

The Beginnings of Civilization in South India

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EARLY civilization in the Tamil region of South India may be distinguished from the less complex agricultural village level of culture by the criteria which are usually used to define civilization. Though the grandeur of early Tamil civilization should not be exaggerated because it was on the fringe of the area of diffusion of early classical Indian civilization, we do have evidence of the existence of literacy and literary traditions, formal religions and philosophies, monarchies and empires, extensive trade and commerce, specialization of labor, substantial buildings, and urbanization. The most important source is the literature of the "Sangam" period, written during the first three centuries after Christ. Though this literature is difficult to use as a source of anthropological and historical data because of its lyrical quality, it has the advantage of having been transmitted to our time essentially without the accretions of Indian epic literature. Other data come from notices of South India in early Greek, North Indian, and Ceylonese literature. There are some early rock-cut caves with brief inscriptions, and a small scattering of archeological data. It is probable that the civilization of the Pāṇḍiyan (Pāṇḍya) region goes back to the fourth century B.C.

How did this civilization evolve? To what extent was its development the result of external cultural stimuli, and what were the patterns of cross-cultural contact? Why did the Pāṇḍiyan kingdom at the extremity of the Indian peninsula develop complexities of civilization before territories lying to the north? These questions have not been answered, except by the tacit assumption that early classical Indian civilization diffused southward overland. One difficulty with this assumption is that there is no evidence of any early civilization located between the Mysore gold fields, with their Mauryan remains, and the Pāṇḍiyan region. Moreover, the early urban complexes of the distant Āndhra deltas, as archeologically defined, consisted largely of Buddhist institutions, and had little or no known impact on the early Pāṇḍiyas.

It is clear that the script, formal religions, dynastic traditions, and other features of the civilization of the early Tamils developed from assimilation and adaptation of the Indian Great Tradition (which cannot be termed "Sanskritization" in this case, as the language medium was Prakrit, or Pali). There is neither archeological nor literary evidence of any previous "Dravidian civilization" in the far south, but Iron Age culture was widespread throughout the peninsula.

It is the contention of this article that the Pāṇḍiyan dynasty, together with the civilization it represented, arose largely through the cultural stimulus of coastal sea traffic. This author believes the same was also true of the Cōlas (of the Kāvēri basin) and the Cēras (of Kēraḷa).¹ This sea traffic originated mostly in Gujarat

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¹ The wider context, and also more data on this

and Sindhu, though from the Mauryan period on it came from the Bengal side also. Sea trade with the Mediterranean had negligible permanent effect on South India.

It is clear that sea traffic emanating from distant parts of India impinged on Ceylon to such an extent that it transformed the culture of that island and brought it within the orbit of Indian civilization. This was but a precursor of the impact of Indian civilization on all of Southeast Asia. From the location of the earliest known ports of India, it is apparent that most of this sea traffic skirted the peninsula. It appears that the processes of acculturation of the Pāṇḍiyan region were similar to those which occurred in Ceylon and in the lands across the Bay of Bengal. Moreover, the culture that developed in Ceylon with the arrival of various immigrants, who blended with the indigenous population to form the Sinhalese, was a dynamic force which spilled over into the Pāṇḍiyan region, as we shall note below. To some extent, both coasts of the Indo-Ceylon straits may be thought of as having acted as a single center of diffusion of Indian civilization in the far south.

Early Sea Trade. The most important very early attraction of the extreme south was pearls, available chiefly in the Indo-Ceylon straits. The author of the *Arthaśāstra* lists a number of places from which pearls came, the majority of which can be identified on the Pāṇḍiyan coast or in northern Ceylon, and also describes many varieties of pearls and pearl necklaces.² Megasthenes writes that Heracles had discovered the sea pearl and had adorned with it the person of his daughter Pandaia, and had given her the southern portion of India as her kingdom; he also narrates some fantastic heresay about how pearls were obtained from the ocean.³ There is little doubt that pearls of the Pāṇḍiyan coast were well known in the north by 300 B.C., and perhaps much earlier.⁴

In the second and first centuries B.C., Chinese traders came to South India and purchased large pearls, as well as glass and rare stones, giving silk and gold in exchange. They traveled on ships of the "barbarians."⁵ Pearls from the Pāṇḍiyan coast were probably traded up the east coast of India about the same time, for that would have been the likely source of the pearls ensconced in the Buddhist stupas of the Āndhra deltas. The stupa at Bhaṭṭiprōḷu at the mouth of the Kṛṣṇa River, for instance, contained sixty-two pearls; its caskets are datable to the early second century B.C.⁶

Pearls of the Indo-Ceylon straits retained notoriety sufficiently to find mention in the works of such Greek geographers and historians as Ptolemy, Pliny, Arrian, and Aelian, who describe the pearl fisheries and state that they belong to the Pāṇḍiyan king, and inform us that the pearls were fished by condemned criminals and were marketed at ports and emporia along that coast.⁷ Indeed, a pearl market,

subject are discussed by the author in *The Effect of Early Coastal Sea Traffic on the Development of Civilization in South India* (dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1968).

² *Arthaśāstra* ii.11, trans. R. P. Kangle, *The Kauṭilya Arthaśāstra* (Bombay, 1963-65).

³ Arrian, *Indika* 8.

⁴ For discussion of the date of this part of the *Arthaśāstra*, see Kangle, III, 74-75, 86-87, 106-15. Pearls are referred to in the *Brāhmaṇas*, though the source is not mentioned, and *Atharva Veda* iv.10 is

a hymn about the healing properties of pearls and mother-of-pearl.

⁵ J. J. L. Duyvendak, *China's Discovery of Africa* (London, 1949), pp. 9-10. The place the Chinese merchants came to is probably identifiable as Kāñcipuram, doubtless served by the easily defended port of Mahabalipuram.

⁶ Alexander Rea, *South Indian Buddhist Antiquities* (Archaeological Survey of India, New Imperial Series, XV, 1894), pp. 7-11.

