

ARAB CONTACT WITH SRI LANKA - SINDBAD AND IBN BATUTA

Dr. M. A. M. Shukri Ph.D (Edin.),

Director, Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Research

Man and his artifacts have been moving around the world for millennia in pre-historic times. But trade and commerce even in its most rudimentary form as barter is very recent. The antiquity of man on earth is an acknowledged fact today. The fossilized remains of present day man's ancestors brought to light by the Leakey, in the Rift valley in Kenya, in East Africa, have been dated 2,500,000 years. In historiography oral traditions and literary sources have been either replaced or supplemented only in recent times, during the last 150 years or so by archaeological evidence. When investigations reached remote times, man's antiquity to be established, it had to lean heavily on such discipline as physical anthropology and paleontology.

Population movements should have gathered momentum with the progressive advance of man in his mastery of his physical environment. In other words population movement has been found to be directly related to his technological progress. A pattern of wide dispersal of manmade obsidian (vulcanic glass) hand axes have been found around the Mediterranean and the Aegean region as long ago as 100,000 B.C. This has been established in a survey carried out recently.¹ Despite this tool making tool using proclivity, man had not arrived at trade and commerce even in its most primitive form. “Although obsidian was often shipped long distances from the source, trade apparently did not take place in those regions.”² In a brief, intellectually exciting monograph,³ commonalities in the Indian Oceanic cultures have been pointed out. Despite the variousness of cultures of this region their affinities in racial types, of languages, religious beliefs and even of material artifacts implying a common technology amongst these people, are on the basis of recent researches unmistakable. All these relate to pre-historic periods. Certainly long before the arrival of Aryans nearly four millennia ago.

¹ Avenues to Antiquity – Richard S. MacMeish – Reading: Scientific American. April, 1971.

² Ibid.

³ Sri-Lanka in Vortex of Cultural Crosscurrents – by A. D. T. E. Perera in Ancient Ceylon No. 7 Volume I – 1990 – pp 147 - 158

This monograph suggests future researches to go into very many fields to establish the antiquity of the cultural pattern among the Indian oceanic lands independent and prior to Aryanisation. If by culture, it is meant, the sum total of human activities, then it follows, that these pre-historic people of the Indian oceanic region in which Sri Lanka finds herself, had their respective cultures though not civilization, in the modern sense. Even in those antique times, the affinities and similarities suggest an interaction and infusion of culture amongst people. Population movement implies a diffusion of culture, technology and the material products of such technology. Seminal researches done in many fields relating to the Indian oceanic lands, countenance this hypothesis. The transmission of culture and movement of people in this region occurred long before the overland intrusion of Aryans and the oceanic voyages of the Polynesians of the South Seas and the Phoenicians of the Mediterranean region. This evidently confirms similar movements of men and material elsewhere.

Though literary references to contacts between Sri Lanka and the progenitors of Arabs as Sabaeans and Phoenicians in the second century B.C. are profuse, yet they remain speculative and vague being based on discursive reasoning from literary references. Hence, they do not command credence as archaeological evidences do. Nevertheless, it is from these references that we have to begin our reconstruction of the past. When trade did in fact begin in ancient times, the men who were really involved in this economic activity were not mere traders in the modern sense of the terms as engaged in 'profit maximization'. In the context of the time, these traders had to be both versatile in many skills and knowledgeable in many spheres of learning. Division of labour and specialization of knowledge had not yet set in, in those ancient times. A trader was in fact a manufacturer, navigator, warrior, a geographer and a scholar. The navigator Ibn Majid who conducted Vasco de Gama from the East coast of Africa to Calicut, was a mariner who had compiled his own star atlas, a merchant and geographer. So was Thales of Miletus (625 B.C. - 545 B.C.), who as a merchant and navigator procured his astronomical knowledge from Mesopotamia and geometry from Egypt. Besides their trading activities, merchants in ancient times thus turned out to be ambassadors of culture and civilization of their respective peoples. Pre-Islamic and post Islamic Arab-Sri Lankan contacts should therefore, be viewed in this light.

