

# Hidden past of a Natural Harbor: Maritime Archaeological investigations in Ancient Harbor at Ambalangoda, Sri Lanka

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## Location

The ancient harbor Ambalangoda is located in No 85 - Patabandimulla Grama Niladhari Division (GND) of Ambalangoda Secretariat Division (SD), Galle District, Southern Province (06 14 104 N, 080 03 127 E) and about 800 m along the Ambalangoda Fisheries Harbor Road and 200m to the North from the jetty of fisheries harbor.

## Historical background

The great Chronicle *Mahavamsa* and *Sandesa kavviya* (messenger poems) had not mentioned about

the activities of the ancient harbor at Ambalangoda. *Thisara Sandesaya* (1344-1359 AD) (Gunawardane, 2001 p. 1), *Parevi Sandesaya* (After 1415 AD) has described the coastal areas of the Southern Province near Ambalangoda in their poems. Kalutota, Maggona, Beruwala, Aluthgama, Kosgoda, Bentota, Welitota (Balapitiya), Madampamodara, Totagamuwa, Rathgama mentioned in *Thisara* and *Parevi Sandesayas* (Jayatilake, 2002 pp. 97, 101, 102, 103, 104, 107, 108, 109, 113; Gunawardane, 2001 pp. 101, 103, 107, 108, 112,

113, 114, 115, 116). However, one notable thing is the name “Ambalangoda” has not mentioned in these *Sandesas*.

Portuguese, Dutch and English (1505-1948) records depict the social, political, economical, religious relationships in the Ambalangoda Harbor.

**Research History**

Three groups of Archaeology, Maritime Archaeology, and Harbour Development Project have intervened to the Maritime Archaeological activities in the Ambalangoda Harbor from 1998 to 2012.

**The Artifacts found from the investigations in the Harbour**

**The Artifacts found in 1998**

Most of the artifacts had been found by individuals. On 14<sup>th</sup> May 1998, a maritime archaeology team (Department of Archaeology and

volunteers) had carried out a preliminary investigation in the harbor (Jayatilaka, Gihan; Nerina de Silva, 1998 p. 1; Maritime Archaeology in the Ancient harbour at Ambalangoda, 2016 p. 32). According to the eyewitnesses, the timbers lie parallel to the shore. However, the team did not unearth the position of the wreck. Most of the artifacts found from the site had sold to the local dealers. The team gathered the information about the artifacts through interviews with eyewitnesses. The locals brought out various artifacts from their house and allowed to be photographed and recorded. 21 artifacts under 8 categories (A-H) were recorded by the group (Jayatilaka, Gihan; Nerina de Silva, 1998 pp. 1-5; Maritime Archaeology in Ancient harbour at Ambalangoda, 2016 p. 32) (Table No 1).

| Gro. | Artifact                 | Description   |
|------|--------------------------|---|
| A    | Wooden plank             | Reddish brown, in poor condition, woodworking details (grooves and cuts), iron square section remains, 400 cm in length, 23 cm in width and 10 cm in thickness. |
| B    | B1 Grinding stone        | More or less rectangular, curved corners concave upper surface, 40 cm in length.  |
|      | B2 Rim and shoulder of a | Diameter of rim 30 cm   |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
|   | large copper alloy vessel                                 |  |
|   | B 3 Porcelain fragments and grey- green glazed bowl shard | Blue and white   |
|   | B4 Cowry shells   | Probably <i>Cypraemoneta</i> of two colours, one yellow tinted and the other brown and white   |
|   | B5 Small coconuts   | Whole and some pieces, 5-7 cm  |
|   | B6 A piece of rope  | Short, length of twisted bundles of fiber. About 15 cm in length and diameter is 3 cm  |
| C | C1 Perforated plate                                       | Copper alloy, probably a bowl of a strainer spoon. About 12 cm in diameter.  |
| D | D1 Tong like instrument with ivory handle                 | Iron, the two arms of the tongs were slightly curved in cross-section, have groove and dot decorations. The ivory handle which has started splitting and it's surface length of tongs 15 cm, length of handle 7 cm.      |
|   | D2 Iron socketed tool                                     | Tapering to a blunt tip, round socket, square (cross section) staff, length 20 cm, diameter of socket 3 cm   |
|   | D3 Lead alloy?  | Cylindrical, with projection at the top, black patina, crudely tooled surface, height 8 cm, diameter about 7 cm  |
|   | D 4 Wheeled shaped plate metal object                     | Copper alloy, with 3 or possibly 4 equidistant spokes, joined centrally by hub. The detail of which are obscured by concretions, a tiny perforation in a pin are present along its circumference, Diameter about 14.4 cm |
|   | D5 Cannon ball  | Diameter about 7 cm  |
|   | D6 Blue and white porcelain cup                           | Floral decoration in outer surface and a flower on the inner base  |
| E | E1 Quern stone  | Possibly of gneisses or granite, large central preparation and small preparation near edge, diameter about 45 cm. diameter of central preparation 10 cm, diameter of edge preparation 2 cm,                              |
| F | F1 Cannon ball  | Diameter about 7 cm  |
|   | F2 two shells   | Possibly <i>Conus aulicus</i> , reddish brown in colour with white pyramidal patterns  |
|   | F3 Perforated iron plate                                  | Raised / corrugated areas  |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| G | G1 wheel shaped object                           | Copper alloy (similar to D4), but slightly larger and thicker, central square perforation lined with a copper colour metal, pegs and perforations are visible along the circumference, diameter about 16 cm, thickness about 4 mm |
|   | G2 two cannon balls                              | Diameter about 7 cm   |
| H | H1 Blue and white porcelain lid with knob handle | Incomplete  |

