

The Need for a Reappraisal of the Study of History of the Eastern Part of the Island

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The study of the history of the eastern part of the country has received scanty attention in the chronicles as well as in modern historiography. The study of the pre-historic period has so far yielded only a few megalithic urn burial sites, in contrast to more numerous sites located on the North West. The presence of the pearl fishery could have been the attraction for the latter. The people of this megalithic culture have not been fully identified though affinities with foreign nations who came for pearl diving and such burial practices on the opposite side of the Palk straits have been suggested. No such suggestions have been made for the North Eastern sites.

In the historical period, a fair number of early Brahmi inscriptions from the 2nd c. B.C. to 4th c. A.C., have been located in the North Eastern and Western districts. These point to an extensive Buddhist habitation from pre-Christian times. All the names are of a North-Indian Prakrit derivation.

The period after the 4th century A.C. seems to present a gap. Many inscriptions were destroyed during the early British period during the process of restoration of ancient irrigation works in this vast area (Brohier). The process continued even after the country became more conscious of the importance of ancient inscriptions and monuments. For example, hundreds of valuable lithic records were willfully destroyed during the construction of the Gal Oya project. Only four inscriptions in fragments were saved from the bulldozers and all of them bore reference to Lajji Tissa.

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Later settlement patterns around the colonial period could be reconstructed by reference to Portuguese, Dutch, and early British records. Bertolacci, the first British Civil Servant in the island, noted in 1817 that the island comprised four “nations”, the “Ceylonese Proper”, the Malabars (Hindoos), Moors and Veddas. Their areas of occupation were given precisely as (1)the Kandyan kingdom, the coastal areas from Hambantota to Chilaw in the case “Ceylonese Proper”, (2) the north and east coasts, and the peninsula of Jaffna in the case of Malabars; (3) wide dispersal in the case of Moors with a great mass in Puttalam, and (4) from the south to the east and north, upon the borders of our frontier in the case of Veddas [The British frontier then did not go beyond the eastern coastal strip, e.g., one mile in each direction from the fort of Trincomalee]. There was no ambiguity here as to who were occupying the lands outside the immediate coasts in eastern parts at the commencement of the British administration.

Later settlements patterns need to be further studied.

Keywords: historiography, lithic records, irrigation works, four “nations,” “Ceylonese Proper.”