The invariants of physical geomorphology were much more determinant in the historic process in ancient times than they are today. When man had not mastered the 'wind and the waves', he was a helpless victim of its vagaries. The Island of Sri Lanka, centrally placed in

the transoceanic East-West highway from Mombasa to Molucas became a haven to the sea weary mariners and merchants. A glance at the map of this sprawling 'Oceanic Silk Route' immediately strikes one's mind of the geographical significance of Sri Lanka in this region. Positively, the variety of merchandise this country had to offer should have been the motivating factor to attract the foreigners to her littoral from pre-Christian times. Quite naturally, the finest Kufic inscriptions that turned up in this country are along the coast, testifying to the early visitors from Arabia.⁴ It should have been natural for the sailing vessels of Arabia and Persia on the one hand and from China and the Far Eastern archipelagoes on the other to touch Sri Lankan ports either motivated by trade or driven by foul weather. Such frequent visits to this Island made Sri Lanka known to many nations in ancient times. This Island came to be known under various exotic names such as *Taprobane* to the Greeks and Romans; *Serendib* and *Seylan* to the Arabs and *Ceilao* to the Portuguese and Dutch. And by a synthesis of *Seylan* and *Ceilao*, the Island came to be referred to as Ceylon in modern times.

This particular 'Oceanic Silk Route' in which Sri Lanka finds herself should be historically anterior to the Mediterranean basin which was another area of international trade from ancient times. Historically, in the Mediterranean region, competition for trade was decided by a clash of arms at different times. Since antiquity, violence was unleashed as one nation replaced another. Phoenicians were followed by the Greeks and Romans, and subsequently the Arabs and Turks were replaced by the maritime superiority of the European nations in the 16th century. In contrast, the Asian "Oceanic Silk Route" despite many nationalities who occupied it, collectively shared the merchandise and cultures of this region. And by the end of the 15th century the Arabs, Islamized Persians, North Indian Muslims and Hindus had spread out from the Far East to the entire eastern coast of Africa, from Mogadishu to Mombasa far down the coast. Despite the progressive European dominance of this region from the beginning of the 16th century, the prevalence of oriental tolerance among the Afro-Asian people such as Arabs, Persians, Hindu and Muslim of Gujarat and Bengal and even Sinhala Buddhists⁵ who shared the economic advantages in trade and commerce in distant Zanzibar is noteworthy.

The Arabs are the most numerous and dominant of the surviving Semitic people, the other being the Israelites. In the past there were many other ethnic siblings of the Semites,

⁴ Since 1827 Kufic inscriptions have been discovered in Sri Lankan ports such as Mannar, Pomparippu, Colombo, Galle and Trincomalee.

⁵ The History of the Asians in East Africa – J. S. Mangat – Clarendon Press. Oxford. 1969. Ch. 1 pp 1-26.

such as Edomites, Jebussites, Phoenicians, Nabataeans, Philistines, Assyrians and so on. The predecessors of the Arabs as Phoenicians, Sabaeans and Yonas⁶ had been familiar in this oceanic silk route. As to what the Phoenicians called themselves we do not know. Historically nomenclatures imposed by a dominant power are accepted by subject people, however misleading they may be. We know the Greeks called a group of Semitic people Phoenicians (Phoancia in Gk: Land of Palms).⁷ The Phoenicians, the Semitic forebears of the present day Arabs and Israelites were a great maritime and trading nation around 1,000 B.C. During the time of their great king Hiram they had gained access to the Indian Ocean via the Arabian Sea through Eilat port on the Gulf of Aqaba.⁸ This was rendered possible by their close understanding with David and Solomon who were Hiram's contemporaries and whom the Phoenicians helped with material and skilled labour to build their temple and palace. These Semitic sea going people were pre-Greek. Only in recent times, since the beginning of the Christian era, and immediately before the birth of Islam, that a particular and the most numerous branch of the Semitic people came to be referred to as Arabs - after Yareb son of Khatan.⁹ These Arabs became the rightful heirs to the nautical knowledge and trading experiences of the Phoenicians.

