.
- 6 Arabia – the term here refers to the Arabian peninsula.
- 7 The *aquilo* is a strong, gale-force wind.
- 8 Carmania – present-day Kerman on the northern shore of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.
- 9 Hippuros – (Gr. *Hippuroi*); cf. Ptol. 7, 1, 83.
- 10 Denarius – Roman silver coin, introduced in the 3rd or 2nd century BC. After Augustus’ currency reform (23 BC) its weight and value remained constant until Nero’s reign. From Augustan times onwards it was worth sixteen as, and its weight equalled 1/84th of the Roman pound.
- 11 Cf. Solin. 53, 9–10: *Stupuisset scilicet regem pecuniam quae capta cum ipso erat, quod tametsi signata disparibus foret vultibus, tamen parem haberet modum ponderis: cuius aequalitatis contemplatione cum Romanam amicitiam flagrantius concupivisset, Rachia principe legatos ad nos usque misit, a quibus cognita sunt universa.*
- 12 Legati (ambassadors) – there are literary references from the Augustan Age to the arrival of Indian envoys (RGDA 31, 1; Suet. Aug. 21, 6), but no other source mentions the mission from Taprobane.
- 13 Rachia – most probably an existing person. It is debated, however, whether it comes from the name of a rank or a proper name. The designation may originate from the words *raja* (king, originally an elected military leader), or Sinhalese *ratija* or *ratika* (district head), or Pali *ratthika* (Skt.



oppida,¹⁴ *portum contra meridiem adpositum oppido Palaesimundo*,¹⁵ *omnium ibi clarissimo ac regio, CC plebis*” (André et Filliozat 1980; Brodersen 1996; Conte 1982; Rackham 1942).

“So much we have learned from the old writers. It has been our lot, however, to obtain a more accurate knowledge of the island, for in the reign of the Emperor Claudius ambassadors came to his court therefrom, and under the following circumstances. A freedman of Annius Plocamus, who had farmed from the treasury the Red Sea revenues, while sailing around Arabia was carried away by gales of wind from the north beyond Carmania. In the course of fifteen days he had been wafted to Hippuri, a port of Taprobane, where he was humanely received and hospitably entertained by the king; and having in six months’ time learned the language, he was able to answer the questions he was asked. The king particularly admired the Romans and their emperor as men possessed of an unheard-of love of justice, when he found that among the money taken from the captive the denarii were all of equal weight, although the different images stamped on them showed that they had been coined in the reigns of several emperors. This influenced him most of all to seek an alliance with the Romans, and he accordingly despatched to Rome four ambassadors, of whom the chief was Rachia. From these it was ascertained that in Taprobane there are 500 towns, and that there is a harbour facing the south, adjacent to the city of

rástrika – governor), or from the proper name *Rakkha* still used on the island (Schwarz 1974, 170; Karttunen 1997, 341; Geiger 1986, 132–133, 138). From a statement in the *Anguttara Nikaya* (3, 76) Schwarz believes that *ratthika* means a person entitled to inherit, that is an heir to the throne, and in his opinion this title may have suited the serious mission of the embassy (Schwarz 1974, 170). However, the possibility that it referred to a proper name cannot be ruled out.

- 14 *D oppida* (500 towns) – this number is obviously an exaggeration, but the noun *ur* was originally also used for smaller settlements, which may explain the misinformation (André – Filliozat 1980, 115).
- 15 *Palaesimundum* – a town and river on the island of Taprobane. In the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* 61 it is the name of the island itself (Casson 1989). Ptolemaios (7, 4, 1) gives Simundu as the old (Gr. *palaaios*) name of the island.



Palaesimundus, the most famous city in the island, the king's place of residence and inhabited by a population of 200,000."¹⁶

In connection with the discovery of Taprobane by the Romans, scholars agree that Pliny's account narrates a historically authentic event. However, several aspects are disputed: the role of Annius Plocamus in Roman economic life; the date of his *libertus'* diverted sea journey (1); the role of Taprobane in western long-distance trade, and the beginning and the character of the trade relationships between the Roman Empire and Taprobane (2).