Table No 1 (After G Jayatilake & Nerina de Silva, 1998)

### **The Artifacts found in 2007**

The Ambalangoda Harbor Development Project was carried out in 2007. Several types of artifacts emerged while digging the seabed of the harbor. Cowry shells (*Cypraea moneta*), copper plates and ceramics are some examples of the artifacts. Two Arabic inscriptions can be seen in two copper plates.

### **The Artifacts found in 2012**


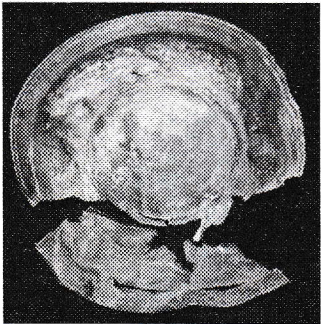
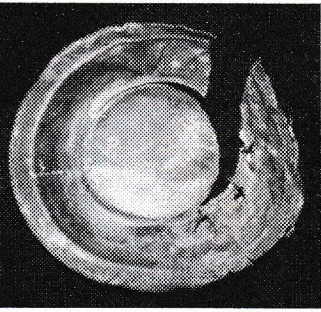
The Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU) of the Central Cultural Fund (CCF) has explored and excavated the site (Grid No 5 & 9 / 10 m x 10 m) from 1<sup>st</sup> of March to 10<sup>th</sup> of April 2012 to unearth more archaeological objects that belong to the ship wreck. Unfortunately,

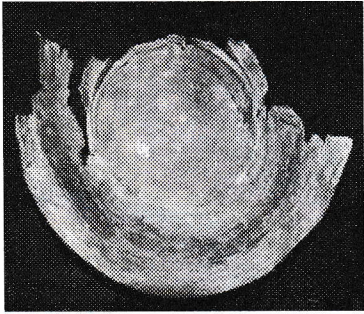
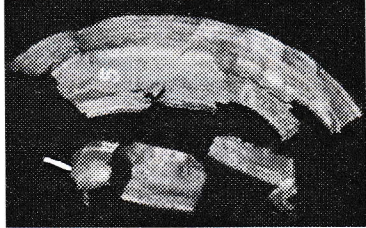
the team did not find any object from the site (Ambalangoda Exploration & Excavation Report – 2012, 2012 p. 5).

### **The Arabic Epigraphy found from the Harbour at Ambalangoda**

**Introduction** - The Ambalangoda harbor development project was carried out in 2007 while digging the seabed unearthed several types of artifacts. Discovering five copper alloy plates were a remarkable finding of the site (Table No 2). A notable thing which can be seen is two epigraphy in the reverse of the copper plates number 2 (2007/SL/S/AMBA/02) and 5 (2007/SL/S/AMBA/05).

## The Copper alloy plates

| Plate No | Registration Number in Maritime Archaeology Museum, Galle | Photograph  | Description   |
|----------|---|---|---|
| 1        | 2007/SL/S/AMBA/01   |    | thickness 1.38 cm,<br>radius 30 cm,<br>width 60 mm,<br>weight 3.952 kg<br>complete  |
| 2        | 2007/SL/S/AMBA/02<br>(With two pieces)                    |   | Thickness 1.21 mm,<br>Radius 29 cm,<br>Width 14.5,<br>Weight 697.3 g<br>Two fragments<br>Can be seen an<br>epigraphy in the reverse<br>Epigraphy :<br>Length 71.68mm,<br>Depth of letters 1 mm,<br>Length of a letter<br>10.68667 mm, |
| 3        | 2007/SL/S/AMBA/03   |  | Thickness 1.58 mm,<br>Radius 14cm,<br>Width 28cm,<br>Heights 686.2 g.<br>Complete but broken  |

|   |  |   |   |
|---|--|---|---|
| 4 | 2007/SL/S/<br>AMBA/04                          |  | Thickness 1.41 mm,<br>radius 15.5 cm,<br>width 31 cm,<br>weight 420.5 g,<br>incomplete  |
| 5 | 2007/SL/S/<br>AMBA/05<br>(With four<br>pieces) |  | Thickness 0.75 mm,<br>Weight 285.4 g<br>Incomplete<br>Four fragments<br>Can be seen an<br>epigraphy in the reverse<br>Length 71.68mm,<br>Depth of letters 1 mm,<br>Length of a letter<br>10.68667 mm, |

(Table No 2) Copper alloy plates

The above table shows five copper alloy plates which have been displayed in the Maritime Archaeology Museum (MAM) of Central Cultural Fund in Galle Fort.