Sri Lanka lies almost midway between the Horn of Africa and the Straits of Malaya. Centrality of the Island in this region is too conspicuous to be ignored. Its importance should have been tremendous in the past to mariners and merchants as a necessary stop-over and entrepot. Its significance then should have been really felt in the absence of steam power and improved navigational technique, equipment and telecommunication. It is situated South East of Kanniyakumari (Cape Camorin) in South India, from which it is separated by 33 miles wide Palk Strait. The Island is 270 miles long and 140 miles wide at its broadest point and has an area of 25,322 square miles. Besides its geographical singularity and valuable produce it was a land where many nations jostled with one another to exchange the cultures and produce of different lands. Hence merchants and mariners, adventurers and pilgrims met and mingled in this entrepot. Besides, from early times the sea weary mariners should have been attracted to this Island by its scenic beauty and a wide variety of climate, landscape, fauna and flora. Finally, the Adam's Peak which was the most conspicuous attraction to the approaching voyagers, specially towards its Western coast continued to be a source of religious motivation

⁶ Mahavamsa – W. Geiger – Lond. P. T. S. 1950. Ch.x – V. 90

⁷ The Histories – Herodotus.

⁸ i. The Martyrdom of Man – Winwood Reade – Thinkers Library, 1943, London. A short History of the World – H. G. Wells Ch. 17. The First sea-going peoples – pp 65-69.

⁹ The Spirit of Islam – Ameer Ali. 1974. Chatto and Windus. London pp Lx 11 – Intro:

to pilgrims from many lands and of all the great religions of the world. Hence for more reasons than one, the Island of Sri Lanka had fascination for people of different times and chimes.

Arab contact with Sri Lanka goes back to pre-Christian times. Initial motivating force even then should have been economic, mainly confined to trade and commerce; which eventually led to the growth of cultural relations. "In the second century B.C. the trade with the Island was wholly in the hands of Arabs. But this position successfully comes to be challenged by the Greeks, Romans and Persians. At the beginning of the 7th century of the Christian era the trade with China through Ceylon received a great impetus. So in the middle of the 8th century Arab traders are found in great numbers in Canton".¹⁰ Yet to this day, our knowledge of Arab contact with Sri Lanka based on literary sources, most of which were written on secondhand information based in turn on oral traditions remains sketchy and incomplete. This vagueness is further enhanced by the limitations of the literary sources as compared to archaeological evidence. These difficulties for the historian are confined mainly to the ancient period. We have fairly adequate records of what happened after the birth of Islam in the 7th century AD. Of what has been described as the modern period beginning with European activities in Asia in the 16th century, the accounts are numerous and varied from many nationalities recorded in different languages, thus enabling us to make a comparative analysis to arrive at a realistic picture of Arab-Sri Lankan contacts. It is from such a perspective which gains more and more tangibility as we come down to modern times as a broad frame of reference that we can hope to sketch the account of this subject under discussion.

The study of Arab-Sri Lankan contacts if confined to a period from the rise of Islam in the 7th century A.D would in fact amount to a study of maritime and trading activities of various ethno-cultural groups of people hemmed in between the immense region to the west of Sri Lanka reaching the shores of East Africa, Southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf; and to the east stretching as far as the Eastern archipelagoes and Canton. This was the picture before Vasco de Gama arrived at Calicut and Lourenzo de Almeida reached Sri Lanka in 1505. Post 16th century the Euro-centered out-look added confusion to historic thought by making 'Arab'

¹⁰ T. W. Arnold – The Preaching of Islam pp. 367.

and 'Muslim' synonymous. It should be borne in mind that at no time was trade and shipping in this region a monopoly of a single nation, much less of the Arabs.¹¹

