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Persians in the Indian Ocean around 6th Century A.D: Special Reference to the Sri Lankan and Persian trade Relations

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ක්‍රි.ව. හයවන සියවසේ තත්වය ගැන කොස්මස් දක්වන අදහස් ශ්‍රී ලංකාව හා පැවැති ජාත්‍යන්තර වෙළෙඳාමෙහි ස්වරූපය පිළිබඳ පැහැදිලි විනයක් ගොඩනගා ගැනීමට හේතු වෙයි. එසේ ම එය වඩාත් වැදගත් වන්නේ ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ එම තත්වයන් අරාබීන් ශ්‍රී ලංකාව කෙරෙහි දැඩිව අවධානය යොමු කිරීමට හේතු වන තත්වයක් තේරුම් ගැනීමට මග පාදන බැවිණි. විශේෂයෙන් පර්සියානුවන්ගේ ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ ක්‍රියාකාරිත්වය ආරාබීන්ගේ ප්‍රවේශයට බෙහෙවින් දායක වීම මෙහි දී වැදගත් කරුණකි. පර්සියානුවන්ගේ ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ වාණිජ කටයුතු බටහිර ආසියාව හා ශ්‍රී ලංකාව අතර පැවැති වාණිජ සබඳතා තහවුරු කිරීමට දායක වූ අතර අනෙකුත් බටහිර ජාතීන්ගේ පැමිණීම ද ඉක්මන් කරනු ලැබීය. පර්සියානුවන් විසින් මෙකල සුවිශේෂී ගරුත්වයකින් සලකන ලද අශ්වයන් ගෙන ඒම අතින් ශ්‍රී ලංකාව ප්‍රසිද්ධියක් උසුලනු ලැබීය. විශේෂයෙන් අනෙකුත් ඇත පෙරදිග රටවලට අශ්වයන් ගෙන යනු ලැබුයේ ශ්‍රී ලංකාවට ගෙන ඒමෙන් අනතුරුව ය. කොස්මස්ට අනුව ඉන්දියානුවන් ශ්‍රී ලංකාව 'සිලේදිබා' යනුවෙන් හඳුන්වා ඇති අතර ජේගන්වරු (Pagans) එය 'තැප්‍රොබෙන්' යනුවෙන් ව්‍යභාර කර තිබේ. එය ස්ථාන ගත වී ඇති ආකාරයේ කේන්ද්‍රීය ස්වභාවය නිසා මෙම දිවයින ඉන්දියාවේ සියළු පෙදෙස්වලින් හා පර්සියාවෙන් මෙන් ම ඉතියෝපියාවෙන් පැමිණෙන නැව්වලට විශිෂ්ටත ම නැවතුම් වරායයන් සපයනවා පමණක් නොව එය ඊට ම අයත් නැව් රාශියක් ම විදේශ වරායවලටත් පිටත් කළ බව කොස්මස් වැඩිදුරටත් සඳහන් කරයි. ඉතියෝපියානුවන්ගේ පැමිණීම පිළිබඳව සඳහන් කිරීම මෙහි දී වැදගත් කරුණකි. බටහිර ප්‍රදේශවලට භාණ්ඩ ප්‍රවාහනයේ දී ඔවුන්ගේ ද අතරමැදි ක්‍රියාකාරිත්වය ඉන්දියන් සාගර වාණිජ කටයුතුවලදී වඩා පහසු තත්වයක් සැලසීය. ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ මෙම කාලය පිළිබඳව කොස්මස්ගේ විස්තර පුරාවිද්‍යාත්මක සාක්ෂි මගින් ද තහවුරු වී තිබීම වැදගත් ය.

