

Victor Melder Lecture 2024

Sri Lanka -
and the Silk
Road of the Sea

Dr Sanjiva
Wijesinha





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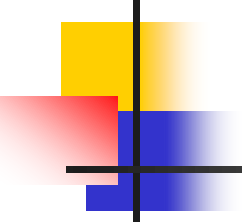
Sri Lanka - and the Silk Road of the Sea

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Sri Lanka - and the Silk Road of the Sea

Dr. Sanjiva Wijesinha

*Member,
UNESCO Maritime Silk Route Expedition 1990-91*



Outline

1. Who is Victor Melder?
2. What are the Silk Roads?
3. Where do Sri Lanka and the Sea fit into the story?

Victor Melder



Friends - from 1988 to 2024

Victor Melder

Our Ambassador in Melbourne *by Dr. Sanjiva Wijesinha*

(From the Island newspaper)

One of the most interesting gentlemen I used to meet during my years in Melbourne was a man called Victor Melder.

Victor was born in Sri Lanka – in Kandy, where he attended St Sylvester's College. Hailing from a railway family (his father and grandfather before him having been "engine-drivers" for the Ceylon Government Railway), it was natural that Victor himself would follow the family tradition and become a CGR driver.

But in 1968, Victor and his wife Esther decided to migrate with their two Galle-born children to Melbourne – where Victor soon found employment in the public service. Starting life in his new country, Victor was appalled (as most migrants to Australia in those days were) at his co-workers' lack of knowledge about his

former home. At first his "educating" of his new friends and neighbours was limited simply to talking to them and correcting some of their misconceptions about our island in the sun- but soon he realized that he needed more information to satisfy the curiosity of all those in Melbourne who wanted to know more.

He gradually started collecting information about Ceylon (as our nation was known in those pre-1972 days) and this collection of newspaper cuttings, magazines, books and journals gradually grew and expanded until it filled a whole room of his house.

As the library grew, so did Victor's reputation – as a walking encyclopaedia about Sri Lanka and matters Sri Lankan – and he was invited to give talks on these subjects to various groups and schools.



Initially he illustrated his talks with pictures and posters, progressing later to lantern slides and finally graduating to Powerpoint presentations. His webpage (at <http://tormel.brinkster.net>) now provides a most user-friendly access to The Victor Melder Sri Lanka Library.



Victor Melder

The library itself (which I had the privilege of visiting myself) is housed in an annexe at the back of his house. It has over 4,500 books on Sri Lanka and around two thousand different magazines – including every issue of the journal of the Dutch Burgher Union (DBU) for the past one hundred years.

There is also much material - such as a complete Index to the Baptisms and Marriages Registry of the Wolvendaal Church from 1706 to 1952 – for those who want to research their genealogy. This resource is particularly popular for those Australians descended from our migrant Burgher families who want to trace their original roots. He also has a small collection of Sri Lankan CDs, DVDs and videos – although sadly he has had to give his 35 year collection of Sri Lanka Sunday newspapers which he had, to a researcher who was able to store them.

The library has been utilized by many students from Melbourne's universities who have found it a valuable source of material for their dissertations and theses – and have found Victor a valuable "unofficial" tutor. It has also been used by famous novelists such as Michelle de Kretser to undertake research about our country in the course of writing their popular works of fiction. He even has groups of school children, accompanied by their teachers, visiting his library to collect material for some of their class presentations.

The beauty of Victor's work is that all his services – allowing visitors to use the material in the library, helping them with answers to their questions or finding out from his vast network of contacts where they can get their answers when he cannot provide the answers himself - are FREE. His has been a labour – nay a vocation - of love, sustained by his own efforts and now that he has retired,

by donations from the occasional well wisher. "If anyone is able to help me with donations of books" says Victor, "I would appreciate them getting in touch with me on tormel@aardvark.net.au"

"When I am no more" he continues, "the entire contents of the library have been willed to Monash University – who have agreed to maintain it as the Victor Melder Wing of the University library."

Sri Lanka has had many High Commissioners in Canberra – appointed by our government to represent this country in Australia. But I believe it is ordinary citizens like Victor – by their love for Sri Lanka, their painstaking efforts and their person-to-person ambassadorial skills – who have done so much for this country among the Australian people.

Much more, perhaps, than some of our salaried diplomatic representatives.

The Silk Roads

- Explorer Von Richthofen (1877)
- *Der Seidenstrasse* (Silk Roads)
- Trade routes linking the ancient cultures of East and West
- Two way transport of commercial goods ("Silk and Spice and all that's nice")
- ALSO: Ideas, Religion, Technology, Culture, Cuisine ...



The Silk Roads



The Silk Roads

Places where traders and sailors stopped to “Rest, Repair, Replenish and Restore” became Nodes along channels of communication



The Silk Roads

What is a NODE?