One important factor in the very location of ports of call and determination of sea routes was the wind system of the Indian Ocean. It was not found to be possible to use a single monsoon wind to travel across directly from the Persian Gulf or South Arabian ports to Indonesian archipelago and beyond. The necessity of breaking journey made Sri Lankan ports to be frequented by vessels sailing in this region. The availability of sheltered harbours, valuable items of merchandise, facilities to replenish food and water and possibilities for repair and servicing of vessels were perhaps other considerations in bringing this Island to prominence in this oceanic route. So long as the *modus operandi* of the sailing vessels remained "hugging the coast", the Arabs proved superior, because of their long familiarity with the indented coast and the fluctuation of the winds. But this situation appears to have changed radically with the discovery of the regular patterns in the phenomenon of the winds towards the middle of the 1st century B.C. Though this appears to have been observed by the Arabs before others, (Monsoon derived from Ar. *Mausim* = season) was actually put into effective use by their commercial rivals,¹² the Greeks as reported by Hippalus and subsequently by Romans. During this period either the traditional silk route through Central Asia had made a detour or an alternative route had developed via Tamluk across the Himalayas.¹³ The exchange of diplomatic mission between the Romans and the Sinhalese in the 1st century of the Christian era might have been an effort on the part of the Romans to bypass the Arabs who had preceded them to the Island, Emerson Tennent draws our attention to an implied reference to Arabs and Sri Lanka by Pliny.¹⁴ Sri Lanka, thus becomes an area of fierce competition not only of Romans and Arabs but also of Persians to intercept the Far Eastern trade, namely from China, because the Island had been in the oceanic trade route and much sought after for her valuable products such as spices, precious stones, pearls, ivory, etc. And pearls constituted an important item of Sri Lankan merchandise in pre-Christian times. Sri Lankan pearls were known from pre-Christian times to the people of the Mediterranean and Near East. The pearl banks of Sri Lanka situated off the coast of Mantai (Mantota, Mahatitta = Mannar) should have come into historical records as early as the 6th century B.C., as the Mahavamsa mentions a gift of pearls sent by Prince Vijaya to the reigning monarch of

¹¹ Muslims and The Trade of the Arabian Sea with special reference to Sri Lanka – Dr., Sirima Kiribamuna – M. S. L. 1986. Colombo. Pp 89-112.

¹² Studies in Islamic History and Culture – S. M. Yusuf – Lahore. 1972 ch. V p. 157.

¹³ Ibid p. 157.

¹⁴ Tennent I – 555 Note 3.

Pandyans at Madura whose daughter he married after the termination of his romantic liaison with Kuveni, the Sri Lankan Yakkini princess.

From around the 1st century of the Christian era literary references to pearl fisheries of Sri Lanka became increasingly frequent.¹⁵ In the time of Pliny in Rome, Sri Lankan pearls were valued highly as he refers to the pearl fishery of this country's as the most productive during his time, as the pearl banks of the Persian Gulf were getting depleted. Thus the pearl fisheries of this country were known to the powers of the Mediterranean region and Near East long before the arrival of Europeans in the East in the 16th century. Ptolomy himself pays references to the trade in pearls. The Phoenicians, the ethnic predecessors of the Arabs had preceded the Greeks and Romans as maritime and trading nations to the Arabian Sea via the Gulf of Aquaba. Therefore, it is not unlikely that these relentless Semitic navigators gained access to the Sri Lankan pearl banks either directly or indirectly. Genoese and Venitian traders who had contact with the Arabs in trade speak of Taprobane (Sri Lanka).

The Arabs and their descendant Moors appear to have excelled others in their endurance to remain submerged in their diving activities as referred to in the '*20th century Impressions of Ceylon*'.¹⁶ Of the four groups that participated in diving for pearls, Arabs were rated as best, and the Moors coming a close second.¹⁷ For the Arabs and subsequently the Moors to excel in this industry the tradition amongst the pre-Islamic Arabs should be very old indeed going back to pre-Christian times.