⁷ *Periplus Maris Erythraei* 59; Ptolemy, *Treatise*

apparently on the delta of the Vaigai River, was called "the greatest emporium of trade in India."⁸ Classical Tamil literature has many references to pearls in connection with the Pāṇḍiyas; the pearl market port of Koṅkai was at one time the seat of the Pāṇḍiyan viceroyalty.⁹

Another valuable product that attracted very early traders to the Indo-Ceylon straits was conch shells, for the best big-bellied ones are available there. Kauṭilya, in describing the valuable products of the South, mentions the conch shell first in his list. Heaps of conch shell ends, the refuse of bangle cutting, may be seen along the Pāṇḍiyan and northern Ceylon coasts. In the Jaffna peninsula they are associated with early Buddhist remains.¹⁰

The third early important product of the far south was gems. Many place names in Ceylon incorporate the words *ratna* or *maṇi*, and several Sanskrit works on lapidary science mention the island as a source of rubies, topaz, sapphires, crystal, and pearls.¹¹ References to gems occur in the earliest level of tradition pertaining to the island, and in Indian epics and folk tales there is a recurring theme that gems come from across the sea or under the sea. The *Arthaśāstra* refers to gems from across the sea, and an Aśokan edict states that Tāmbapaṇṇī is marked by Mount Vaiḍūryaka.¹² Hsüan-tsang's account of the arrival of the Siṃhalas says they were traders and settled in Ceylon because they saw that it abounded in gems.¹³ It appears that traders coming from the north by sea were the earliest agents of the diffusion of the Indian Great Tradition in the far south, and that this process was well under way before the Mauryan period.

A study of the place names of the distant south first known in the north does not indicate a gradually increasing knowledge of geography southward from Āndhra and Mysore, but rather shows that the coasts of the Indo-Ceylon straits were known well in early historic times. The *Arthaśāstra* mentions the following places as sources of pearls: Pāṇḍyakavāṭa (probably the Pāṇḍiyan Kapāṭapuram of legend described below), Tāmraraṇī (the Tāmbaraparaṇi River, though the same name also came to be applied to Ceylon), Koṭi (Dhanuṣkoṭi, on the Vaigai delta), Cūrṇī (perhaps Maṇṇār in northern Ceylon), Pāśikā (probably a port on the Vaigai mouth), Mahendra (a prominent mountain inland from Cape Comorin), and Kulā (an unidentified place in Ceylon).¹⁴ It also mentions Mathurā, source of the best

on *Geography*, vii.1.10-11; 1.13.1; Pliny, *Natural History*, vi.17.23; Aelian, *On the Characteristics of Animals*, xv.9.

⁸ Pliny vi.17.23; Aelian xv.8.

⁹ *Puranānūṅgu* 380.1; *Neḍunalvāḍai* 125. All the references to sources classified as "Sangam" literature here refer to the editions published by the Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society, Tirunelvēli. On Koṅkai, see also the epic *Cilappatikāram* 23.11; 27.127-35.

¹⁰ P. S. Pieris, "Nāgadīpa and Buddhist Remains in Jaffna," *JRAS, Ceylon Branch*, XXVI (1917), 28.

¹¹ Louis Pinot, *Les Lapidaires Indiens* (Paris, 1896), pp. xxxviii, xlv, xlviii, 64, 162.

¹² *Arthaśāstra* ii.11 refers to gems called *pārasamudra*. Such legends as Kalyāṇa-dhamma Jātaka (trans. E. B. Cowell, *The Jātaka*, II, 90-91) may have grown from early gem trade with the island.

Legends of the earliest stratum of Ceylon tradition several times refer to gems in connection with Nāga kings and their thrones (*Mahāvamsa* 1.45, 48, 63, 75). On Aśoka's Rock Edict XII, see B. C. Law, "Historical and Geographical Aspects of the Aśokan Inscriptions," *Journal of Indian History*, XLI, Part 2, p. 354.

¹³ Samuel Beal (trans.), *Buddhist Records of the Western World* (London, 1906), II, 239, 241, 243, 246.

¹⁴ *Arthaśāstra* ii.11. The promontory of Dhanuṣkoṭi was notable enough so that the Greeks knew of it as a destination and as a point from which to measure distances (Ptolemy i.13.1; vii.1.96). It may be suggested that Cūrṇī is not a river in Kēraḷa as pearls are not generally taken there, but may be Maṇṇār. Maṇṇāṅgu means "muddy river," it was a pearl market, and was located on the main ship channel. Pāśikā may refer to Pāśippaṭṭiṅgam, an

cotton fabrics,¹⁵ which was Old Madurai on the coast, as we shall note below. It is apparent that all these places on the Indo-Ceylon straits were known early in the north because of sea traffic. Onesicritus, one of the pilots of Alexander the Great, had heard about the island of Ceylon while he was in Sindhu about 325 B.C.¹⁶ Megasthenes had heard of the Pāṇḍiyan pearl fisheries by about 300 B.C., and Eratosthenes in the third century B.C. referred to Ceylon as being south of Cape Comorin.¹⁷ There are certain implications which cannot be discussed here to the effect that there was sea trade between western India and the far south even before the third and fourth centuries B.C.

Onesicritus referred to Ceylon as Taprobane (Tambapaṇṇi), the Prakrit name for its northwestern port. Indeed, all the above mentioned places, with the possible exception of Pāsikā, are referred to by Prakrit names, which is suggestive of the early cultural impact of North India on the coasts of the extreme south.

Ceylon and the Early Pāṇḍiyas. The growth of civilization in the Pāṇḍiyan region of South India may be viewed as a development parallel with that of the earliest historical period in Ceylon. There was frequent contact between the two regions. According to the Ceylon chronicles, a number of princes with the name Paṇḍu came to the island from northwestern India. Paṇḍuvāsudeva was the first of these, and he is said to have come from the same Sihapura as his mythical predecessor Vijaya. He came with an entourage. Later Paṇḍuvāsudeva's bride came from the same place, also with an entourage. Her father is said to have been Sakka Paṇḍu. Later, six sons of this monarch followed their sister to Ceylon, each having an entourage and each founding an important early city in the island. If these accounts are correct, minor Paṇḍu dynasties were founded in various parts of Ceylon. Paṇḍuvāsudeva had a son whose given name was Abhaya, but when he became king, he took the name Paṇḍukābhaya. He had a Brāhmaṇ tutor named Paṇḍula who also financed this prince's first army, and who came from a village named Paṇḍulagāma.¹⁸ Since there is no reason to deny the historicity of the names of these monarchs of the Paṇḍu line, it appears credible that they built up pre-Buddhist Anurādhapura as the chronicles narrate, and perhaps other cities also, in the fourth century B.C.