1. A connection point in a communications network
- point for data transmission and re-distribution
2. Part of a plant stem from which one or more leaves emerge - site of new growth
3. Point of Connection.



- Trading Ports were Receivers and Transmitters of Information
- Every ship that left with a cargo of goods was also taking away a cargo of Knowledge

Caravanserai and Ports

Communication and Learning are human traits common to all cultures - so from the Caravanserai and the Seaports ("The Nodes") spread

- Thoughts and ideas
- Music and art
- Food and recipes
- Belief systems
- Technology



Learning new ideas from others

Example - How much can I make if I sell Forty jars of olive oil at Four silver coins each?

- Roman: Multiply LX by IV and the result is CLX
- Indian (Sri Lankan) : $40 \times 4 = 160$
- Chinese:



The UNESCO Expeditions

1990-1991

Integral Study of The Silk Roads as Roads of Dialogue

1. Desert Route in China - From Xian to Kashgar
2. Steppes Route - from Turkmenistan to Kazakhstan
3. Maritime Route - From Venice to Osaka in the Royal Omani Navy yacht *Fulk al-salamah*



The *Fulk al-Salamah* carried on board an interdisciplinary team of scholars
- visited sites and participated in seminars together, sharing knowledge and ideas (**Samharram**)

Sri Lanka - the midpoint of the Maritime Silk Road





Sri Lanka

Supplied exotic goods since ancient times to lands far across the seas

Cinnamon קינמון

The Book of Exodus Chapter 30
circa 5th century BCE

Rubies الياقوت

Al-Balazuri, 9th century Arab historian, described Sri Lanka as *Jazirat al-Yakut* (The Land of Rubies)

Elephants

Megasthenes (circa 350-290 BCE) describes Elephants from Sri Lanka as being "more powerful and more intelligent than those from the Indian mainland"

כב וַיִּדְבֹר
יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה
לֵאמֹר.

22 Moreover
the LORD
spoke unto
Moses, saying:

כג וְאַתָּה
קַח-לְךָ, בְּשָׂמִים
רֹאשׁ, מֵר-דְּרֹר
חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת,
וְקִנְמֹן-בֶּשֶׂם
מִחֲצִיתוֹ חֲמֵשִׁים
וּמְאָתָיִם;
וְקִנְיָה-בֶּשֶׂם,
חֲמֵשִׁים וּמְאָתָיִם.

23 'Take thou
also unto thee
the chief
spices, of
flowing myrrh
five hundred
shekels, and
of sweet
cinnamon half
so much, even
two hundred
and fifty, and
of sweet
calamus two
hundred and
fifty,

כד וְקַדְדָה,
חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת
בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ;
וְשֶׁמֶן זַיִת, הֵינִן.

24 and of
cassia five
hundred, after
the shekel of
the sanctuary,
and of olive oil
a hin.

כה וְעָשִׂיתָ אֹתוֹ,
שֶׁמֶן
מְשַׁחַת-קֹדֶשׁ--
לְקַח מִרְקַחַת,
מֵעֲשֵׂה לְקַח;

25 And thou
shalt make it a
holy anointing
oil, a perfume
compounded
after the art of
the perfumer;
it shall be a
holy anointing

Sri Lanka

1. Situated at the crossroads of the maritime trade routes
2. Abundant natural resources and valuable products for trade - precious gems, pearls, elephants, ivory, cinnamon and other spices
3. Excellent natural harbours
 - Mahatiththa (Mannar)
 - Jambukolapatuna (KKS)
 - Gokanna (Trincomalee)
 - Godavaya (Hambantota)
 - Beruwela
 - Galle





Sri Lanka's Ports

A successful port required a Foreland across the sea - as well as a Hinterland

- Seafaring across the Indian ocean depended on the monsoon (*Mosum*) winds
- **West to East from May to Sep and East to West from Nov to March**
- Popular ports had to provide accommodation, food etc. for traders and sailors to rest and wait for the next monsoon wind
- Safe, well-provisioned ports allowed 'segment voyages' without single ships undertaking the perilous voyage from one end to the other
- Ports became Trans-shipment Points (**Mahatittha**)



Developed "Cascaded Tanks" to feed the people

Sri Lanka developed pioneering irrigation techniques

- improved crop yields that could support large populations and the growth of cities

Cascaded Tank-Village System (CTVS)

- CTVS or 'Cross basin canals' or *Wewa Ellangava*
- "a connected series of tanks (reservoirs) in a micro catchment area"
- Stored and conveyed water by controlled flow
- rainwater plus water from 'ephemeral' rivers collected in a network of small tanks that drained through irrigation channels to large reservoirs