1. The name of Annius Plocamus, a lessee of the Red Sea customs duty, is not mentioned in literary sources other than Pliny; however, some inscriptions show the name with different *praenomens*.¹⁷ In 1936, a Latin–Greek bilingual inscription was found in Wadi Menih, Egypt, containing a note by Lysa(s), a slave of P. Annius Plocamus.¹⁸ Wadi Menih was a resting place used by Western merchants headed towards India along the caravan route connecting Coptus with Berenice (Charlesworth 1925; Avanzini 1994; Casson 1991; Székely 2010, 63–69). The caravan journey took twelve days, and provisions, according to Pliny, were provided at the eight—actually, eleven—stations (Plin. 6, 26, 102–103; De Romanis 1997, 212; Székely 2010, 63–69). Six of these were *hydreuma*, 'watering stations', whereas the others were simple desert stations without water. Wadi Menih is located forty kilometres from the first watering station of the route, where a rock cavity provided a shady resting place for traders.¹⁹ This is indicated by the inscriptions carved in the rock cavity, including the inscription by P. Annius Plocamus' slave.²⁰ The inscription can

16 Translation by J. W. McCrindle (Majumdar 1960, 346).

17 Annius Plocamus, A. Annius Plocamus (CIL XV 798; 7391), P. Annius Plocamus (CIL X 2389). Cf. De Romanis 1997, 188; 214–216.

18 LYSA P. ANNI PLOCAMI VENI ANNO XXXV/III NON. IVL.

19 Because of the heat the traders mostly travelled by night and rested during the day. Cf. Plin. 6, 26, 103.

20 Meredith's translation, published in 1953, was based on a photograph taken of the Latin inscription and on Winkler's handwritten copy of the Greek inscription (Meredith 1953, 38–40). Meredith dated the Greek inscription to 2 July 6 AD according to the Alexandrian variant of the



be dated to AD 6, 2 or 5 July.²¹ Since the inscription found in Wadi Menih is near a road to one of the most important ports on the Red Sea, researchers surmised that Annius Plocamus, mentioned in both the inscription and Pliny, is one and the same person. This led them to the conclusion that the island was not discovered under Claudius, but Augustus; or, alternatively, Annius Plocamus may have been a remarkably long-lived man, as the sources remember him in AD 6 and at least thirty-five years later. Researchers agreed that the *Lysa(s)* of the inscription probably had nothing to do with the *libertus* mentioned by Pliny (Meredith 1953, 38–40; Wheeler 1955, 128; Trautmann 1971, 182; Schwarz 1974, 173–174.).

Schwarz assumes that the *libertus*' sea journey had occurred years before the Taprobane envoys arrived in Rome, but Pliny did not care or did not want to care about the exact description of the *libertus*' journey (Schwarz 1974 JAH, 34). Schwarz, using, among others, the sources of Pauline literature, tried to draw up a chronology as to the arrival of the *libertus* in Taprobane, the beginnings of direct trade between the Western world and the island, and the arrival in Rome of the official Taprobane envoys. He concluded that the *libertus* of Annius Plocamus came to Taprobane at the time of Augustus, at about the same time or somewhat later than King Bhatikabhaya sent some products to the Roman Empire in return for red coral; moreover, at the time of Claudius, an official embassy arrived in Rome from the island (Schwarz 1974, 176; Schwarz 1974 JAH, 38).

De Romanis does not agree with the view that the discovery of Taprobane took place in the age of Augustus. In his

Julian calendar, and the Latin text to 5 July of the same year according to the Roman variant.

- 21 Meredith's explanation for the three-day difference is that, since there was no water in Wadi Menih, *Lysa(s)* went to Wadi Menih el-Heir, where there was a Roman post with water reserves. However, De Romanis thinks this is impossible, because in AD 6 the Roman post had not yet been set up (De Romanis 1997, 213–214.) De Romanis personally visited the site in 1989, and after examining the Greek inscription he concluded that it also records the date of 5 July 6 AD. (De Romanis 1997, 165–172; 202–204.)



opinion, this may have happened during Claudius' reign. He assumes that there was a twelve-month period between the arrival of Annius Plocamus' former slave in the island and Rachia's Roman embassy: a period of six months was spent on language learning, and the embassy had to wait for the north-eastern monsoon to board the ship (De Romanis 1997, 226.). Reading Pliny's description—depicting the King of Taprobane admiring the Romans for their justice, and motivated to seek their friendship—it does not seem likely that he then waited thirty-five or forty years to send his ambassadors to Rome. Accordingly, I agree with De Romanis that the *libertus*' journey did *not* occur at the time of Augustus. I would not, however, limit the period between the arrival of the *libertus* in Taprobane and the embassy to twelve months, as we have no evidence to that effect. Indeed, that could be the earliest possible moment for the embassy to set out, but—given the conditions at the time—the envoys could not be sent out this quickly. Based on the above, the straying voyage of Annius Plocamus' *libertus* occurred either during or shortly before Claudius' reign (André et Filliozat 1980, 113).

