

## MARITIME TRADE CONTACTS OF GRAECO ROMAN WORLD WITH TAPROBANE (SRI LANKA) ON THE BASIS OF LITERARY EVIDENCES

**Dr. Manisha Tyagi**

*Assistant Professor*

*Swami Vivekanand Subharti University*

*Samrat Ashok Subharti School of Buddhist Studies, Meerut, U.P.*

*Email: manisha.tyagi1301@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

*The close proximity of Úrí Lankā to the subcontinent of India and the island's strategic position to the south of it, gave Úrí Lankā an important place in the oceanic commerce from east to west. From very early times Úrí Lankā set her as a commanding position on the silk road of the sea. The emergence of the Achaemenian empire may be stated as providing the first opportunity of interaction between India and Greece. However, the island was known to the Indians of the Indus valley as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. And to the Greeks and Romans Taproban was known with the age and achievements of Alexander's expedition in north western India. After the effort of Alexander many Graeco roman writers shed their knowledge on Taprobane . even before first century Graeco roman traders didn't follow the direct route to Sri Lanka and they collected all traded items from South Indian ports.*

### **Keywords**

*Taproban, Tamrapanni, MahāvaCsa Dipavamsa.*

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

**Received: 26.02.2024**

**Approved: 17.03.2024**

**Dr. Manisha Tyagi**

*MARITIME TRADE CONTACTS OF  
GRAECO ROMAN WORLD WITH  
TAPROBANE (SRI LANKA) ON THE  
BASIS OF LITERARY EVIDENCES*

**Article No.05**

*RJPSS Oct.-Mar. 2024,*

*Vol. XLIX No. 1,*

*pp. 034-042*

Similarity Check - 7%

**Online available at:**

[https://anubooks.com/  
view?file=3516&session\\_id=rjps-  
2023-vol-xlix-no1-mar2024](https://anubooks.com/view?file=3516&session_id=rjps-2023-vol-xlix-no1-mar2024)

[https://doi.org/10.31995/  
rjps.2024.v49i01.005](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjps.2024.v49i01.005)

The history of South India is tied with the history of the border country Úrî Lankâ and the surrounding regions also. The close proximity of Úrî Lankâ to the subcontinent of India and the island's strategic position to the south of it, gave Úrî Lankâ an important place in the oceanic commerce of the mainland of India from very early times and set her as a commanding position on the silk road of the sea. The emergence of the Achaemenian empire may be stated as providing the first opportunity of interaction between India and Greece. But during this period, the geographical knowledge of India in Greek writings was confined to the region of Indus only i.e., the part of India included in the Persian empire. Beyond that corner of India which Persian knew, it was thought that there was nothing towards the east but a continuous desert.<sup>1</sup> this was the vague idea, that all to the east of the Indian was a sandy desert'. However, the island was known to the Indians of the Indus valley as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. And to the Greeks and Romans Taproban was known with the age and achievements of Alexander's expedition in north western India.

In the Hellenistic world Úrî Lankâ was famous by various names but the most popular names were Tabroban (ÔáðñîâáíÆ). This name was subsequently adopted by all Latin authors as well.<sup>2</sup> It is generally agreed that the name Taproban was derived from the Sanskrit Tâmrarnî, 'copper coast' (Pali Tambapanni) The ancient Úrî Lankan Buddhist records of *MahâvaCsa* and *DipavaCsa* and the Rock Edicts no. XIII of Aœoka have reference to the island of Úrî Lankâ.<sup>3</sup> Aœoka's inscription express it as one of the border kingdoms along with Chola, Pandaya, Satiyaputta, Keralaputta and the kingdom of the Anticho Yonaraja with whom Aœoka had established friendly relations. According to *MahâvaCsa*, Greeks was the first Europeans who came to Sri Lanka and in *MahâvaCsa* they were mentioned as 'Yonas'<sup>4</sup>. The first Latin author to mention Úrî Lankâ was the poet Ovid, and he wrote there is a country called Taproban in the Indian Ocean<sup>5</sup>. That's why Cosmos (as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> C.A.D.) said it "a great resort of ships from all parts of India, Persia and Ethiopia.....<sup>6</sup> It dispatches many of its own to foreign ports." called this island the "Mediatrix' between the countries of eastern and western Asia, speciality is this that informer of Cosmas's was a Greek merchant named "Sopatros" who had a trade relationship with Úrî Lankâ. There were many reasons that made Úrî Lankâ an important trade centre in the long-distance maritime trade. its central position in the Indian Ocean; its physical features as its natural harbours, navigable rivers and other convenience for inland trade, and its natural wealth like precious and semi-precious stones, pearls, ivory, tortoise shell, spices, clove and pepper and cinnamon. These things have great export value especially in Graeco Roman world.<sup>7</sup>