In this Arab-Sri Lankan trade, Mantai in the North East of the Island is believed to have played a crucial role as one of the premier maritime emporium in the South Asian region. Its decline and final abandonment appears to have coincided with the Chola invasion of this country about a millennia ago.¹⁸ Archaeological surveys by W. J. S. Boake in 1887 and of A. M. Hoken in 1907, 1927 and 1928 went a long way to confirm the importance of Mantai. Subsequent excavations in 1951 by Shanmuganathan which brought to light Chinese and Islamic pottery ware supplements Boake's earlier findings of Far-Eastern glazed ceramics, Near Eastern glass and a variety of beads of glass, shell and cowries, of copper and iron slags. All these archaeological artifacts impart credence to the literary reference to Mantai in

¹⁵ The Island. Sunday ed. December, 1, 1985, p. 15.

¹⁶ Edited by Arnold Wright. 1907. London. P. 232

¹⁷ Report to the Government of Ceylon on the Pearl Oyster Fisheries of the Gulf of Mannar, London, 1905. Vol. 3 pp. 11-15.

¹⁸ The Excavation of Mantai – John Carswell. Ancient Ceylon No. 7, Volume I p. 17.

Suntharamurti Nayanar's sixth century epic cited in Boake's Report¹⁹ which describes the commercial splendour of cosmopolitan Tirukkestisvaram - Mantai.

It has been suggested that Mantai was the most sought after port of this Island mentioned in the 6th century A.D. by Cosmos Indica Pleustas. The port of Mantai is believed to have had a community of Nestorian Christians. This variant of Christianity began and flourished in Eastern Rome, mainly in Syria which was a part of Byzantium; this explains the presence of the artifacts from the Near East. Pre-Islamic Semite, whatever the name they were called were perhaps frequent visitors of Mantai. Between the 6th and 8th centuries after the withdrawal of Roman influence in the area maritime activities came increasingly under Sasanian influence. References suggest a Persian outpost in Sri Lanka during this period and it is plausible that it was located at Mantai port.²⁰ It is not unlikely that the Persians who embraced Islam in the early 8th century in collaboration with their Arab compatriots held the monopoly of the silk trade from China. The Arabs have been it appears sharing the trade of the regions with the Persians (Sasanians) and Tang China as archaeological evidence at Mantai reveal. These finds are placed between the 8th and 11th centuries and their regions of origin have been determined as the Near East, South India and Tang China. It is not unlikely that foreign merchants settled there permanently. Early Kufic tombstone inscriptions found at Mantai and in the Mannar District (Elupitiya inscriptions, Puliyantivu inscriptions and the one at Thirukeswaram) are suggestive of Arab settlements.

In this oceanic and overland trade which linked China with the Near Eastern countries, the Persians, Arabs, Chinese and East Africans appear to have played a leading role sharing the trade with the Indians from Gujerat and Bengal and the Malays to the further East. Parallels with materials at Mantai with those in other parts of Asia, such as those at Nishapur only the overland route and at the Siraf Port in the Persian gulf and Eilat on the Aqaba Gulf are clues to the inter-connection of the land and the oceanic silk routes in which from pre-Islamic times till the 10th century the Sri Lankan port of Mantai played a significant role. Prosperity of this port is believed to have terminated abruptly with the Chola invasion towards the end of the 10th century.

About the very century of the birth of the Prophet (b.570) just before the rise of Islam, South Arabia became the bone of contention because of her valuable entrepot products

¹⁹ Op. Cit. Carswell, p. 18.

²⁰ John Carswell, p. 18.

besides its traditional frankincense between Sassanian Persia and Byzantium through its Christian ally Abyssinia. This showdown for the control of the 'Gateway to the East' which included Sri Lanka brought about the ruin not only of decadent Rome but also of the South Arabians, particularly Yemen. Around the middle of the 7th century A.D. Persia which had been exhausted by the uninterrupted wars for supremacy with Eastern Rome – the Byzantine empire and the Asyssinian ally of Byzantium, was almost effects and degenerate when it was invigorated by Islam, which she adopted and the Arab script which replaced the old Pahlevi script. This was to mark a turning point in Arab-Sri Lankan contacts as Arab commercial activity gained a fresh impetus in her association with Islamised Persia and the Persianised North Indians and their ubiquitous compatriots the Negroes of the East African coast. And in the 9th and 10th centuries it was this conglomerate of the Persians, the Arabs and the Abyssinians, all Islamised and speaking the Arab tongue, hence for the sake of convenience designated "Arab" which dominated the Indian region, Sri Lanka, held a commanding position in the oceanic silk route of Afro-Asia. The ninth century saw the Muslims as the dominant traders along the entire maritime route from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf to Canton.²¹