Determining the date is a major issue because—although Roman traders had already been familiar with the island of Taprobane and its products through intermediaries—the start of direct and regular trade relationships between the Roman Empire and Taprobane was signalled by the *libertus*' arrival (De Romanis 1997, 173). King Bhatikabhaya's purchase of coral, mentioned by Schwarz, was probably managed by intermediaries, but no far-reaching conclusions may be deduced from this source. The details of the *Vamsatthappakasini* (34, 13–16) are relevant because this is the only source in the ancient literature of India where the word *Romanukharattha*, a reference to the Roman Empire, is found (Schwarz 1974 JAH, 37; Schwarz 1974 Graz, 174–175; De Romanis 1997, 230).²²

The role of Annius Plocamus, a lessee of the Red Sea customs duty, and his *libertus* in contemporary economy is disputed. The

22 This is a compound word, the first part of which, *romanukha*, is the equivalent of the Latin adjective *Romanus*, while the term *rattha* probably means rule, rulership.



occurrence of the name Annius Plocamus, featuring in several inscriptions in the same geographical area for several decades, gives the impression that we are here confronted with several people, families, or several generations of a family who were significant in the area's economy. Their slaves and their *liberti*—who, even after their release, were linked to the business of their former lords—could play a decisive role in the collection of the Red Sea customs duty as well as in the management of the customs stations. The individual journey, economic activity of Annius Plocamus' *libertus* and his name in a literary source, all refer to the growing role and influence of liberated slaves in the Roman Empire of the first century, both in the economic and social spheres (Alföldy 1996; Alföldy 1981, 336–371).

The written records and archaeological finds that have come down to us suggest that the island of Sri Lanka was an important trading centre in ancient times, a kind of hub for a sea route linking Asia with Africa, and thus—indirectly—to Europe (Hermann 1932, 2260–2271; Boisselier 1979; Rosenberger 1996; Boparachchi 1998, 133; Faller 2000; Székely 2004, 57–74; Székely 2011, 81–91).²³ It owed its role in long-distance maritime trade to three important characteristics of the island.

The first was its favourable location: to the south-west of the Indian sub-continent, in the Indian Ocean, the island provided excellent links between Africa and south-west Asia, as well as between south-east Asia and the Far East.

Secondly, the good geographic features of the island are also worth noting. The coast abounds in natural bays, ideal for building ports. The water cascading down from the central mountain slopes widens out in the flat, lush coastal areas into slow, navigable rivers, which allows for the goods arriving by sea to be transported further into the interior of the island.

Thirdly, Sri Lanka, like India, had high-value export items that were sought after in faraway lands, such as pearls (Carswell 1991, 197–203; Gupta – Raman 1994, 167–170; Bellina 2003 285–297; Székely 2006, 32–37), gems, spices, scents, ivory,

23 For the religion and society of early Ceylon, see Szemeka 1969.



turtle shells or elephants, which were recorded to be larger than the ones found in India, and thus more suitable for warfare. According to Megasthenes, Taprobane is richer in gold than India (Schwarz 1976; 233–263). Second-century Ptolemy gives a detailed geographic description of the island, also listing its products: rice, ginger, honey, beryl, sapphire, gold, silver and other ores, as well as tigers and elephants.²⁴ Except for tigers, the list appears to be reliable (Warmington 1974, 118.). Strabo, who lived at the age of Augustus, tells us that Taprobane often sends ivory, turtle shells and other products to the Indian market.²⁵ In Strabo's era, Western merchants purchased Taprobane's goods in the southern Indian markets.²⁶ Ptolemy, however, already reports about Roman merchants who traded directly with the island and even circumnavigated it. The author's enthusiastic prediction that Taprobane would soon become the commercial hub of the Indian Ocean, was only fulfilled later, in the fourth–fifth centuries (Warmington 1974, 120).

There are numerous archaeological excavations in Sri Lankan territory.²⁷ Initially, ancient towns were discovered in the central areas of the island: Anuradhapura, the capital of the island, as well as Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa. At the beginning of the 1980s, Mantai, the most important port of the Mannar peninsula, was discovered (Carswell 1991, 197).²⁸ Mantaka excelled among the other commercial ports due to its close connections with the capital, Anuradhapura. The two cities were connected by the river Aruvi Ari; the straight distance of about 80 kilometres could be covered within two days. Mantai played a similar role in the commercial life of Taprobane's centre to the one Ostia played in Rome's economic life. In the 1990s excavations began in the southern part of the island: the archaeologists