According to our sources Graeco Roman came to know about Lanka by the time of Alexander (circa 326 B.C.). Onesicritus, Megasthenes, Eratosthenes, Pliny Ptolemy, Periplus and Starabo are some important name of this list.

Greek captain of Great Alexander's navy called Onisicritus was the first Greek who wrote about Úrî Lankâ, he certainly had access to information from the Indians who were in contact with the navigators sailing to Úrî Lankâ. Surely, Europeans got to know about this country from that. His fragments on Tabroban were preserved by Strabo and Pliny<sup>8</sup> Alexander planned the coastal voyages from the mouth of Indus to the head of the Persian Gulf which was executed by Nearchos. Nearchos recorded that Alexander built the fleet of Ships during his eastern exploration so as to proceed southwards to explores Taproban. However, Onesicritus sailed down to the mouth of the Indus. It appears that he noticed some vessels were used to sail on the route from Sindh to Úrî Lankâ. He informed that the island had 20 days sail from the Indian mainland.<sup>9</sup> That mariners from Úrî Lankâ continued to make voyages to the western part of India evident from the early Brahmi inscription from *Maligatanna* in the Kurunegala district, in which a mariner by the name of Maha-Aœoká describes himself as having gone to Bhojakataka. R.A.L.H. Gunawardane appropriately correlates this evidence with the report of Onesicritus, pointing out that Onesicritus had apparently noticed certain sailing vessels used on the route from Sind to Úrî Lankâ.<sup>10</sup> Pliny also says that the age and achievements of er proved clearly that it was an island.<sup>11</sup> Pliny also says that under the name of the land of the *Antichthones*, Taprobane was from a long time considered to be another world.

Over forty classical Greek and Roman authors mentioned Taprobane. among this group ten provided significant information concerning the islands geography and products. These evidences have been reviewed and synthesised many times during the past centuries, most recently by D.P.M. Weerakkody.<sup>12</sup>

Both Onesicritus and Megasthenes had first-hand experience of India because they spent their time in India. Most of the region they described concerning Taprobane's location. Onesicritus says<sup>13</sup> .....that it is twenty days voyage distant from the mainland of India but that ships sail badly since their sailing gear is inefficient and they are built without belly bolts on both sides....., though that island is the southernmost, that amphibious creatures exist around it. Some similar to oxen, others to horse and others to land animals."<sup>14</sup> One important feature of his work is that "bigger and more war like elephants are produced in Úrî Lankâ than in India.<sup>15</sup> The journey described must be from the Indus to Taprobane. The twenty days might be an exaggeration, but it must have been prompted or supported by the

poor sailing conditions, which the writer goes on to describe. Onesicritus himself could have obtained this information while he was in northwestern India.<sup>16</sup> We know that he was sent to Taxila by Alexander the Great in order to discourse with the Indian wise men apart from being a well-known centre of learning. Taxila was also a prosperous trading city of international renown. So too was the Indus delta, whence Onesicritus and the Greeks set sail for Persia. Either of these places could have supplied him with information about Taprobane. But even though he did not reach the island. He shared with other early Greek writers a privilege enjoyed by few of their successors, namely, that of being able to gather knowledge about Taprobane in regions closely associated with it. Northern India remained firmly inside the Greek orbit, and from it Onesicritus and others learned the details which have survived.<sup>17</sup>