Innovations in Irrigation

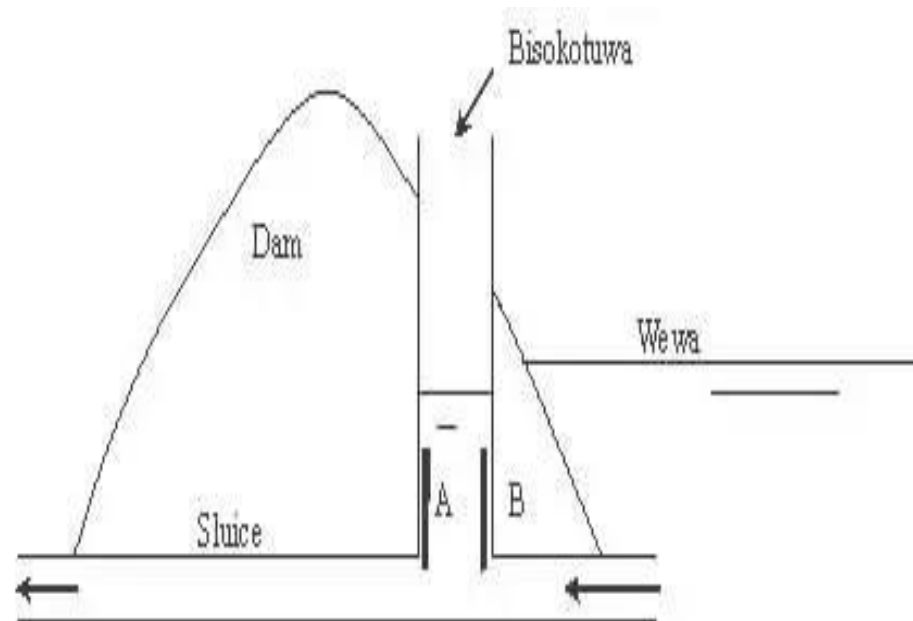
- Canals such as the 90 km Jayaganga or Yoda-Ela (459 CE)
- trans-basin diversion canal from the Kala Wewa to the Tissa Wewa
- 54 miles (90km) long, having a gradient of 10 to 20 cm per kilometre!



Innovations in Irrigation

Innovations

- The *Bisokotuwa* cistern sluice gate to control water flow from reservoirs (3rd century BCE)
- “serves as a surge tank, **reducing water pressure and velocity**”





Sri Lanka's History

During the last century, we in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) were privileged to receive a "British Education" 😊

Taught a very Euro-centric (actually an Anglo-centric) view of the world

- Sri Lankans became civilised only with the advent of the Europeans
- Indian Ocean trade was started by the Portuguese and other Europeans
- Sri Lankan people did not know how to build ships or navigate the seas



How Sri Lanka's Kings made Money.....

Thriving international trade provides

- Rewards for those producing goods for export
- Revenue for those who could tax the goods
- Taxes for storing, selling and buying all these products (like charging VAT!).