24 Ptol. 7, 4, 1.

25 Strab. 2, 1, 14.

26 From the Tamil and Malabar markets on the Indian shores.

27 Short accounts of the archaeological work on Ceylon are published by the Report on Archaeological Survey of Ceylon.

28 On Taprobane the majority of the pearl shells have been found in the shallow waters of the Gulf of Mannar.



of Harvard University worked at the cities of Ridiyagama and Walawe Ganga (Bopearachchi 1998, 133), whereas the city of Tissamaharama was excavated under a German archaeological project (Weisshaar 2001). In the excavations, large quantities of pottery, as well as glass, stone, ivory, and seashell jewellery, and many precious and semi-precious stones were found. In several places traces of pearl manufacturing sites were unearthed. Among the pearls, reddish brown carnelian and imported blue-green lapis lazuli are quite common. The latter originated from today's Gujarat, a north-western region of India, and from the area of today's Afghanistan.

Due to its geographical location, Sri Lanka established its earliest commercial relations with India, first and foremost with southern India. Southern India was the centre of long-distance trading, which activity became regular in the era of Augustus (Raschke 1978; Dihle 1978; Casson 1991; Begley 1991; Young 2001; Székely 2008). The first Roman merchant ships came to this area primarily for gemstones and pepper; Roman coins also prove the commercial relationships (Turner 1989; Tchernia 1997, 250–276; Székely 2013, 9–15.). Hardly any Roman coins were found on Taprobane from early times: eight denarii from the era of the republic; 14 denarii from the early empire; which, compared with the thousands found in India, show the differences in emphasis in Roman commerce. Moreover, some early Roman coins found on the island may well have been moved there from southern India.

In the fourth century, however, we witness a change: the number of Roman coins considerably increased on Taprobane, indicating that the centre of maritime trade with the Romans gradually moved south, from South India to Sri Lanka. The reasons for this are still a matter of controversy, yet a significant factor may have been the fact that Taprobane, by that time, had seen the end of religious conflicts between the followers of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, with the dawn of peace for almost a century and a half (Rahula 1956; Gombrich 1994.). Religious peace and this quiet period favoured economic prosperity and the flourishing of trade. The heyday of commerce between Rome and Sri Lanka came in the fourth–fifth centuries,



and its end was marked by the Arab conquest of Alexandria in the seventh century.

The embassy of Taprobane's king to Rome was also most likely related to the strengthening of commercial relationships in the fourth century. Ammianus Marcellinus reports that Emperor Iulianus received envoys in 362 from the land of the *Serendivi*.²⁹ According to interpretations of this account, the name of the *Serendivi* bears reference to the inhabitants of Sri Lanka as Persians and Arabs called the island *Serendib* or *Serandib*.

| 58 |

The name of Taprobane in Persian and Arabic—Serendib—is also published in the title of a Venetian publication from 1557: *Peregrinaggio di tre giovani figliuoli del re di Serendippo*, translated by an Armenian from a Persian original to Italian. The Armenian translator thoroughly rewrote the original story and meshed together several Oriental narratives: he wove the Arabic tale of the clever sons of Nizar together with the folk tradition about the Sassanid ruler Bahram V (417–438), famous for his hunting and amorous adventures (Borzsák 2003, 127–128). This Nizar became Giaffer, the legendary king of Serendippo, whose three sons embark on an adventurous journey, and always succeed thanks to their inventiveness, agility, and luck. This adventurous story became popular in English, too, under the title *The Three Princes of Serendip*. Horace Walpole coined the word serendipity as an allusion to this eighteenth-century tale: the three princes in their travels always discovered—by accident or by their cleverness—things they were not looking for (OED 1989).

The discovery of Taprobane by ancient Rome was accomplished by a similarly unexpected, fortunate event: the diversion of the ship of Annius Plocamus' *libertus* and his successful

29 Amm. Marc. 22, 7, 10: *Proinde timore eius adventus per finitimos longeque distantes latius explicato legationes undique solito ocius concurrebant: hinc Transtigritanis pacem obsecrantibus et Armeniis, inde nationibus Indicis certatim cum donis optimates mittentibus ante tempus ab usque Divis et Serendivis, ab australi plaga ad famulandum rei Romanae semet offerentibus Mauris, ab aquilone et regionibus solis, per quas in mare Phasis accipitur, Bosporanis aliisque antehac ignotis legationes vehentibus supplices, ut annua complentes sollemnia intra terrarum genitalium terminos otiose vivere sinerentur.*



landing on the island can be regarded as pure serendipity. The event is also significant from the island's point of view, as its contact with Rome resulted in ancient Sri Lanka's active involvement in early global trade.

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