ප්‍රමුඛ පද: පර්සියානුවන්, ජාත්‍යන්තර වෙළෙඳාම, ඉන්දියන් සාගරය, ශ්‍රී ලංකාව

Introduction

By this time Persian merchants were firmly rooted in the entrepôt trade in India and Sri Lanka. According to Cosmas in the 6th century A.D. Sri Lanka had been the main centre of commerce in the Indian Ocean and Persians were held in high esteem as respectable merchants in Sri Lanka. By this time, Sri Lanka obtained a firm position in the international commerce and trading system. Although not a commercial production centre, Sri Lanka became a supply and distribution centre of commodities and a main naval centre in the Indian Ocean; as such Sri Lanka became a reputed naval base with a well organized shipping system in the region. Consequently, the income generated being tremendous, it was properly invested in completing 60 irrigation systems and cultural monuments in Sri Lanka successfully (Gunawardana 1993:178-208 ; 1971: 3-27; 1984: 115-143; Premathilaka 1978: 61-74; 1987: 1-20; Dasanayaka 2002: 117-135.)

A good image of the trading activities with West Asia during this period emerges from the account of *Cosmas Indicopleustes* of the 6th century A.D.¹. This kind of brisk trade with West Asia was the very reason why the Arabs paid so much attention to Sri Lanka; especially the activities of Persians in the commerce with Sri Lanka made way for the Arabs. Further, because of the Persians' involvement with Sri Lankan commerce, all West Asian nations and Europeans too were attracted immediately to the Sri Lankan trade.

Cosmas says that this Sri Lanka is situated in the remotest of all Indian lands that it lies to the left of those who went to the Indian Sea beyond the Persian Gulf, and that the island was called by the Indians *Sielediba* and by the Greeks *Taprobanê*. He also states that the distance from *Taprobanê* to the China is much greater than the distance from the island to the head of the Persian Gulf. He says, due to its central position, the island is much frequented by ships from all parts of India and from Persia and Ethiopia and likewise sends out many ships of its own. He also adds that from China and other places east of Cape Comorin, (the "inner countries"), the island received silk, aloes, clove-wood, sandal-wood and other products, and these were again passed on to the western marts such as Male, Kalliana, and Sindhu, Persia, the Himyarite country, and Adoulis. The island receives imports from all these and passes them on to the ports in the east, and, at the same time, exports its own produce in both directions (The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk 1897 : 364-372; Cosmas Indicopleustes, The Christian Topography 1909: 322; Nilakanta Sastri 1942: 88)

From this account it is evident that the island took an active part as an entrepôt trade centre in international trade at this time, especially trade with West Asia. This evidence of

1 Cosmas was surnamed Indicopleustes, i. e. "Indian Navigator." He was probably an Egyptian Greek. After a long career in overseas trade he became a monk and devoted the rest of his life to writing theological works. One work of his which has come down to us is the Christians Topography, in twelve books. Book XI of the Topography, contains a description of the island of Sri Lanka.

Cosmas is also attested by Procopius the Roman historian who was a near contemporary of Cosmas. According to this writer, the Persian merchants bought their wares of silk from Indian merchants who brought them to Ceylon (Dewing 1906: 9-13) But there is evidence that Persians came to Sri Lanka even before Cosmas' time. According to Fa-hien (A.D. 414) there were many *Vaisya* elders and *Sabaeans* (Hussein 2007: 3) (*Sa-Bo*²) merchants whose houses were stately and beautiful (A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms: Being an Account by The Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of His Travels in India and Ceylon A.D. 399-414 1971: 68; The Travels of Fa-Hien 1886 :104; Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun-Buddhist Pilgrims from China to India 400 A.D. and 518 A.D. 1869: 149-64)

Cosmas does not tell us what the products were, apart from the precious stone which he calls the hyacinth. In fact, according to Cosmas, Sri Lanka in the 6th century A.D. was the most important entrepôt and the Persians occupied a privileged position here because they brought horses (a commodity of great prestige) into the country, and further says the island now became the terminus of western navigation in the Indian Ocean. Because of the strategic location of this Island and the natural harbour, ships arriving from all parts of India, Persia and Ethiopia could be anchored safely while many ships sailed to foreign harbours from here. Cosmas has described this very vividly. It is important to note that the arrival of Ethiopian ships and transporting many commodities to western parts of the world as intermediate agent made the Indian Ocean a busy high way of trade and commerce.