Trade provided Wealth for construction of elaborate temples and monuments

Monuments and temples-1



Ruvanwelisaya - built circa 140 BCE

Monuments and temples-2

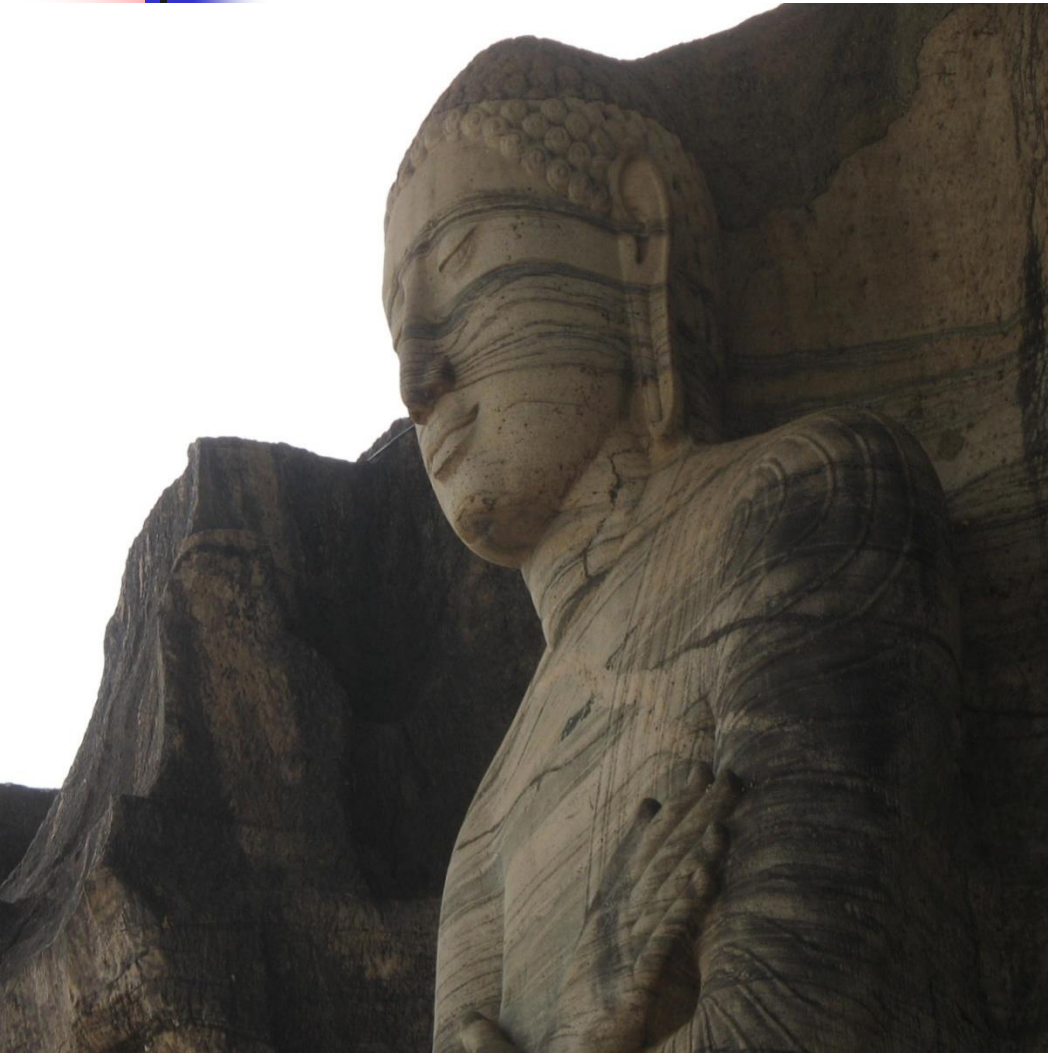


Sigiriya

5th century CE



Monuments and temples-3



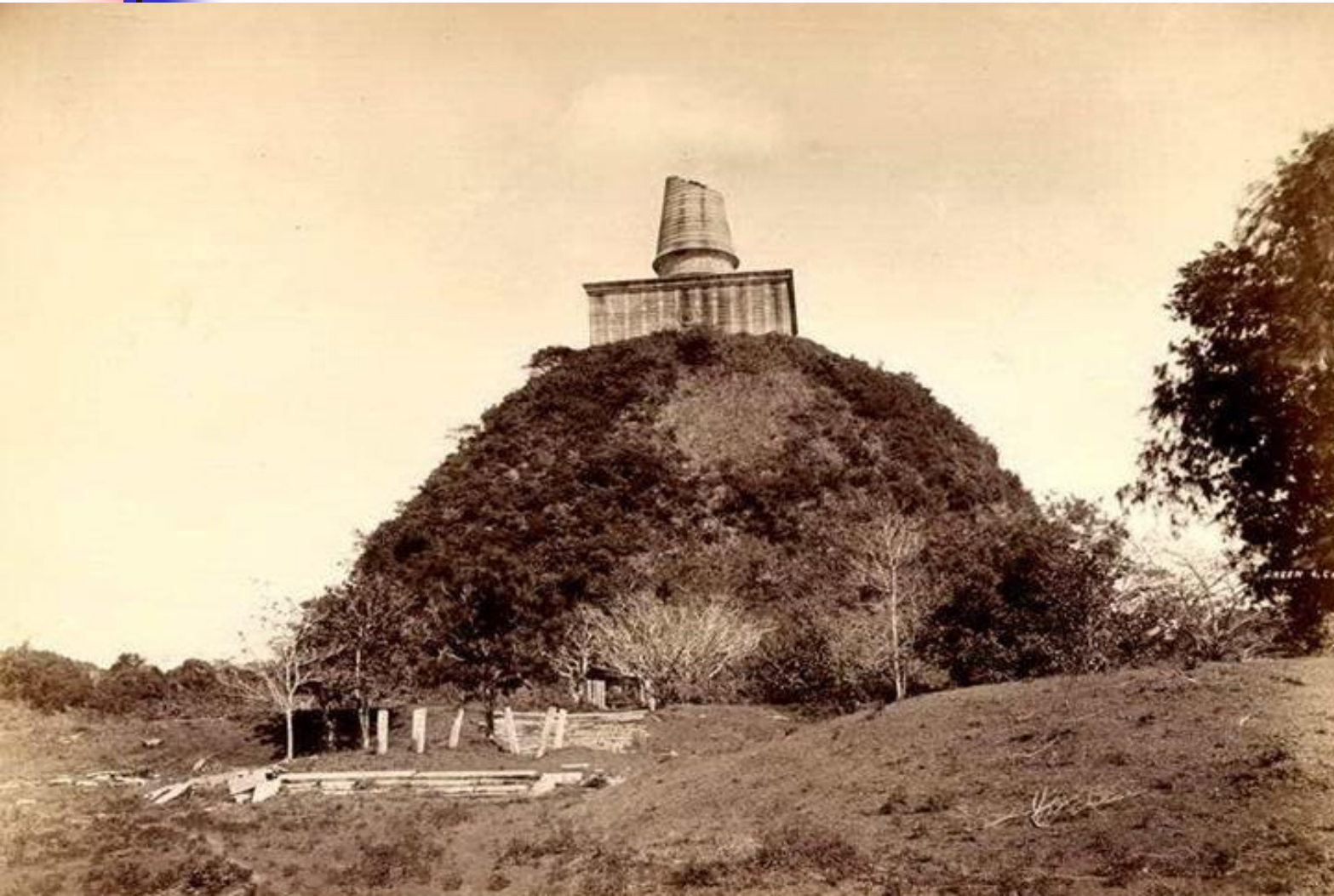
Gal Vihara
12th century CE

Monuments and temples-4



Jetavanaramaya - 3rd century CE

Jetavanaramaya - before




Jetavanaramaya - restoration



Jetavanaramaya - today





The temples and monuments of Anuradhapura

Temples in places like Angkor Wat and Borobudur are magnificent ruins of past civilizations (museum pieces)

The temples of Anuradhapura, in contrast, are active links to the past

- people have been worshipping here and continuing the traditions of their ancestors for over two thousand years



Ships on the Maritime Silk Road

Interactions between cultures could take place because of the existence of ships that could connect them across the maritime space

Required people who could build ships and people who could navigate these ships (eg. *Kamal* and *Compass*)