Megasthenes, an ambassador to the Maurya Emperor Chandragupta's court, was another famous Greek writer who mentions Taprobane in his text. His fragments on Taprobane are preserved by Pliny. Megasthenes wrote that "India and Sri Lanka are divided by river, the inhabitants are called *Paliogonoi*, and that they are more productive of gold large pearls than the Indians".<sup>18</sup> He was first Hellenistic writer who mentioned Úrî Lankan pearls. Eratosthenes writes that Taprobane is famous for purity of gold and large size of pearls<sup>19</sup> he also gave some fresh information on geography of Úrî Lankâ.<sup>20</sup> his fragments were preserved by Strabo <sup>21</sup> and Pliny. Strabo writes as follows, "that Taprobane is an island in the ocean seven days sail distant towards the south from the southernmost portions of India around the Koniokoi; that its length is about eight thousand stades in the direction of Ethiopia; and that it has elephants too.

The same information is repeated by Alien. He compared Taprobane with the Britain.<sup>22</sup> Kosmas writes that Úrî Lankâ is more productive of precious stones, this was noticed again by the author of the *Periplus Maris Erythrean* as well as Pliny, who says that the island was the chief pearl producer.<sup>23</sup>

The evidences given by Megasthenes, Pliny and *Periplus* are proved by some other Asian literature. The *Mahabhartâ* narrates how the king of the Sinhala sent to king Yudhisthira, "are best of sea borne gems and pearls", white pearls were the main attraction with other gems that were sent to the king of Madura by Vijaya, and by Devanampiya Tissa to Aœoka.<sup>24</sup> Except it Strabo, associates the island with other well-known exotic products of antiquity, namely ivory and tortoise shell. These were apparently produced on a commercial scale at this time for he specially says, "both ivory is brought in abundance to the markets of the Indians and tortoise shell and other merchandise<sup>25</sup> (he does not tell us other merchandise). Strabo statements leads us to believe that the Romans knew the tortoise shell of Taproban,

as early as the commencement of monsoon navigation for trade with India if not from earlier times <sup>26</sup>



### **Ptolemy's Map**

The most comprehensive and scientific foreign account of Úrî Lankâ is the geography of Claudius Ptolemy (C.A.D). he also presented a map of Úrî Lankâ. His treatise on geography contains eight books. Chapter (11.4) deals with a detailed description of Taproban and another chapter (VIII.28) contains graphic discussion with maps.<sup>27</sup> he called Taproban Simoundou but now Salike.” <sup>28</sup>

Sri Lanka is largely exaggerated in size. But in spite of such errors, the treatise of Ptolemy on the whole was the most accurate of ancient geographical works and it has been the most comprehensive and standard documentary evidence until the modern times. Among its Fauna are elephants and tigers. He also mentions feeding groups of the elephants, which he locates beyond the Malai hills as far as the sea.<sup>29</sup> Ptolemy is the first to name some of the food products of Taproban like fruit, grain, rice honey, and ginger.<sup>30</sup> and mines of every sort of gold, silver and other metals. Even from Pali chronicles we learn that ginger together with turmeric was the chief object of the merchants who travelled to the highlands in ox wagons to fetch and sold them at Anurâdhâpura and other places where they were in demand. Thus, unlike previous writers Ptolemy knows the products of the interior and his geographical knowledge of the areas is also far more detailed and accurate than that of his predecessors. Dionysius<sup>31</sup> information is also very important.<sup>32</sup>

Another important writer about Úrî Lankâ was Cosmas Indicopleustus, i.e., “Indian Navigator”. Name of his work is “Christian Topography”<sup>33</sup> importance of this work could be seen clearly because the author has not only stressed the importance of the island in the international commerce of that time, but also explicitly pointed to the reason of its importance. he wrote Taprobane as a large island in the Indian ocean where the precious stones hyacinth<sup>33</sup> is found; and it is situated above the pepper country. Cosmas mentions elephants used in war were bred chiefly in Sri Lanka and they were exported to the mainland in specially constructed boats is confirmed by the *Hathi Gumpha inscription* of Kharvela. Aelian adds that the people of Taprobane exported these elephants to the mainland opposite in boats that they constructed expressly for this traffic with timber supplied by the forests of the island; and he says that they dispose of their cargoes to the king of *Kalingoi*.<sup>34</sup>