As adverted to, the great Phoenician king Hiram of Tyre helped David and his son Solomon in their building enterprises with materials and skilled Phoenician labour. It is not unlikely that the Phoenicians through the goodwill of the Israelites reached Eilat port overland and sailed down the Gulf of Aqaba to the Red Sea finally reaching the Arabian Sea. The Phoenicians who sailed down Aqaba to finally reach the Indian Ocean were the Semitic ancestors of the Arabs. In early times before improvement in nautical techniques and improved ship building and navigation these early mariners kept close to the shores. The geographic position of the Arabian peninsula, large and arid though it is, being engulfed by the Aegean, Mediterranean, Red and Arabian seas and the Persian Gulf afforded attractive opportunities for sea faring. The participation of Arabs in oceanic trade was therefore inevitable. In the centuries immediate receding Islam, the South Arabian kingdoms of Hadramaut capitalised on this situation. The well sheltered ports of Southern Arabia and the gulf were not only transit points and entrepots but became a focal point in the East-West trade which linked up the overland and overseas silk routes of the world. And Sri Lanka though a small Island, favoured by geography became an equally unavoidable link between Hadramaut and the Far East. Sri Lanka and South Arabian ports served as points of storing and re-export

²¹ Kiribamuna, Op. Cit., p. 97.

for the merchandise of the sub-continent, Eastern archipelago and China. Hadramaut, flanked by the Red sea and the Persian Gulf was controlling the commanding point in the oceanic highway between East and West Asia. It was also linked to the overland caravan route which moved North through Mecca, Medina and Wadi Shiran reaching the Mediterranean coast. And on the East the South Arabian ports were connected via Persia and the traditional silk route through Central Asia to Cathay (China). Further, they were joined through the passes of Sulaiman range leading to North West India (Pakistan). About the beginning of the Christian era the South Arabian kingdoms through whose habitat the inter-linked caravan routes passed were in full control of this trade and held its position,²² until the discovery of the Cape route by Bartholomeusz Diaz and Vasco de Gama. Sri Lanka being inter-connected to this multi-national trading system centered on Hadramaut was exposed to the radiating cultural influence primarily, of the Southern Arabs. And the Island by her equally enviable and strategic position became a necessary adjunct in the international network. Thus she continued to be in continuous contact with the Arabs and the still wider Muslim Community of this region until almost the beginning of the 16th century. The rise of Islam and its meteoric expansion from the 8th century infused and invigorated Arab trading activities in this region, which had, for many centuries continued in the pre-Islamic period as an international trading area. With the ever widening influence of the new religion in the sub-continent, Islamised Persians and North Indian communities of Gujerat and Bengal collaborated in the South Asian trade as Muslims along with the Hindus of the Malabar and Coromondel coast and the Chinese from the Far East in a state of peaceful competition and collaboration as symbolised by the trilingual Galle slab inscription erected by Cheng-Ho in the 15th century (The three languages are Persian, Tamil and Chinese).