Ships on the Maritime Silk Road

"Waning influence of our Eurocentric paradigm"

New evidence of the trade and travel taking place in the maritime space of the Indian Ocean prior to 16th century

- archaeology, shipwrecks and inscriptions
- writings in non-European languages

Confirms that pre-modern people in the lands around the Indian Ocean were able seafarers

Ships on the Maritime Silk Road



Evidence:

- Shipwreck found at Godavaya in 2010
-dated between 100 BCE to 100 CE
- Belitung shipwreck (9th century) found off the Java coast in 1998
- Shelomo Dov Goitein (1973): *The Cairo Geniza documents ('Letters of the Jewish India traders')*
- Arabic writers such as al-Buruni (11th century) and Ahmad ibn Majid (15th century)

Ships on the Maritime Silk Road



Did pre-modern Sri Lankans build and sail their own ships?

Did they charter ships to carry their export cargoes?

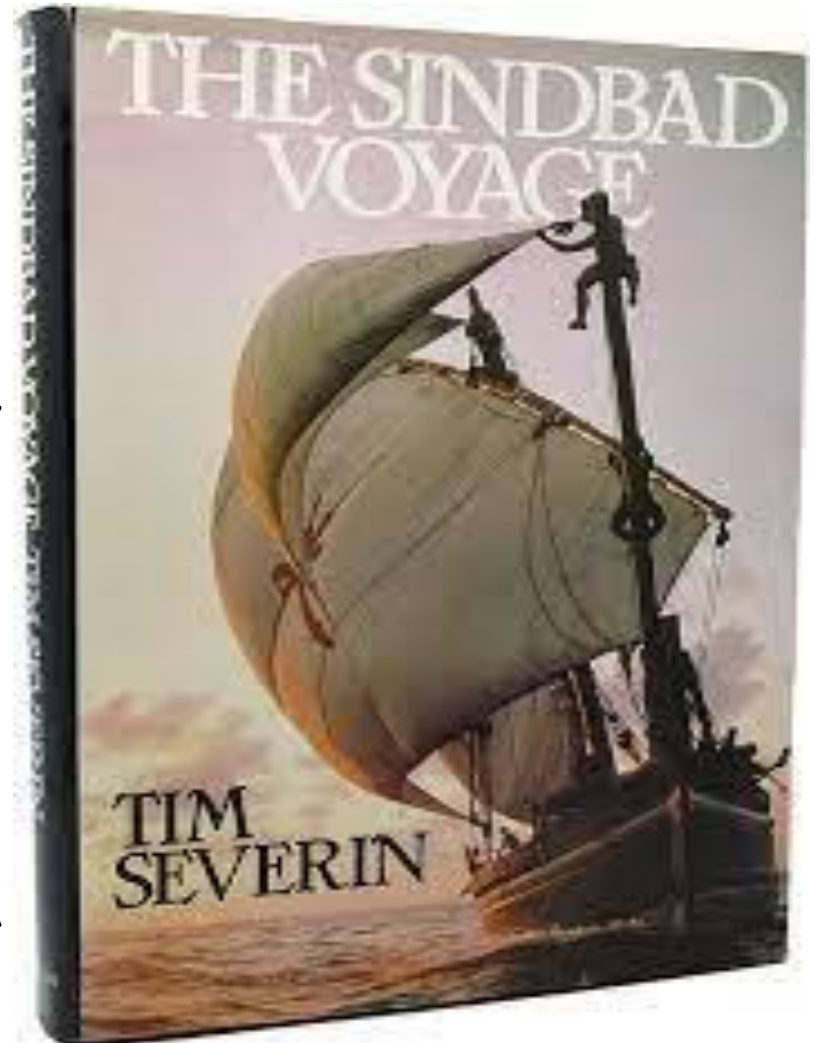
Were we simply small players in a big game, being content to stay ashore and play the role of middlemen on the trade route?