Before first century A.D. Graeco Roman traders bought the commodities from South India. But during the latter parts of the first century A.D. increasing demands for eastern luxuries forced the Romans to explore fresh supplies and new markets and this forced rediscovery of Úrî Lankâ. The information by Periplus is very significant in the context of Graeco Roman and Úrî Lankan commercial relations. Later on, this knowledge was fully utilized by Graeco-Romans.

So the literary evidences over Taprobane by Graeco Roman writers are really have great worth for the future studies and it has been a detailed information on the ancient history of Sri Lanka.

#### References

1. (1959). Herod. III, 98. According to Bunbury, History of Ancient Geography. New York. I. Pg. **229-30**.
2. Weerakkody. (1990). (Weerakkody, 1997, Ferguson, 1904, Weerakkody, 1997 Cosmos and Ptolemy used ‘Taprobane’ in his writings and Pliny described ‘Palaisimoundou’ as a city near Kudiramalai Harbour. Eratosthenes’s book contains Sri Lankan trade had an honourable position among Western countries at Before Christ period. Also, he recorded that Sri Lanka had better ships for trade.
3. Law, B.C. (1932). Geography of Early Buddhism. Calcutta. Pg. **70**. 7. Jac. No. 715, f.26; Plin., N.H., vi, 81.
4. Peris. 2006. Pg. **1**.
5. Ovid. Tristia. (2015). Ex Ponto, McLaughlin. Pg. **6,7**.
6. D.P.M. (1997). Weerakkody refers to Cosmas Indicopleustus, Topographia Christiana, XI, 16" So this Siediba, situated as it were in the middle of

- India, and with the hyacinth producing country too, receives wares from all the marts and exports to them all and it is a great centre of trade. D.P.M. Weerakkody. *Taprobane: Ancient Sri Lanka as Known to Greeks and Romans*. Brepols, Turnhout. 218 and 245.
7. Perera, B.J. (1952). The Foreign Trade and Commerce of Ancient Ceylon, 4 parts, CHJ 1" Jan. 1952 nos. 1&2. Pg. **14-22**.
  8. D.P.M. (1993). Sri Lanka's Fauna and Flora as Known to Greeks and Latin Authors, Yavanika. *Journal of the Indian Society for Greek and Roman Studies*. ed. U.P. Arora. Bareilly. no. 3. Pg. **26**.
  9. Gunawardane, R.A.L.H. (1990). Seaways to Seilediba: Changing patterns of navigation in the Indian Ocean and their impact on Pre-Colonial Sri Lanka, "Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea", by S. Bandaranayake, L. Silva, R. Dewaraja, K.D.G. Wimlaratne, Colombo. Pg. **26**.
  10. Paranavitana, S. (1970). R.A.L.H. Gunawardana. 1990: 26.
  11. Pliny, Natural History, vi, 81 (Jacoby, F.Gr.H., no. 134, fr. 13)
  12. Onesicritus. (1986). (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the fourth C. B.C.) Megasthenes (early third C.B.C.) Eratosthenes of Cyrene (late third C.B.C.) all three varyingly quoted in Strabo (A.D.21) and Pliny the Elder (A.D. 77) the Periplus Maris Erythraean Sea (second half of the First C.A.D.), Claudius Ptolemy (2<sup>nd</sup> C.A.D.) Dionysius (2<sup>nd</sup> C.A.D.,) largely based Eratosthenes ), Palladius (5<sup>th</sup> C.A.D.), and Cosmos Indicopleustus (6<sup>th</sup> C.A.D.) D.P.M. Weerakkody, The Foreign Relations and Trade of Ancient Sri Lanka from Greek and Latin Sources, Silver Jubilee Commemoration Volume of the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, ed. By S.G.M. Weerasinghe, D.C.R.A. Goonatilleke and A.A. Abhayasinghe, Kelaniya. Pg. **447-463**.
  13. "it is five thousand stades in size, without defining its length or breadth;
  14. Strabo, XV, 1.15, Jacoby, Die fragments der Griechischen Historiker, (F.Gr.H.), no. 134, fr. 12
  15. Pliny, VI, 81 (Jacoby, F.Gr.H., no. 134, fr. 13 (his information concerns the size and location of Taprobane as well as the conditions of navigation and the fauna in the neighbouring waters.)
  16. (According to J.E. TENNENT, 1860: 525, n. 1, Gosselin believed that Onesicritus had visited Taprobane during a second voyage, which he was ordered to accomplish. There is no ancient authority to support what is obviously a mere assumption on Gosselin's part. It is true that Onesicritus mentions the sailing distance and the conditions of navigation, but this