There is more than similarity of names to suggest the common origin of the Pāṇḍiyas and this line of Paṇḍu princes. The first capital of historical Ceylon seems to have been Tambapaṇṇi, the old port otherwise known as Māntai in the northwest of the island, where the temple of Tirukētīśvaram now stands.¹⁹ The earliest legendary cities of the Pāṇḍiyas, including the first Madurai, were on the coast of the delta of the Tāmbarapaṇṇi (the same name as Tambapaṇṇi), across the straits from the early Ceylon capital. Subsequently the Ceylonese capital was moved inland to Anurādhapura, and the Pāṇḍiyas established themselves at Madurai on the bank of the Vaigai River, seventy miles northward. Since the two dynastic lines of the same name

old town on Palk Bay, where pearls have been available on occasion.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* ii.11.115.

¹⁶ Strabo, *Geography* xv.1.14-15.

¹⁷ Strabo xv.1.14; ii.1.4-7. Strabo himself refers to the people around Cape Comorin as Coniaci (xv.1.11).

¹⁸ *Mahāvamsa*, Chaps. 8-10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 7.38-42. All the earliest Greek sources refer to the island only as Taprobane, from the name of this early port and capital. Its association with the Vijaya myth is incorrect, for we show below that the Siṅhalas came later than the Paṇḍu princes.

had capital regions of the same name and since, according to Greek and Ceylonese sources, both flourished in the fourth century B.C., it appears probable that they were connected in origin.

Moreover, a newly discovered document in Ceylon states that Paṇḍukābhaya "conquered the Coḷa and Pāṇḍya kingdoms and made Tāmbraparṇi the center of an empire."²⁰ It is not certain which of the two places this name refers to, as by the time of that monarch, according to the chronicles, Anurādhapura was built up. Another link between the early Pāṇḍiyas and Ceylon monarchs is a tale narrated in the *Mahāvamsa* and incorporated into the Vijaya myth, that that king rejected his wife of indigenous origin because she was not worthy of his status, and requested a bride of the Pāṇḍīyan king. After paying tribute of pearls and gems, he obtained a Pāṇḍīyan princess. The importance of this tale is that it substantiates the existence of a coastal Madurai as discussed below, and moreover suggests the attitude in early Ceylon in regard to the genealogical claims or relative status of the Pāṇḍīyan dynasty.

Cultural Impact of Northwestern India. Both the Pāṇḍiyas and the early Ceylon monarchs traced their dynastic origins back to northwestern India. Though mythical genealogies all over India converge on the names of epic heroes of the northwest, in this instance there is some supporting evidence. The Ceylon chronicles, when read carefully, clearly show a western rather than an eastern origin for the earliest "Āryan" settlers of the island, though this was later obfuscated by Buddhist pre-deliction for the east. There are an increasing number of linguistic, archeological, and literary proofs of this opinion.²¹ Even more interesting, however, are the new sources recently studied by Dr. S. Paranavitana. These indicate that an actual Siṃhala tribe fled from Panjab to Sindhu upon the invasion of Cyrus, and that Xerxes and Artaxerxes tried to expel them from the lower Indus but were unsuccessful. Alexander the Great, however, gave a daughter to Siṃhala, who fled the lower Indus in the wake of the successors of the Greek invader and established himself somewhere on the west coast of India. Siṃhala's son, Murunḍa Siva (probably Muṭasiva of the chronicles) founded the Siṃhala line of Ceylon and built onto Anurādhapura.²² The Siṃhala dynasty, therefore, could not have flourished in Ceylon before the early third century B.C.,²³ though both the Pāṇḍiyas and the Paṇḍus existed as strong monarchies before that time.

The only source referring directly to the origin of the Pāṇḍīyan dynasty is a fragment from Megasthenes, who was in North India about 300 B.C. He writes that

²⁰ S. Paranavitana, "Newly Discovered Historical documents Relating to Ceylon, India, and South-east Asia," lecture reprint, given at Colombo, Dec. 4, 1964, p. 9; also, "An Account of Alexander the Great and Greek Culture in a Universal History Written in the Reign of Mahāsena," lecture reprint, Oct. 31, 1964. Both these reprints, mimeographed by the Ceylon Department of Archaeology, contain a wealth of new data from epigraphical sources, which will, when completely edited and assimilated, demand much revision of the historiography of early Ceylon.

²¹ Some of the more important data are collected in H. C. Ray (ed.), *History of Ceylon* (Colombo, 1959), Vol. I, Part I, 89-111.

²² See Paranavitana's two lecture reprints. The credibility of these accounts is enhanced by the inclusion of a wealth of other data about the history and culture of the Greeks and their appearance in India.

²³ Neither Greek nor North Indian sources before or during the Mauryan period refer to the island by any name except one derived from Tambapanni. Greek and Tamil sources from the first century on, however, use names derived from Siṃhala. The earliest recorded use of this name is a Tamil Brāhmī inscription of about the second century B.C. at Tirupparaṅkūṅgam, which refers to Ilam (Siṃhala).

Heracles (Śiva) gave to his daughter the southward portion of India which extends to the sea, and that he found pearls there for her as he was roaming about. He says Pandaia had a force of about 130,000 men, 4,000 cavalry, and 500 elephants. He also says that the father of Pandaia, Heracles, was held in special honor by the Sūrasenas, one of whose cities is Mathurā.²⁴ It is doubtful that this account could have been created by any genealogical bias of the Pāṇḍiyas themselves, so it may reasonably be accepted that in early Mauryan times in North India itself, it was believed that the Pāṇḍiyan city Maturai (Madurai) was named after Mathurā, that the Pāṇḍiyas were thought to worship Śiva, that they ruled in the south as far as the coast, fished for pearls, and had a fair military force.