It was possible here to exchange their wares with the cargoes brought from further east. O.W. Wolters argues that the Persian shipping went no further than Sri Lanka in the fifth and sixth century, and that the Malay ships monopolised the trade in western luxury goods with China (Wolters 1967: 74) In the seventh and eighth centuries one hears of Persians sailing beyond Sri Lanka, but there is no evidence to show that this took place in the time of Cosmas (Weerakkody 1981:120; Comes 1966:7-24) If Persian ships had been sailing beyond Sri Lanka, the island would not have been so famous as an entrepôt at that time. But Cosmas knew from the experience of his own time that the situation was really that "this Siedediba is "mediatrix" (Sri Lanka in the centre) (Ibid) in the great eastern trade routes by sea; then, 'he repeats, "placed, as one may say, in the centre with regard to India, and possessing the hyacinth-producing region, it receives imports from all the seats of commerce and in turn exports to them, and is thus itself a great seat of commerce'. But, as it is emphasized in the introduction, during Cosmas' time, Sri Lanka played a great role in the Indian Ocean as an entrepôt trade centre from ancient times and Cosmas's information is in addition to this. But when discussing the beginning of Sri Lankan and West-Asian relations, his account is the most important source.

2 The phonetic values of the Chinese characters being as and vabo or bha-These Sabaeans evidently refer to the Arabs of the southern Arabian Peninsula whose origin is traced to one Saba, a descendant of Joktan (Arabic Kahtam) who in turn descended from , the Shem, the progenitor of the Semitic peoples.

Cosmas narrates with vividness and enthusiasm the adventures of his friend Sopatros who, having gone to the island on business, and having been granted audience with the king at the same time as the Persian ambassador, convinced the king of the superiority of the Romans (that is the Byzantine empire) over the Persians by offering a comparison of the coins of the two nations. This is how he reports the incident:

“Anyway, one of the business people from here, named Sopatros, who has been dead for the last 35 years, to my knowledge, once reached the island of Taprobanê on a business venture, when the ship from Persia had just cast anchor there. So the people from Adoulis, and Sopatros with them, disembarked, as did the people from Asia, with whom there was a Persian envoy also. Then, as was the custom, the local magistrates and the tax collectors welcomed them and took them to the king. The king welcomed them, received their salutations, and told them to sit down, and then he asked, ‘How are your countries, and how things are getting on there?’ ‘Nicely’, they replied. Then, in the general conversation the king put the question, ‘Which of your kings is the greater and the more powerful?’

“The Persian got his word in first and said, ‘Our king is the more powerful, the greater, the richer, and he is the King of Kings. Whatever he wills, he is able to put into effect.’ Sopatros kept quiet, and then the king said, ‘What about you, Roman? Haven’t you anything to say?’ And Sopatros replied, ‘What can I say after these statements of his? If you want the truth, you have got both kings here. Have a look at each of them, and you can see which is the more glorious and powerful.’ On hearing this, he was astonished, and asked, ‘Are the coins of both kings here?’ He replied, ‘You have the coins of them both, the *nomisma* of the one, and the *drachma* (that is the *miliarision*) of the other. Look at the image on each of them and you will see the truth.’

“The king praised and commended the idea and ordered both coins to be produced. Well, the *nomisma* was of gold, brilliant and of shape, for the coins which are exported are specially selected, whereas the *miliarision*, to put in a nutshell, was of silver, and that was enough to rule out any comparison with the gold coin. The king turned both coins over and inspected them, and, full of praise for the *nomisma*, he said, ‘Truly, the Romans are glorious, powerful and wise (The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk 1897: 363-373; McCrindle 1901:160-66; Yule 1913 :222-231; NilakantaSastri :86-92; Weerakkody 1981: 120; Weerasinghe, Goonetilleke and Abeysingha 1986: 447-463; De Silva and Kiribamune 1987: 21-32)