information could have been obtained easily without his having made the journey himself. It is also true that Solinus (53, 2) represents Onesicritus as having been sent (missus) as admiral to the Macedonian fleet (presumably by Alexander), and as having informed us of the size, products, and life of the country. i.e. Taprobanê. This might have implied the possibility of his having visited the island, had it not been known that Solinus's material is borrowed and paraphrased almost entirely from Pliny. Thus, any divergence here as elsewhere must be ascribed to Solinus' own misinterpretation of his source rather than to consultation of any independent material.)

17. Weerakkody, D.P.M. (1997). The earliest Greek notices, Taprobane, ancient Sri Lanka as known to Greeks and romans, Brepols, turnhout. Pg. **33**.
18. Jacoby. op.cit., no.715fr. 26, Pliny op. cit., vi; 81; Schwanbeck, who was the first to collect and edit the fragments of Megasthenes, included under these fragments. A quotation from Solinus (53.3). This is really a garbled version of the passenger from Pliny and has been justly left out by both Muller and Jacoby, who edited the fragments subsequently. The passage purports says that while wild animals occupy one part of the island men occupy the other.
19. E.H. Warmington op.cit., Pg. **199-200**.
20. Frazer, P.M. (1970). Lecture on a Master Mind: Eratosthenes of Cyrene, Proceedings of the British Academy, LVI. Pg. **175-207** esp. Pg. **187 ff**.
21. Strabo XV; 1.14
22. Strabo, 115,32, As far as We Know, Julius Ceasar (B.G, V, 12) was the first to give any definite measurements for Britain, and according to him (B.G., IV, 200 that is land up to his time, was pretty well unknown
23. Periplus Maris Erythrean Sea. Pg. 61. Pliny, op.cit., IX. 5
24. Mahabhartar, Sabha Parva. (Pratap Chandra Roy), Mahavamsa, tr. Geiger Vii, 49, XI. 1682. Pg.146.
25. Strabo, III. 14.
26. Weerakkody, D.P.M. (1993). op. cit., Yavanika. Pg. **38**.
27. Ptolemy, op.cit., VII, 4.1
28. Ptolemy begins his description by "saying that opposite the Indian cape koru is the projecting point of Taprobane, the island formerly called simundou, Inhabitants were called *Salai*. ) Ptolemy; Geographia. VII, 4.1
29. Weerakkody, D.P.M. op. cit. Pg. **86**.



30. Rice remains the chief food crop of the island even to the present day. Both honey and ginger are products of the interior.
31. Dionysius has written another important work *Periegesis* on Taprobane. The work is believed to have been written in the time of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117-138), second century A.D.
32. He says Taprobane, “mother of Asian born elephants..... around it, on all sides their shore harbours sea monsters, beasts that graze the Erythrean sea, like huge mountains....”Donysius, *Periegesis*, 591-604,
33. Wolski Conus, C.F.W. (trans.). (1973). *Cosmas Indicopleustus, Topographie Chretienne*, 3 vol. Paris. J.W. Mac. Crindle, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas an Egyptian monk* trans. ed. Mc. Crindle, London 1897.
34. Weerakkody, D.P.M. (1993). op. cit. Pg. **45**.