One may suspect that there was actual movement of people from the Panjab to the extreme south, not simply diffusion of epic and dynastic names. Mention in the above source of the Sūrasenas of Mathurā in connection with the Pāṇḍiyas suggests that the latter may be connected in origin with the Pāṇḍavas. It also happens that this coincides with the dynastic mythical traditions of the Pāṇḍiyas. The above-mentioned, new Ceylonese source stating how the ancestors of the Simhālas fled from the Panjab to Sindhu is a sober account not imbedded in the matrix of Buddhist or Hindu mythology. Even from the chronicles one may extricate the statements that the Simhālas came from Sihapura, which was in or near Lāḍa, and halted at the ports of Bharukaccha and Suppāraka on the way to Ceylon.²⁵ Paṇḍuvāsudeva is said to have come to the island from Sihapura, as did his bride and her brothers of the Paṇḍu line, sons of Sakka Paṇḍu.²⁶ Hsüan-tsang noted a Simhapura on the Indus seven hundred li south of Takṣaśilā.²⁷ The Indian epics narrate the well-known tales of the movements of the Pāṇḍavas and many related peoples from the Panjab area to the coasts of Sindhu and Gujarat.²⁸ The probability is enhanced, therefore, that the Pāṇḍiyas and Paṇḍus were connected in origin, and that both originated with people who came by sea from western India, and ultimately from Panjab.

In earliest historic times in both the Pāṇḍiyan region and in pre-Buddhist Ceylon, forms of the Śiva cult were prominent. Many individuals in Ceylon in the third and second centuries B.C. had the name Śiva, and some were called Nandi, according to inscriptional and literary sources,²⁹ and ceramic phalli and Nandis have been found by the Department of Archaeology in the northern part of the island, generally associated with the earliest known irrigation works. In the first century B.C. Pliny wrote of the people of Ceylon, that "Hercules is the god they worship."³⁰ Strabo says that Heracles' soldiers were the ancestors of the Sibae, who wore skins and carried clubs.³¹ Diodorus Siculus observes that Heracles had the club and the lion skin, and also records how Alexander the Great met the Siboi on the Indus and how their country had previously been invaded by Heracles' soldiers, whose descendants the Sibi claimed to be.³² We have already noted that Megasthenes said that the father of the Pāṇḍiyas was Heracles. From these Greek sources, we may understand that

²⁴ Arrian 8.

²⁵ *Dīpavaṁsa* 9.1-26; *Mahāvamsa* 6.5, 46.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 8.6. Many other names in the earliest Ceylonese literary and epigraphical sources, such as Grāmaṇeyas, Kambojas, and Yonas, point back in the same direction.

²⁷ Beal, II, 67.

²⁸ *MBh* Sabhā. 14, 30, 31, 32.

²⁹ *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, V, Part 2, 219, 236, 237, 239, 251; note also such early names in the chronicles as Muṭasiva, Mahāsiva, Girikaṇḍasiva, Sivali, and (king) Siva.

³⁰ Pliny, vi.22.

³¹ Strabo, xv.1.8.

³² Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, ii.39; xvii.94.

Hercules was Śiva, and that the Śiva traditions of the early Pāṇḍiyan region and Ceylon may be traced back to the middle or upper Indus region of the fourth century B.C. which agrees with the postulated origin of the dynasties of those two regions.

The Skanda legends associated with Kataragama in Ceylon, and the *Kantapurāṇam* (*Skandapurāṇa*) of the Tamils have buried in them many elements which probably can be traced back to the same source. The suggestion of some scholars that the Skanda legends grew from memory of Alexander the Great seems more credible now, in view of the wealth of detail about that general's invasion of the Indus region known in Ceylon, according to S. Paranavitana's newly discovered inscriptions. Greek sources describe two major ports that Alexander built on the mouths of the Indus,³³ and we have noted above that the Siṃhaḷa dynasty apparently did not arrive in Ceylon until a generation after the time of Alexander. The *Rājavamśa* also states that formerly there was a legend of Alexander in vogue in the Pāṇḍiya country.³⁴

The temple at Tiruchendūr, on the Pāṇḍiyan coast near the Tāmbaraṇai mouth, stands on a spot that has been sacred since the time of the earliest Tamil traditions. It is a Śaivite shrine, and the theme recurring in its traditions is that Murukaṇ, the Śaivite hero, protects the Pāṇḍiyas from incursions from the sea; this is recorded even in Sangam literature,³⁵ and indeed this site is said in legend to have been the location of the "Middle Sangam." In the same way that Tiruchendūr is associated with the earliest Pāṇḍiyas, Tirukēṭṭiśvaram, a widely known shrine on the northwest coast of Ceylon, is at the site of Māntai or Tambapaṇṇi, referred to above as associated with the earliest level of civilization in the island. The other important and ancient Śaivite shrines are also along the coast, such as Toṇḍēśvaram, Muṅḡēśvaram, Nakulēśvaram and Kōṇēśvaram. These are all at ancient port sites, and Kataragama in the south, another Śaivite shrine, is said in local legend to have been founded by immigrants. Kārttikēya, Varuṇa, Indra, and Rāma were known in pre-Buddhist Ceylon as well as among the early Tamils; pre-Buddhist Anurādhapura already had Brāhmaṇs, Jainas, Ājīvikas, and other ascetics, whose cults apparently arrived in the island by sea with early immigrants.³⁶

Brāhmī Inscriptions and Early Tamil Merchants. The earliest inscriptions in the Tamil country are written in a form of Brāhmī script much like those in Ceylon which date from the third to first centuries B.C. The date of the earliest Ceylon inscriptions is established by their historical content, as six of them refer to royal persons who can reasonably be assigned to the second half of the third century B.C. The names are those of Devānaṃpiya (contemporary of Aśoka), his wife, his sister in law, and his brother.³⁷ The chronicles also confirm that Devānaṃpiya gave many rock-cut caves to religious orders,³⁸ and in this he no doubt was imitating Aśoka. A stupa of the Buddhist missionaries Mahinda and Iḍika has also been

³³ Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, vi.20; Doidorus Siculus, xvii.104.

³⁴ S. Paranavitana, "An Account of Alexander . . .," p. 8.

³⁵ *Patirrupattu* 11.1-5; *Puranānūru* 55.18-19; *Akanānūru* 266.20-21; *Tirumuruḱārruppaḍai* 125.

³⁶ S. Paranavitana, "Pre-Buddhist Religious Beliefs in Ceylon," *JRAS, Ceylon Branch*, XXXI (1929), 302-27.

³⁷ *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, V, Part 2, pp. 210, 217, 218, 220, 231.