The most significant event in world history between the fall of Rome and the commencement of European voyages of discovery in the 15th century was the birth and expansion of Islam. Religions as a part of the cultural influence always followed the trade routes. Arab familiarity with oceanic and overland trade routes before Islam enabled its meteoric expansion. After its dramatic victory over the Arab lands Islam became a major political force, heir and transmitter of Hellenic civilization. The speed of its advance after the passing away of the Prophet is resounding. Palestine was captured and Byzantium army defeated. Persia was overrun by 643, and within a century the Arabs had linked Spain on the

²² Studies in Islamic History and Culture – S. M. Yusuf – 1970 – Lahore. Ch. V. Ceylon and Arab Trade. Pp 156-168.

west and Sind in India with their empire. They had reached the Western confluence of China and defeated the Tang army at the Talas River in 751. When their martial energies mellowed, recently converted Mongoloid-Turkish people continued Islam's expansion. Wave after wave, their hordes thrust into India going beyond Sind. By 1453 Constantinople had collapsed to Muhammed's II's attack; and Berber after the battle of Panipat in 1526 consolidated Muslim rule in India. The upshot of Islamic wars was bringing together the traditional trade routes which greatly encouraged trade. Merchants followed the soldier and sailor, and eventually pilgrims, preachers and saints followed them. Thus their international caravan routes which were motivated by reasons, primarily economic, eventually led to cultural influences of Arabs and Islam. Then in turn it will be observed, especially in Asia and the Far East an outburst of Arab and Muslim dominance in trade followed. Arab trading activity in Sri Lanka and Asia after the 7th century is directly connected to the extension of Islam and Muslim political power in Asia. Trade cannot flourish when threatened by piracy and brigandage. It needs safety of the routes, of life and property. They can come only with strong centralized powers. Muslim dynasties for brief periods were able to ensure their security.

The Thousand and One Nights. These Arabian Tales based on the experiences of navigators were probably composed in the early Abbaside period (750 – 850 A.D.). Arab fortunes having shifted from the Hadramaut to Basra port as a commercial centre of Bagdad Caliphate. Mercantile fortunes were made at Basra, trading with the East Indies, China and South Asia. Sri Lanka too, shared in the fortunes of this trade and accordingly found a place in the Arab tales of renown and was referred to as *Serendib* - the land of Rubies. And there is a reference in the 7th voyage of Sindbad of taking presents from the king of Sri Lanka to the Caliph of Bagdad and the Calcutta text of the same tale, refers to the Caliph reciprocating the Sri Lankan king's gifts. It is recounted, that Sindbad obtained from Sri Lanka diamonds, precious stones, sandalwood, camphor, cloves, cinnamon, pepper, coconut, ambergris and ivory during his voyages. It is evident of the Arab knowledge of this country and of their familiarity with the produce of the land. These tales really supplement the records of Arab geographers, historians and mariners. These anecdotes based on information or in some cases of direct experience revealed that the Arabs evinced much interest in the local produce of the land which they carried to distant countries in the East and West. 'Thus there grew up in Sri

Lanka an Arab Muslim contact - a continuation of the earlier Christian (Nestorian), Zoroastrian, Jewish community of traders.²³

The tales of Sindbad, as one of the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*, believed to have been compiled during the reign of the great Abbaside Caliph Haroun-al-Rashid (786 - 809 A.D.) narrated in a romantic setting, is somewhat exaggerated in the element of legend and miracle, nevertheless it is an exaggeration of a truth which bears testimony to the close relations between Sri Lanka and the Arabs. That the Island was designated by them *Jazeera-al-Yakut* = the Island of gems, has a perspicuity to the *Ratnadvipa* of the Sinhalese. We have no definite records or archaeological evidence so far of Arab settlements in the pre-Islamic period, though foreign literary sources indicate their strong presence in the region in which Sri Lanka finds herself. The established Arab communities in this land appear to have been encouraged, especially after the 7th century of the ever widening community of the Muslims in the entire region. As these early Arab communities established themselves as early Kufic inscription of the 10th century reveal, was by a peaceful process of consolidation unbacked by force of arms of any kind and appears to have been fostered by patronage of local kings and the indigenous population.²⁴ And the second stage was for these Arab settlers to penetrate to the interior in the course of their trading activities.²⁵ But, it is not unlikely, that Muslim Saints and mystics frequented this land in the garb of ascetics joining the many pilgrims who came from Arabia, Persia and North India. The Adam's Peak rock inscription and the Balangoda cave inscription in *Farisi* style testify to this fact. The latter reads Daruwesh, Duniya Mohammed (*Duniya* Ar. the world; *Danvesh*²⁶ in Persian meaning a wandering mystic, and Mohammed refers to the Messenger of God) Abu Abdulla-al-Kafifi was a well-known Persian Saint (d.982 A.D.) who according to traditions recorded by Ibn Batuta was the pioneer leader of the first caravan of Muslim pilgrims.²⁷