Sri Lanka's Nautical Heritage

The ocean going ships plying the Indian Ocean were wooden ships, made of planks sewn with coconut fibre and no metal nails

Tim Severin in 1981 built a ship using the ancient Omani boat building technique of using coconut fibre rope to sew together planks of Jak wood (*Artocarpus hirsutus*) to form the hull

He sailed this ship *The Sohar* from Muscat in Oman to Guandong in China





Sri Lanka's Nautical Heritage

Sri Lankan watercraft originated for use on inland waterways and then progressed to seagoing vessels

- Paaruwa (flat-bottomed boat)
- Oruwa (dugout)
- Vallam (dugout with wider middle)
- Oruwa with boom connected to outrigger
- Yaathra dhoni (seagoing cargo ship with outrigger)
- Jaffna dhoni (seagoing cargo ship with no outrigger)
- Battal (ferried rice across Trincomalee bay till 1970s)
- Vattal (Jaffna - used for pearl fisheries)

Sri Lanka's Nautical Heritage



Model of Yaathra Dhoni in Kumarakanda Pirivena, Dodanduwa

Model of 'Cingalee' ship in British museum



Vattal in Trinco harbour - (late nineteen sixties)





Sri Lanka's Naval History

Sri Lankan ships sailing to Kuang Chou (Guangzhou) for trade

- *T'ang Kuo Shih Pu* by Li Chao (806-825 CE) during Tang Era 618-907
- "The sea vessels of the South seas are ships of foreign lands. Every year they arrive at Annam and Kuang Chou. Among these, the ships of *Shizhi-guo* (Sri Lanka Kingdom) are very big, their ladders make many *zhang*."

Report of Ibn Batuta in 1344 in *The Rihla*

- King Arychakravarti had a fleet of a "hundred" ships
- used for overseas trade



Sri Lanka's Naval History

Invasion of Burma (1164-1165)

- King ParakramaBahu I despatched a fleet of ships to Burma - captured *Kusumiya* (modern Pathein) and dethroned the Burmese king Narathu (Alaungsithu)
- Corroborated by Devanagala rock inscription in Mawanella

Chola inscription from 1178 CE

- Describes assembling of troops and ships at Urathota (modern Kayts) by King Parakramabahu I for his South Indian campaign
- Inscription from the 8th year of the reign of King Rajadhiraja (Chola empire)



History

In school we learned mainly about Rulers and Heroes
(about "Books and Men and how to play the Game")

But history comes from many sources

1. Written sources

- writers who want to (need to) praise the rulers - as well as travellers' tales and other writings
- inscriptions and paintings

2. Archaeological sources - buildings, excavations, shipwrecks, underwater artefacts

3. Non-tangible sources

- oral transmissions
- music, food, clothes, genetic studies



History

Much writing about Sri Lanka's connections to the world were in European languages
-but recently we have been able to learn about Sri Lanka's international connections from historical sources in other languages