³⁸ *Mahāvamsa* 16.12-14.

discovered, which bears their names in an apparently contemporary inscription.³⁹ There are numerous inscriptions all over the island datable to the second and first centuries B.C., in a style of Brāhmī script in which the lettering is somewhat larger than in the third century B.C. inscriptions.

There are about sixty inscriptions in Brāhmī script in the Tamil area, mostly short donative records or single names on the drip-ledges of rock-cut caves.⁴⁰ When epigraphically compared with the earliest Ceylon inscriptions, they can be dated to the third to first centuries B.C. In both regions, aspirates were lost, the long vowels *ē* and *ō* were marked, and some of the letters were written in unique ways, all of which slightly differentiated this script from Brāhmī scripts in other parts of India. Though from the earliest epigraphical sources there were adaptations to Tamil phonetics, the Tamil Brāhmī must have been derived from or related to the early Ceylon Brāhmī script.

If a map is made plotting the location of all the ancient Tamil inscriptions, it will be observed that the earliest ones occur in the southern Tamil country, the only Brāhmī inscriptions found north of the Kāvēri River being later, perhaps contemporary with the Sangam period. The earliest ones are found between Tirunelvēli and Pudukōṭṭai, with a cluster around Madurai. The implication is that Tamil literacy diffused in a south-north direction.

If the origin of the form of writing of these inscriptions is sought, it will not be found in the earliest epigraphical evidence from the Āndhra deltas, the closest region to the north from which the script could possibly have been brought overland. The Brāhmī of the extreme south is stylistically closest to the earliest varieties of script in western India.⁴¹

What was the agency by which script was introduced to the extreme south? This question is pertinent to the issue often discussed regarding early Southeast Asia, as to whether Indian civilization was transmitted over the sea primarily by religious functionaries or by commercial interests. The earliest inscriptions in Ceylon are contemporary with the alleged official adoption of Buddhism. However, the script might have been introduced even earlier, since by the third century B.C. it had already been adapted to the phonetics of Ceylon Prakrit.⁴² It might have been brought by Brāhmaṇs or Ājīvikas, said in the chronicles to have resided in pre-Buddhist Anurādhapura. The Tamil Brāhmī inscriptions record the names of both Buddhists and Jainas.

It is clear that merchants played an important part in the acculturation of the far south and that they had connections with western India. Several early Brāhmī inscriptions in Ceylon mention Kamboja merchants.⁴³ Hsüan-tsang refers to the trading activities of the Siṃhalas, and says they settled in the island because it

³⁹ S. Paranavitana, "Inscriptions of Rājagala in Batticaloa District," *University of Ceylon Review*, XX, No. 2 (1962), 159-62.

⁴⁰ Few of the earliest Tamil Brāhmī inscriptions are published to date, though some may be seen in *Epigraphy: Madras Reports*, 1908, 1912, 1915, 1917, and 1918. The Department of Epigraphy has copies of others. Some of them around Madurai are easily accessible. See also Kamil Zvelebil, "The Brahmi Hybrid Tamil Inscriptions," *Archiv Orientalni* 32 (1964), 547-75.

⁴¹ A. H. Dani, *Indian Paleography* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 72-74, 66-68, 216-19, 225. This author, however, ignores the historical correspondences and works with paleography alone, and therefore his dating of all the Brāhmī scripts of the South is two to three centuries too late.

⁴² *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, V, Part 2, 227-34.

⁴³ C. W. Nichols, "Text of the Brāhmī Inscriptions in the Ruhuna National Park," *JRAS, Ceylon Branch*, New Series, II, Part 2 (1952), 126-40.

abounded in gems.⁴⁴ A newly discovered record, the *Suvarṇṇapura-vamśa*, narrates that the founder of the Siṃhala line was the son of a merchant named Pūrṇa, who came from the Indus to Puṇḍra on the west coast,⁴⁵ which also brings to mind the well-known Buddhist tale of the merchant Pūrṇa of Suppāraka who had a shipping business. The missionary Mahinda "traveled to Ceylon in the company of merchants," and was born in Ujjain so probably came from the west.⁴⁶

On the Tamil side, the rock-cut cave at Tirupparaṅkuṅgam near Madurai was donated by an individual from Ceylon who was a householder, and therefore perhaps a merchant. The inscription which may be seen at Alakarmalai north of Madurai, the longest early Tamil inscription, mentions merchants, among whom one dealt in gold and another in copra. The graffiti in Brāhmī script on potsherds excavated at Arikamēḍu are in the commercial context of a port town.⁴⁷ Moreover, the earliest Brāhmī in both the Pāṇḍiyan country and in Ceylon is mixed with symbols, which appear in some cases to have been the trade marks of merchants, but may also have been a nonphonetic method of communication which gradually became obsolescent after the introduction of Brāhmī script.⁴⁸ It is likely, then, that merchant activity by sea, especially with the west coast of India, provided much or most of the impetus for the early stages of acculturation of the extreme south.

The earliest Tamil individuals referred to in inscriptions were engaged in commerce by sea, and these sources are epigraphically datable to about the second century B.C. In Anurādhapura there is a boulder with the inscription, "The terrace of the Tamil householders caused to be made by the Tamil Samaṇa (residing) in Ilubarata."⁴⁹ There is an excavated rock terrace nearby, on which are inscribed the names of six Tamils, each above his section of the terrace. The names are in Prakrit. Above the highest part of the terrace is the name of one Tamil who is described as a *nāvika*, a ship captain.

Another early Brāhmī inscription reads: "The cave of the householder Visākha, the Tamil merchant." The name of the same or another Visākha is inscribed on a flight of steps nearby.⁵⁰ Another ship captain of the second century B.C. is mentioned in the *Mahāvamśa*. He was a Tamil horse importer, and his sons, Sena and Guttaka, overthrew the Siṃhala monarch Sūratissa with a great army and ruled Anurādhapura for twenty-two years.⁵¹ An inscription in Kataragama perhaps refers to this Sena.⁵² In the same century, another Tamil usurper of the Ceylon throne appeared. This was Eḷāra, who, "though he had not put aside false beliefs," still patronized Buddhist monks. Five other usurper Tamil kings in the island who ruled in the

⁴⁴ Beal, II, 239, 241, 243, 246.