### Epigraphy on copper alloy plates

#### I. Description of the epigraphy

This epigraphy is very small, 71.68mm in length, 1 mm in the depth of the letters and, 10.68667 mm in Length of a letter. Thickness is 1.21 mm, Radius 29 cm, Width 14.5 and Weight 697.3

g (copper plate 2) and Thickness 0.75 mm, Weight 285.4 g (copper plate 5).

The plate had fragmented into two parts, probably, when it was under the seabed or when digging the seabed by the high-pressure water dredger. There are no decorations in the obverse and the reverse of the plate. The five plates have been made of the copper alloy. This plate with epigraphy was deteriorated. It is covered by the brownish or blackish "patina". This plates conserved in 2014

before being displayed in the Maritime Archaeology Museum in Galle.

## **II. Photographs and stamp pages of the epigraphy**

### **Epigraphy 1**

### **III. Translation of the Epigraphy**

The period between the fourth and sixth centuries A.D. is generally considered to be a period of decline for the trade of Arabia.

The Arabic alphabet has 28 letters, all representing consonants, and is written from right to left. Of the letters, twenty-two are those of the Semitic alphabet from which it descended, modified only in a letter from, and the remaining six letters represent sounds not used in the languages written in the earlier alphabet.

It is a Southern Central Semitic language spoken in a large area including North Africa, most of the Arabian Peninsula and other parts of the Middle East.

Translation of the Epigraphy

### **Epigraphy 1**

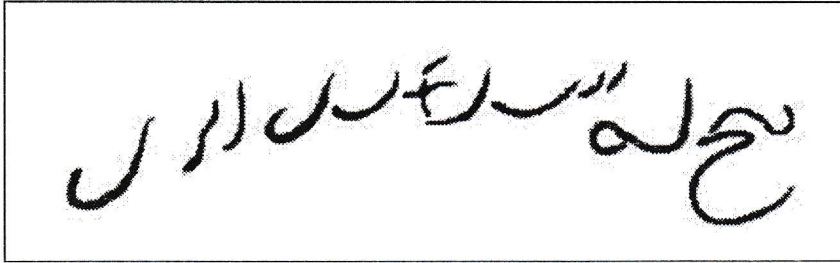
Arabic (منح له سيد عبد الرب) / (Manehe Lahu Sayyid Abdul Rabb)

Arabic is a language of the Quran and is the religious language of all Muslims. Literary Arabic usually called Classical Arabic, is essentially the form of the language found in the Quran, with some modifications necessary for its use in modern times; it is uniform throughout the Arab world. Colloquial Arabic includes numerous spoken dialects, some of which are mutually unintelligible (The New Encyclopedia Britannica, vol.1, page: 508, 509, 51015<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2005, U.S.A).

Ceylon was earlier known to the Arabs on account of its pearl-fisheries and trade in precious stones and spices, and the Arab merchants had formed commercial establishments there centuries before the rise of the Islam (Abid;Page 838). This Arabic letter had been written without dottings, it reveals the early era before Islam, because after introducing Islam, dotting to Arabic was introduced to make it easy to recite the Holy Quran.

English “Mr. Abdul Rabb Awarded to him”

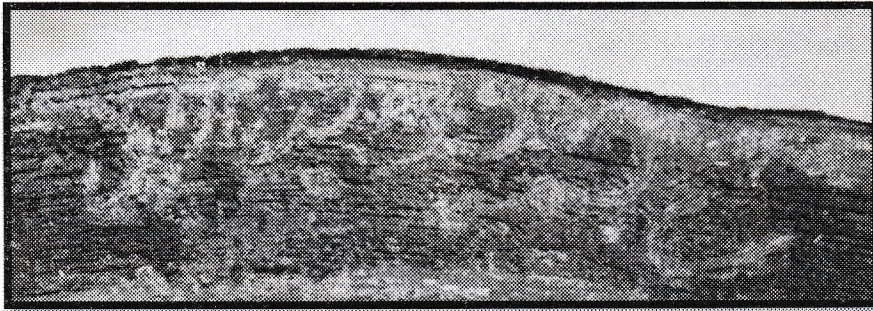
Epigraphy 2



Arabic (منح له سيد عبد الرب) / (Manche Lahu Sayyid Abdul Rabb)

English “Mr. Abdul Rabb Awarded to him”

This first epigraphy similar to the second epigraphy



Here, this Arabic letter was written without dotting, its meaning is: “Mr. Abdul Rabb Awarded to him”, (منح له سيد عبد الرب), (*Manche Lahu Sayyid Abdul Rabb*), Early Arabic writing had been included without dots. The dots found today in Arabic writing were one of the first innovations that came after the spread of Islam. These dots make it clear what consonant is to be

pronounced. Before the dots, people read the text without any dots. They could do this through their experience. Arabic Writing has been using dots since the dotting system was first invented by Abu al-Aswad Al-Du’ali ( 603–688 A.D) to prevent grammatical errors. He was a close companion of fourth Khaliphah Ali bin Abi Talib and grammarian. He was the



first to place dots on Arabic letters and the first to write on Arabic linguistics.

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