Cosmas had recorded that incident directly from Sopatros or from his men, while details of Sri Lankan information were also obtained from other reliable sources. As such many believed his recordings. According to this information, during that period, although Roman kings were mighty and more powerful, Sri Lanka had a better trading system with

the Persians. This had to be accepted. In the time of Cosmas, Persia was more powerful than during the Sopatros period (Tennent 1859: 542) Sassanid activity in the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Peninsula and the Indus valley is best known from the last century before the Hijrah³, when the Byzantines made efforts to break the Sassanid hold on the India trade. It can definitely be said that the Sassanids, taking over commercially where the Romans and Greeks left off, developed into a major Indian Ocean power, and that the Persians did not leave much room to their Byzantine-Ethiopian rivals, for, as Procopius writes, “the Persian merchants always located themselves at the every harbour where the Indian ships first put in (since they inhabit the adjoining country) and are accustomed to buy the whole cargoes.” (Wink :50)

This much is clear; in the centuries preceding the advent of Islam there was persistent and intense commercial rivalry between the Sassanids and the Byzantines, and that such rivalry acquired outspoken political and ideological dimensions which were manifest from Syria to Sri Lanka. As it is mentioned above, during the long reign of king Nushirvan (A.D. 531-579), Persia vastly strengthened her position all over West Asia. The decline of the Himyarite kingdom on the one hand and the growing interest of the Persians in the navigation of the Arabian sea (Ahamed 1978:81) on the other affected Arab trade relations with South Asia, and caused the transfer of the immemorial traffic between India and Egypt into the hands of Persia.

Thus, in the century before the rise of Islam the Persians were supreme in commercial activities in the Indian Ocean. Their ships frequented harbours of India and Sri Lanka (Mantai). Though the Arabs were well known as traders in Asia long before the birth of Islam, the Persians had been trading with China and the far eastern countries even earlier than the Arabs. Besides, Persian interests in the island can be traced back to at least a century and a half earlier (Wolters 1967: 80)⁴, for it is learnt from Chinese sources that as early as A.D. 380 a Persian king asked for the hand of the daughter of a king of Sri Lanka and sent a gold bracelet as a present (Ibid :81)⁵ As Cosmas said, there is no doubt Persians kept Sri Lanka as a notable centre for their trading activities.

3 The emigration of the Prophet from Meccato Yathrib (later called *Madinat an-Nabi*, the “City of the Prophet” or Medina) at the end of September in 622. The Hijrah took place in the year 622, at the end of the September, probably on the 17th. Sixteen years later, in 637, the Caliph ‘Umar formalized the Prophet’s custom of dating event from the Hijrah, the moment of the establishment of the first Islamic state. Thus, the year of the Hijrah became the first year of the Islamic era.

4 The following passage appears in the *T’aiyülan*: ‘The *T’angtzü* states: *Shih-tzü* country (Sri Lanka) produces cinnabar, mercury, *hsün-lu*, turmeric, storax, costus, and such perfumes.’ According to the *Sui shu* the author of the *T’angtzü* was the Taoist T’angP’ang, who lived under the Wu dynasty (122-280). *Shih-tzü* is the name used by FaHsien for Sri Lanka at the beginning of the fifth century.

5 The fragment comes from Liu Hsin-ch’i’s (A.D.380) *Chiaochou chi*: The *Po-ssü* (Persian) king asked for the hand of the daughter of the king of *Ssü-t’iao* (Sri Lanka) and sent a gold bracelet as a (betrothal) present.

In the 5th century A.D. the Sassanian emperor had an ambassador in the Royal council of the king of Anuradhapura. This is an evidence of the Sri Lankan diplomatic relationship with West Asia. According to historian Ibn Miskawaih (A.D. 1029 A.D.), among the kings of Asia and Byzantium who presented themselves at the court of this illustrious Sassanian Emperor with their delegations, there was also the king of Sarandib who had come with precious gifts (Imam :173) Whoever, it is not clear whether the king himself was present or an emissary represented the king. Al-Beruni (A.D. 1048) also refers to a dispatch of a diplomatic mission along with ten elephants, two hundred thousand pieces of teakwood,⁶ and seven divers (of pearls) sent by Sarandib to Khusraw Nushirvan (*Kitāb al Jamāhir fi Marifat al Javahir* 1908: 71; Imam: 173) Al-Beruni was considerably a well educated historian on Asia and furnished reliable details on historical events-and, therefore, what he referred to here could be the same royal delegation. Mahmud Gardizi who flourished in the middle of the eleventh century A.D. also confirms in his *Zain-ul-Akhbar* or “Glorious Chronicle” that the king of Sarandib had sent valuable gifts and good wishes to the Sassanian emperor (Imam:173)