⁴⁵ Parānavitana, "Newly Discovered . . .," p. 9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*; *Mahāvamśa* 13.11.

⁴⁷ Most of these are datable to about the first century: Mortimer Wheeler, "Arikamedu: an Indo-Roman Trading Station on the East Coast of India," *Ancient India*, II (1946), 109. At least one, however, is said to have been recovered from the "megalithic" stratum: J. M. Casal, *Fouilles de Virampatnam-Arikamedu* (Paris, 1949), Annexe V, pp. 20, 55.

⁴⁸ Some of the symbols in the inscription at Alakarmalai are similar to those mixed with the earliest Brāhmī writing of Ceylon. See *Epigraphia*

Zeylanica, I, p. 15; V, Part 2, pp. 229-33; H. Parker, *Ancient Ceylon* (London, 1909), pp. 438, 447. Similar symbols are also found on early punch-marked silver coins of both regions and on copper coins of the Jaffna Peninsula, and may be the type of writing called Kaṇṇeluttu in *Cilappatikāram* 26.136, 170.

⁴⁹ S. Parānavitana, "Tamil Household's Terrace, Anurādhapura," *JRAS, Ceylon Branch*, XXXV (1940), 54-56.

⁵⁰ *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, V, Part 2, 242.

⁵¹ *Mahāvamśa* 21.10.

⁵² Ray, p. 146.

first century B.C. were also not Buddhists.⁵³ Two of them had names ending in *-māra*, perhaps from Tamil *māra*, a common Pāṇḍiyan title.

From these and similar sources, therefore, we know that in the second century B.C. in northern Ceylon there were prosperous Tamils, some of whom were merchants, cargo shippers, and horse importers. Some of them had become literate, and had adopted Prakrit names, perhaps under the influence of Brāhmaṇism or Jainism. Some names in the earliest inscriptions in the Pāṇḍiyan region are also in Prakrit.

An inscription of the same period at Tirupparaṅkuṅram near Madurai mentions an *īla kuḍumbikaṅ*, a Ceylon householder, who apparently donated the cave.⁵⁴ Later evidence of Ceylonese or Buddhists in the Tamil region may be seen in the names of some of the Sangam poets, such as Maturai Īlattup-pūtaṅ Tēvaṅār, Īlampōtiyār, and Tērataṅār. It is clear that this reciprocal exchange of persons between the Pāṇḍiyan region and northern Ceylon contributed to the diffusion of literacy, the major religions and sects, and other civilizing influences on both sides of the Indo-Ceylon straits.

Early Pāṇḍiyas on the Southern Coast. Tamil legends of the Three Sangams state that the first two capitals of the Pāṇḍiyas were on the southern coast. These legends are found only in medieval works, and in highly exaggerated form,⁵⁵ and therefore have been considered by some scholars as of little value for historiography. However, the formalization of style, collection, and preservation of the many works of the so-called Sangam literature indicate the probable existence of at least one such body at Madurai, said in the tradition to have been the locus of the Last (third) Sangam.

When these legends are viewed in the light of the other evidence presented herein, one is led to suspect that there might be some substance to the tale of the existence of the first two Sangams and Pāṇḍiyan capitals located on the coast. It is said that there was a First Sangam at Old Madurai, also called South Madurai, the Pāṇḍiyan capital on the southern coast which was destroyed by inundation. The Middle Sangam is said to have convened at Kapāṭapuram, also inundated. It is also stated, however, that this Sangam was held at Alaivāy, identifiable as modern Tiruchendūr, the prominent sacred town on the coast west of the Tāambarapaṅi River. The Last Sangam is said to have convened at Uttara Maturai (present Madurai). The legends give fabulous details of the Sangams having lasted for thousands of years, each having had scores of poets, commissioned by Pāṇḍiyan monarchs, many of whom are named. The First Sangam is said to have produced the grammar *Aḱattiyam* (of Agastya), the Middle Sangam the grammar *Tolkāppiyam* (which stands now as a post-Sangam work), and the Last Sangam all the rest of the existing "Sangam" literature. The names in the legend of such poets as Agastya, Mārkaṇḍeya, and Vālmīki, are obviously interpolations, though the names of some of the Pāṇḍiyan monarchs and poets may have been preserved from that period.

The question of the historicity of these two early Pāṇḍiyan capitals alleged to have existed on the coast is important in tracing the development of civilization in the far

⁵³ *Mahāvamsa* 21.13-34; 33.56-61.

⁵⁴ This inscription just south of Madurai can be seen written in a rock-cut cave above four sleeping

platforms apparently carved out for four monks.

⁵⁵ Iraiyaṅār Akapporuḷ (together with "Nakkirar's" commentary) (Madras, 1939), pp. 5-7.

south. Old Madurai and Kapātapuram are not mentioned in Sangam literature itself, nor have they been identified archeologically. On the question of inundation, however, *Kalittoḱai* 104 states that when the sea encroached on the Pāṇḍiyan king's southern territory, he in turn encroached on the lands of the Cōlas and the Cēras. Though Sangam literature is dated to the first three centuries A.D., the Pāṇḍiyas must have been located in the present Madurai much earlier, at least by the last part of the third century B.C., for most of the early Brāhmī inscriptions are clustered around that city. The legends refer to Uttara Maturai (Madurai), apparently in contrast with South or Old Madurai. The existence of such a South Madurai is suggested in a passage in the *Mahāvamsa* in the story of the mythical ancestor Vijaya, who took a Pāṇḍiyan princess to wife. That king's "messengers were quickly come by ship to the city of southern Madhurā" and met the Paṇḍu king.⁵⁶ The adjective "southern" distinguished that Madurai from the inland city of the same name which was the Pāṇḍiyan capital at the time the chronicles were edited and put in present form. Another Tamil medieval source also states that South Madurai was on the coast and was inundated by the ocean laden with ships.⁵⁷ South Madurai was probably at the mouth of the Tāmbaraṇi River, perhaps near the present village of Koṅkai. Koṅkai was a port frequently mentioned in Sangam literature, and it was the site of the Pāṇḍiyan viceroyalty and the source of much of the wealth of the kingdom because it was the center of the pearl trade. An inscription fragment now in the village suggests that it might be identifiable with the legendary South Madurai.⁵⁸

The city of Kapātapuram, legendary site of the Middle Sangam, also must have existed because it is referred to in several Sanskrit works.⁵⁹ If it was the same as Alaivāy, it would be identifiable with modern Tiruchendūr, site of the Śaivite temple referred to above. It appears, then, that these two early cities of the Pāṇḍiyas existed during the Mauryan period, before the dynasty moved its capital inland to Madurai. These cities could well have been destroyed by floods, as the legends say, because the Tāmbaraṇi River frequently changes its course in the delta, gouging a new channel because of the monsoon rains in the Western Ghāts.