Arabic/Hebrew/Aramaic

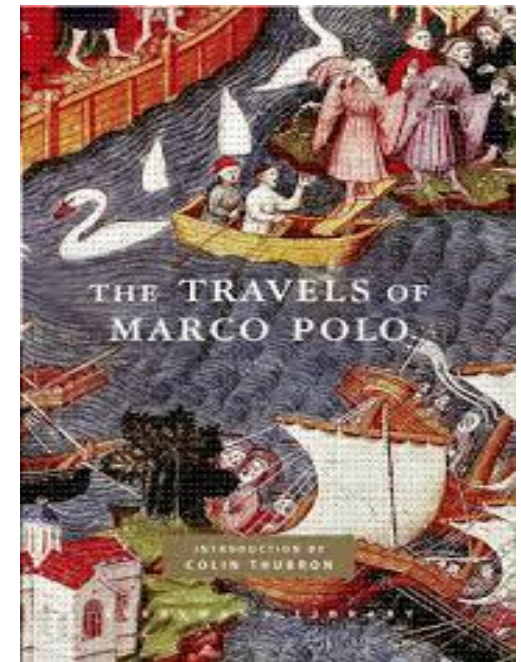
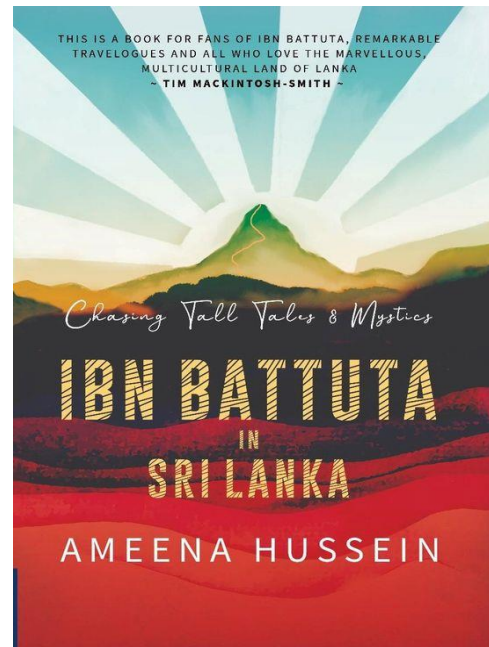
- Ibn Batuta's *Rihla*
- Documents from the Geniza of Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo
- (*Letters of the Jewish India traders*)

Chinese

- Li Chao's *T'ang Kuo Shih Pu* (? *History of Tang Dynasty*)
- Ban Gu's *Han shu* (*History of the Former Han Dynasty*)
- Xuanjang's *Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions* (tr. Li RongXi)

Visitors to Sri Lanka

1. Fa Hien - 5 CE
2. Marco Polo 13 CE
3. Ibn Batuta - 14 CE
4. Sindbad (?)



Fa Hien (Faxian)

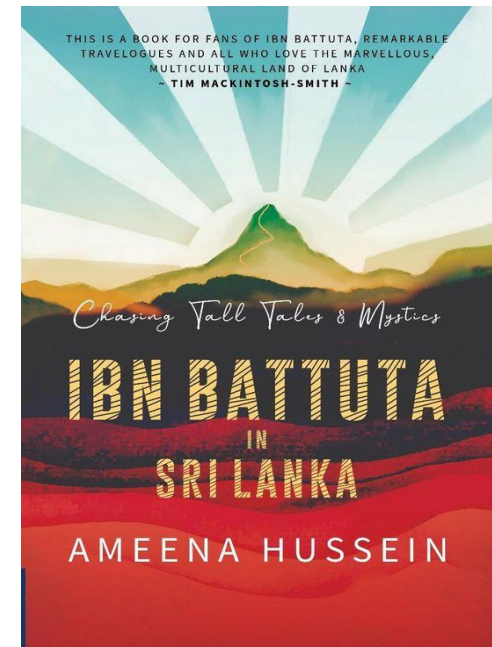
- Chinese Buddhist monk who visited Sri Lanka between 400 and 414 CE - spent two years here
- Wrote '*Foguoji*' (A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms)
- Travelled in his sixties from China to India, and then sailed from port of Tamralapti in Bengal to Sri Lanka



- Visited the Sri Maha Bodhi, the Abhayagiri temple and other monasteries in Anuradhapura
- Mentions many foreign merchants (including Chinese) living in Anuradhapuraa
- Made copies of the Vinaya Rules of Hinayana Buddhism and other books to take back to China