But Gardizi records a fact which has not been mentioned either by Al-Beruni or Ibn Miskawaih that some emissaries of king Nushirvan also visited the Sarandib island. The exact time has not been recorded. King Nushirvan had a long reign of 47 years, (A.D. 531-579) during which period there were six kings in Sri Lanka. Silakala (A.D. 518- 531) Dhatapiboothi (A.D. 531), Moggallana II (A.D. 531-551), Kithsirimegha (A.D. 531-569), Mahanaga (A.D. 569-571), and Agghabodhi (A.D. 571-604). Therefore, the above mentioned visit of the emissaries could have been during the reign of one of those kings. The Sri Lankan king at that time had sent 7 divers or royal pearl collectors to Iran to be employed in the Persian Gulf pearl-fishing, because the Iranian emperor had been highly impressed by the abilities of these divers collecting pearls. They were assigned to serve in the Gulf bay area with the permission of the king of Iran. Al Tabari (A.D. 839-923) has recorded that the emperor of Iran, Nushirvan, had sent an army or fleet to Sarandib and collected valuable gems and other products (Goeje 1903: 90; Whitehouse and Williamson 1973: 29-49; Colles 1969: 10-47; Tibbetts 1957: 6-7,9) However, Ahmad Nafis is of the view that the Persians acted aggressively in Sri Lanka (Nafis 1945: 225)

Andre Wink and Auguste Toussaint mention that a second fleet was also sent to Sri Lanka in the reign of Khusro I (Wink: 51; *History of the Indian Ocean* 1966: 45) Hanza d' Ispahan, in his chronicles written in the middle of the tenth century, says Chosroes Nourschirvan, the celebrated Persian monarch, invaded Sarandib in the year A.D. 650 (Rifles 1876:233) But there is no evidence to this, and especially there is no mention in Sri Lankan chronicles regarding an invasion by Persians. Therefore, Al Thabari's declaration may be taken as an exaggeration or boasting of Iran. The close relationship of Persians with the Royal council of Anuradhapura had an impact on the Arab-Sri Lanka connections. Although the Arabs had some connection with Sri Lanka earlier, this made them improve the relations much more

6 May be 2500, ornamental articles made of teak wood carvings

vigorously. However, when considering the West Asian relations with Sri Lanka, before the Arabs were able to capture the trade relationship, the Persians were closely related to Sri Lanka through sea-trade.