There are other references in Tamil literature which suggest that the Pāṇḍiyan kings of Madurai recognized that their early traditions came from the south. One of the earliest known "kings," Neḱiyōṅ, is said in the *Puṛaṇāṅṅuru* to have performed numberless sacrifices at the Paḥruḱi River,⁶⁰ which flowed into the sea somewhere on

⁵⁶ *Mahāvamsa* 7.50-58. Also, see Ray, p. 94 on translation of the passage. This story is not found in the *Dīpavamsa*. Though "Vijaya" can hardly be considered a historical personage, the episodes relating to him demand careful scrutiny for the early history of the region.

⁵⁷ Parañcōti Muṇivar, *Tiruvilaiyāḱal Purāṇam*, I, Story 13.

⁵⁸ The word *Maturōtayanallūr*, "eminent fertile town of Maturai," appears in a fragment of a medieval inscription on a reused stone inside the doorway to the left, in a small temple standing between Koṅkai and the adjacent hamlet of Akkaśālai. The context of the word is land measurements, presumably local.

⁵⁹ *Arthasāstra* ii.11.2 speaks of Pāṇḍyakavāṭa and Tāmbaraṇi as sources of pearls. *MBh*, Droṇa

23, says that Kṛṣṇa overcame the Pāṇḍya *kapāta* and slew its king, and some versions refer to the place specifically as Kapātapuram. See Mu. Irāḱavaiyaṅgār, "Kapātapuramum Kaḱal Koḱum," *Annals of Oriental Research*, II, Part 2, 1937-38. *Rāmāyaṇa* vi.41, in narrating Hanuman's journey to the south, says he is instructed to cross the Kāvēri, then go south and cross the Tāmbaraṇi, and where that river "enters the sea is the golden gate of the Pāṇḍyas," and beyond that is Mahendra (Potiyil hill, near Cape Comorin), and then there is Ceylon. This mention of the Pāṇḍiyan capital at the mouth of the Tāmbaraṇi must have been derived from a source older than this work as it now stands.

⁶⁰ *Puṛaṇāṅṅuru* 9.8-11; *Cilappatikāram*, "Vēṅṅirkātai," 1-2. The Paḥruḱi is associated with the Cape Comorin region, and also with South Madurai ac-

the southern Pāṇḍiyan coast. Neḍiyōṅ is said in this passage to have been an ancestor of Mutukuḍumi Peruvaluti, himself one of the earliest Pāṇḍiyan kings contemporary with Sangam literature. The sage Agastya is not mentioned in Sangam literature, but the legends which jelled around the personality of that fictitious worthy seem to have been of earlier origin.⁶¹ He is accredited with having written the grammar of the First Sangam, and with having introduced almost all aspects of the Indian Great Tradition into the Pāṇḍiyan country, including priesthood, asceticism, Brāhmaṇism, astrology, and to have brought immigrants to the Tamil country from the Gujarat side. These tales surely reflect the diffusion of North Indian civilization to the far south.⁶² The Agastya legends are geographically associated primarily with the Cape Comorin region, especially Mount Mahendra. All these medieval legends, coupled with the more firmly historical material from Ceylon and the epigraphical data, point to the diffusion of civilization in the Pāṇḍiyan region from the coast northward.

Why was not the Pāṇḍiyan capital on the coast during the Sangam period? The real reason for the shift to the inland Madurai might have been fear of invasion from Ceylon. Across the straits from the Tāmbaraparani was Tambapaṇṇi, the earliest Ceylon capital, but we know that the Ceylonese moved their headquarters inland to Anurādhapura and built it up well before the time of Aśoka. Probably the Pāṇḍiyas also moved inland in the early third century B.C. We have noted above that before Ceylon became officially Buddhist, king Paṇḍukābhaya invaded the Pāṇḍiyas from Tambapaṇṇi. There was another invasion by sea from Ceylon shortly after 9 A.D.⁶³ The Tiruchendūr temple near the Tāmbaraparani mouth has traditionally protected the Pāṇḍiyas from incursions by sea. The chronicles of Ceylon mention several instances of Tamils having invaded the island in the centuries preceding the time of Christ. There is little doubt that by shifting their capital inland to Madurai the Pāṇḍiyas enhanced their security.

The Ceras and Cōlas. Within the space of this article it is not possible to elaborate on the origins of the civilizations represented by the early dynasties of the Cēras (of Kēraḷa) and Cōlas (of the Kāvēri region). It appears that in both regions it was the coasts that were subject to the earliest cultural cross-fertilization.

Brāhmaṇism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were all intrusive elements brought by successive cultural waves which washed the long verdant coast of Kēraḷa. It is obvious that the Paraśūrāma legends of Kēraḷa incorporate the oldest memories of intrusive North Indian influences, serving much as do the Agastya tales of the Pāṇḍiyan region. The Paraśūrāma legends purport to explain the spread of Brāhmaṇs along the coast, and are particularly important on the whole of the littoral as far north as Gujarat. The Kēraḷōtpaṭṭi, a late medieval "history" of Kēraḷa, states that Brāhmaṇs, including the high Nambūtiri Brāhmaṇs, arrived by sea to settle there, that they brought varieties of flora and fauna in their ships, and that some of them came from Bharukaccha (Broach).⁶⁴ Brāhmaṇs did travel overseas in early India, for

ording to the legend of the Three Sangams. See *Cilappatikāram* 11.19-22, and also a legend about the inundation of the region of the Paḥruḷi in M. Rasanayagam, *Ancient Jaffna* (Madras, 1926), p. 10.

⁶¹ *Paripāḍal* 11.11-12 refers to an ascetic on Potiyil hill, which later became the sacred seat of Agastya. See also *Puṇanūpāru* 33-7.