Ibn Batuta

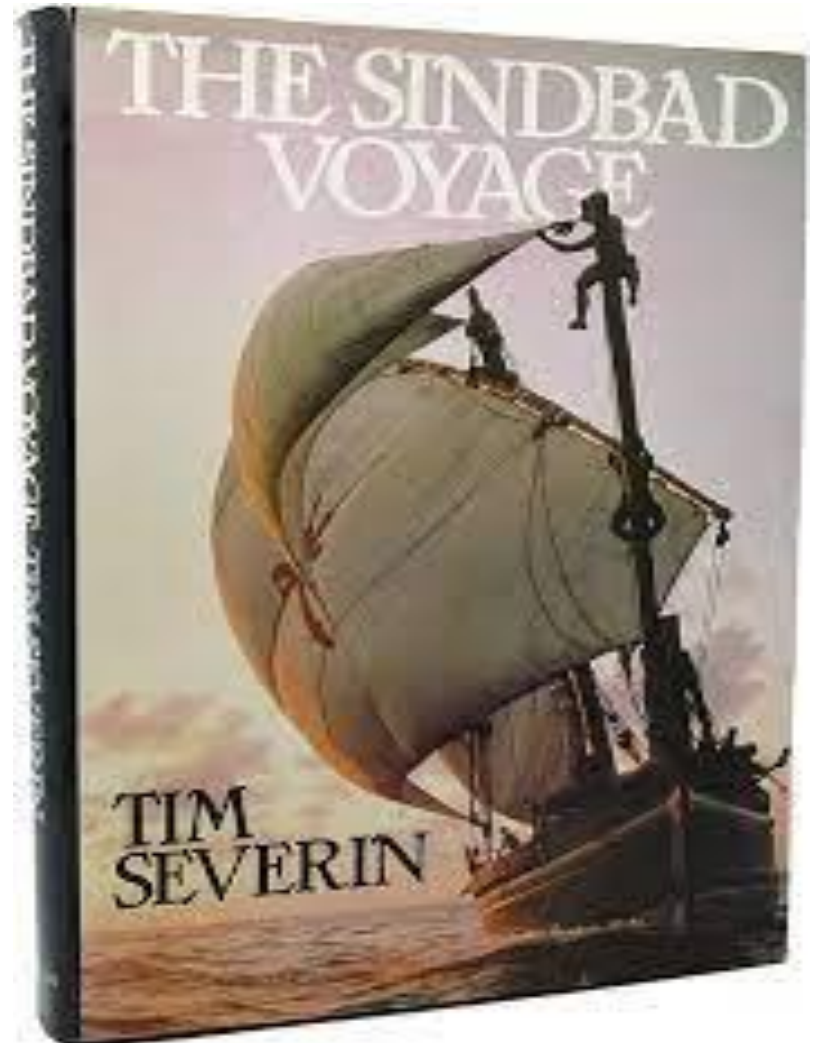
- Moroccan jurist from Tangier who visited Sri Lanka in the year 1344
- wrote a book about his travels '*The Rihla*'
 - described Sri Lanka, which he referred to as *Sarandeeb*
 - travelled by land to Delhi, then from India by ship to the Maldives, to Sri Lanka and on to China
 - stayed as a guest of the king in Sri Lanka and climbed the 'Mountain of Adam'
 - mentions the names of cities Bandar Salawath, Kunakar, Kalanbo
 - he and the king conversed in Persian, the language of international trade at the time



Imported Genes

Where did the Sri Lankan people come from?

1. Sinhalese from North India
2. Tamils from South India
3. Moors from Arabia (Yemen, Oman)
4. Malays from Indonesia (Java)
5. Burghers from Europe
6. Chinese (from China!)
7. 'Sri Lankan Kaffirs' (Afro-portuguese) from south-east Africa



Sri Lanka's African connection

Communities of African descendants


- The community of Afro-Portuguese folk who live near Puttalam in a village called Sirambiyadiya
- *"Our culture and history is only in our song and dance. It is the only inheritance left behind by our forefathers"*
- Kaffringha or Manja music
- Sung in Portuguese creole



Foods that came in via the Silk Route

- Patties (**Empanadas**)
- Watalappan (*Seri-kaya*)
- Muscat (**Halwa**)
- Bibikkang (*Bebinca, Bibingka*)
- Love cake (*Bolo d'Amor*)
- Kokis (*koekjes*)
- Lampries
- Chinese rolls
- **Biscouto, Doçe, Linguiça**





Sri Lanka and the Maritime Silk Road

- Gave us access to the world
- Enriched the island in many ways
- Brought in trade from overseas - as well as knowledge, ideas, religion, culture, food, music, genes (plus a few diseases!)
- Simultaneously transmitted all these to other lands



Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the following friends who helped me in preparing this oration

- Ashley de Vos - Restoration of Jetavanaramaya
- Somasiri Devendra - Sri Lanka's nautical heritage
- Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya - Africans in Sri Lanka
- Ameena Hussain - Ibn Batuta's travels in Sri Lanka
- Roger Thiedeman - for introducing me to Victor!

Thank You!



VICTOR MELDER LECTURE

LECTURE TOPIC: SRI LANKA AND THE SILK ROAD OF THE SEA

Wednesday 10 April, 6.30pm-8pm
Clayton Community Centre Theatre
9-15 Cooke Street, Clayton

Foreign trade has been a prominent feature of Sri Lanka's economy from ancient times. Situated virtually at the mid-point of the maritime trade routes between West Europe and East Asia, it was ideally located to become an important link in the trade network and a major meeting place for sailors and traders from all over the known world.

Delivered by Dr Sanjiva Wijesinha, the 2024 Victor Melder Lecture will focus on the important role that Sri Lanka played as a link between the East and the West on the Maritime Silk Road.

Dr Sanjiva Wijesinha is a graduate of the Colombo Medical School in Sri Lanka. He has worked as a paediatric surgeon in both Sri Lanka and Hong Kong, family physician, Monash University professor, and an army medical officer in both Sri Lanka and Australia.



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