Cosmas further attests that there were Persian settlements in the island. According to him, it seems that there was a Persian church and that the presbyter was appointed from Persia⁷. This, by the way, is the only authentic record of the existence of Christianity in ancient Sri Lanka prior to the arrival of the Portuguese. However, legendary claims cannot always be substantiated. There was, for instance, a curious tradition that the island was visited and converted by a eunuch of Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia, and he, along with St. Thomas the Apostle, were put forward in the time of the Portuguese rule as rival claimants to the sacred footprint on Adam's Peak (Rifles: 95; Weerakkody 1981:111). It is also sometimes alleged that there was a monastery of St. Thomas in the island in the middle of the fourth century. So far, it has not been possible to establish the truth of any of these stories. Many Indian scholars insist that St. Thomas did reach South India in the time of king Gundaphar identified with Gondopharnes (HimanshuPrabha Ray :185) and attained martyrdom on a mountain outside the city (near Madras) (Abraham 1988:17). Certainly there is evidence of the presence of the Christians in South India from at least A.D. 300(Pearson :59). In fact, some of the Nestorian (Loewe 1971-1972:166-169)⁸ tomb-inscriptions in India have been dated as early as A.D. 547 around which time Cosmas was writing (Weerakkody :111). One of these stone panels is preserved in the church of St. Thomas near Madras (Hodivala 1995:12-13), while others have been found in the state of Kerala (Zachariah 2006:Ch II) in the churches of Kottayam, Murrucira, Katamaram and Alanga (HimanshuPrabha Ray: 186). The original text, however, is preserved in the epitaph at Madras (HimanshuPrabha Ray:186; Langfeldt :32-60).⁹ This evidence leads us to conclude that the Christian church set up in Sri Lanka primarily met the religious needs of the Persian community settled there. (probably near the Mantai port city in Anuradhapura). The discovery of a similar stone panel with a Nestorian cross at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka in 1912 has also lent support to the view that they dwelt in the city (RamanathanAyyar 1924:188-196; Archaeological Survey of Ceylon 1924:51-52). But it must be pointed out that the cross cannot be dated to the time of Cosmas. D.P.M. Weerakkody correctly assumes, 'the cross may date to a time before the fall of Anuradhapura in the 11th century A.D. but it cannot serve as evidence for the location of the Christian "church" mentioned by Cosmas' (Weerakkody :113) However, the fact that contact was maintained with Persia is in harmony with the extensive sea trade that existed from the Gulf to Malabar and Sri Lanka.

7 He was also the Bishop of India

8 According to story,told by Procopius and Theophanes of Byzantiyan, two monks who were probably Nestorians had brought some silk-worm eggs to Justinian's court, hidden in the staves which they carried; this allegedly occurred c.550.

9 The presence of Christians remains in the archaeological record from the Persian Gulf (at al-Qousour on the island of Failaka) further reveals Christianity in this period.

The relations with Persia is also testified by numismatics; the silver Larins or fish-hook coins of Persia and the gold seraphins of Ormuz on the Presian Gulf have been found in Sri Lanka (Nicholas and Pranavitana 1961:322). Among the materials in recent excavations which can be attributed to Persian origin, there were: a Partho-Sassanian pitcher from Jetavanarama from the citadel in Anuradhapura (Fernando: 68). Besides large quantity of Sassanian-Islamic ceramics (British Archaeology Report 1989; Whitehouse 1996: 339-349; HimnshuPrabha Ray 2003: 87)¹⁰ and a baked-clay bulla with three impressions of the Sassanian period have been found from Mantai (Carswell 1991: 197-203; HimanshuPrabha Ray:186) . Bopearachchi notices that when defining the design of the interior city, the royal pleasure gardens and the palace, the ancient site of Sigiriya was, to a certain extent, influenced by Persian architectural tradition (Bopearachchi 1996: 72; Allchin and Allchin 1997: 377-391; Multi-Disciplinary International Conference on the Occasion of 50th Anniversary of Independence of Sri Lanka 1998:23-25). By publishing three coins of Yezdigerd 1 (A.D. 397-417), Codrington (Codrington 1924:30) puts forward a hypothesis according to which occasional finds of small copper coins among the ‘third brass’ show the dealings of Persians in Sri Lanka. Apart from that, there are three more Sassainian coins which further support these relations. The interesting thing is, one of these coins belong to the king Nushirvan period. All of them bear the same obverse and reverse types: bust surmounted by crescent/ fire alter with flames and two attendants.

The first coin is of Xusro I (A.D.532-579), of the year 16, mint AYR

The second is of Hormizd IV (A.D.579-590), of the year 10, mint BBA

The third is of Xurso II (A.D. 591-629), of the year 6 (Bopearachchi 1996:72



Fig.1
Persian pottery

It would seem that with the decadence of the Sassanian empire, the Muhammadan Arabs began to reach the Malabar coast and Sri Lanka, and it can be ascertained that a great number of literary sources and inscriptions, archaeological artifacts, such as ceramics and especially coins testify to the presence of Muslims in the island as early as the 7th century A.D.

10 Archaeological excavation conducted at Siraf port in the Persian Gulf indicates that Siraf played an active commercial role in the Sassanian Period.

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