⁶² A summary of the historical import of some aspects of the Agastya legends is found in K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 67-75.

⁶³ Paranavitana, "Newly Discovered. . . ." p. 11.

⁶⁴ K. P. Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala* (Cochin, 1937), I, 22, 51; IV, 475 ff.

at least seventeen of the earliest cave inscriptions of Ceylon mention them, as do literary accounts of its earliest settlers.⁶⁵ Brāhmaṇs were chaplains of the Pāṇḍiyas, Cēras, and Siṃhalas. They are mentioned in connection with some of the kings of the Cēras eulogized in the *Patirruppattu*, a work of the Sangam period. Their presence is confirmed in Greek works, for Ptolemy mentions two coastal cities, existing about the second century, called Bramagara (Brāhmanagara or Brāhmagṛha?) and Brakhme, where there were Brakhmanai Magoi (Brāhmaṇa *maḥḥal*, or people).⁶⁶ Brāhmaṇs were well entrenched along the coast, it seems, by the time of Sangam literature.

The *Patirruppattu* is a compilation of ten poems on ten Cēra kings. Every one of the kings eulogized in that work was renowned either for his naval exploits or for his wealth acquired by sea trade. All those Cēra kings had navies, and some of them controlled the whole coast from about Goa down to Cape Comorin, and even the port of Māntai in northern Ceylon. It was during this period that Romans or other Yavanas conducted considerable trade with Kēraḷa, buying pepper and textiles and giving in exchange gold and wine.⁶⁷ The Roman trade resulted in practically no permanent cultural impact, but was no doubt a factor in the settlement in Kēraḷa of Jews of the diaspora, and subsequently in the appearance of Christianity. The intrusion of Islam and of the Portuguese in later centuries highlights the inevitable involvement of the Kēraḷa coast in navigation patterns in the Indian Ocean.

Several of the Cēra kings of the Sangam period had their capital at Toṇḍi, a port in central Kēraḷa patronized by Mediterranean trade. Other ports which were capitals or other centers of political power were Vañci, Muciṭi, Pantar, Koḍuṅkalūr, Kuṭṭunāḍu, Naravu, the Nētrāvati mouth, Vākai, and Pūli.⁶⁸ Civilization in Kēraḷa developed first of all along the coast.

The Cōla dynasty is said to have descended from some ancestor who harnessed the monsoon winds for sea trade.⁶⁹ Another line of Cōla (or perhaps Pallava) monarchs was the Tiraiyar, who are also said to have come from the sea, in as much as the very name means "people of the waves." Kāñcipuram may be as old as the Mauryan period,⁷⁰ and we have noted above that it was visited by Chinese traders who came by ship in the second and first centuries B.C., probably through the naturally fortified port of Mahabalipuram. Though the Cōlas had a sometime inland capital at Uṭaiyūr, Kāvēripaṭṭiṇam is more often referred to in early literature and in the epics. With its streets lined with fine houses, goods piled high waiting for shipment, king's customs agents, and a lighthouse,⁷¹ there is no doubt that this port generated the better part of the wealth of the Cōlas.

Since the east coast of India from Bengal to Ceylon is devoid of any archeological evidence of pre-Mauryan civilization, we may doubt the existence there of much

⁶⁵ C. W. Nichols, "Brāhmaṇas in the Early Sinhalese Kingdom," *University of Ceylon Review*, VIII, No. 4 (1950), 259-61; *Mahāvamsa* 7.44; 10.102.

⁶⁶ Ptolemy vii.1.8, 74.

⁶⁷ *Puranānūru* 343.1-10; *Aḥanānūru* 149.7-11; *Periplus*, 54, 56; these sources are also supported by the distribution and dating of Roman coins in Kēraḷa.

⁶⁸ *Patirruppattu* 17.4-6; 21.23; 22.15; 55.3-6;

67.1-4; 74.6; 76.4-5; 88.4-6; 90.19-30; *patikams* of 2nd and 5th decads; *Kuruntoḥai* 128.2; *Puranānūru* 343.1-10; *Aḥanānūru* 57.15; 127; 149.7-11, 199.19-24; *Periplus* 53, 54, 56; Ptolemy vii.1.7-8; Strabo ii.5.12; Pliny vi.23.26.

⁶⁹ *Puranānūru* 66.1-3; 95; *Perumpānāruppaḍai* 28-38; *Maṇimēḥalai* 25.124-26.

⁷⁰ Hsüan-tsang said there was a stupa there built by Aśokarāja. Beal, II, 228-30.

⁷¹ *Paṭṭiṇappālai* 116-37; Ptolemy vii.1.13.

long-distance sea traffic before the third century B.C. From the time of Buddhist expansionism, however, communication picked up along the east coast and cross-cultural fertilization was engendered. The accounts of navigation there in the Ceylon chronicles, the *Jātakas*, and Tamil literature, testify to this, as do the appearance from Mauryan times on of port cities in Bengal, Orissa, the Āndhra deltas, the Kāvēri delta and northeast Ceylon.

If it was this coastal trade which largely stimulated the appearance of the Cōlas and the rising star of their dynasty, they were not long on the receiving end only of the diffusion of Indian civilization. The Tamil epics describe Cōla trade with Ceylon and with Indonesia,⁷² and the role of medieval Cōlas in the acculturation of Southeast Asia is well known.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the basic elements of complex culture reached the Tamil area by sea to begin with, and that this was more of a stimulus to the growth of primary civilization in the region than was diffusion overland down the peninsula. The reasons this has not been much discussed in existing histories of the south include the fact that this is not apparent as regards the Pāṇḍiyas in Sangam literature itself, and the Pāṇḍiya and Cōla capitals had been established inland. Furthermore, the literary, epigraphical, and archeological resources of Ceylon have not hitherto been thoroughly searched for their applicability to South India. The diffusion of early Indian civilization from Bharukaccha, Sopāra, and other early ports in Gujarat and Sindhu whose antiquity is authenticated by literature and archeology, should be as much considered in the study of South India as of Ceylon and Southeast Asia. Certainly this Indianization of so many regions peripheral to the Indian Ocean ranks as one of the most vigorous tendencies of the early culture history of South Asia.

⁷² *Cilappatikāram* 14.104-12; *Maṇimēkalai* 25.124-26.