With the Pandyan political ascendancy in the 13th century there is observed an attempt on the part of the Sri Lankan kings to gain the close friendship of Arabs. In the 13th century Bagdad was at its nadir of decline and it was given the *coup de grace* when Hulago rased the city in 1258. This explains why Buvenekabahu the king of Yapahuwa sent an embassy to the

²³ Op. Cit. Yusuf.

²⁴ Dr. Lorna Devaraja in *Muslims of Sri Lanka*. Colombo 1986 Ch. Vii pp 211-234.

²⁵ The two Kufic inscriptions of the N. C. P. of the Anuradhapura – Puttalam Road and the Kurunegala-Puttalam road confirms the internal movements of the Arab settlers.

²⁶ Hobson Jebson. London. 1896. P 306.

²⁷ Ibn Batuta. *Travels* II pp 218-248.

Arab court of Egypt in 1283 led by Al-Haj Abu Uthuman. What is pertinent about the wide Sri Lankan-Arab contact is the reference in the royal letter of Buvenekabahu to the Egyptian Sultan *inter alia* to the arrival of an ambassador from Yemen at the Sinhalese king's court. This is an implication of Sri Lankan contact with varied nations of the Arab and Muslim world. From the reference in this letter to the pearl fisheries and precious stones it is indicative of this country's attraction to the Arabs besides other items of trade. And cinnamon which is unheard of among the products of Sri Lanka in the preceding centuries is mentioned in this letter. This commodity which was covered by the Dutch as late as the 17th century was not unknown to the Arabs even before the 13th century as there is a reference to it in the *A Jab-al-Hind (Wonders of India)* of Shariyar compiled in the early 10th century. It is also an indication of the important role played by the Arabs in the Island's economy particularly of its export trade. The narratives of Ibn Batuta²⁸ about half a century later (1344 A.D.) testifies to dominant Arab presence in trade in this region and Sri Lanka during this period. Henceforth, Arab settlements from Colombo to Galle were steadily coming into prominence. Thus Ibn Batuta was able to visit some of these settlements up to Galle with stop over at Beruwela where he is reported²⁹ to have visited the grave of a Persian Saint. Evidence of Muslim presence is also clear from the friendly and hospitable reception he received from the Sinhala and Tamil kings. Arya Chakravarti the king of Jaffna, Ibn Batuta records, spoke to him in fluent Persian. Perhaps Persian along with Tamil and Chinese were the regional commercial languages of the time.

Trade and commerce were the motivating factors that kept the Arab-Sri Lankan contacts through the early Arab settlers of the land even before the introduction of Islam into this country. The exclusive economic connection in the pre-Islamic period developed to higher stages of cultural ties. The Arabs themselves were not organized into a nation before Islam. It is Islam that welded the tribes into a cohesive nation with a mission and raised them to the level of a civilizing force. Hence, it is no surprise, when one finds that the Sri Lankan Arab ties beyond the 7th century is primarily economically motivated. "Before the end of the 7th century, a colony of Muslim merchants had established themselves in Ceylon... These Muslims lived in settlements along the coastal areas of Ceylon in peace and prosperity maintaining contacts, cultural and commercial with Bagdad and other countries of the Muslim world. It is significant that the heyday of the Abbaside Caliphate was contemporaneous with

²⁸ Ibid. Travels II pp 217-218.

²⁹ Muslims of Sri-Lanka – 1986 Colombo. Vide Intro :

the zenith of the classical age of Sinhalese power".³⁰ After the early settlers of the country embraced Islam soon after its appearance in Arabia, contacts between Arabia and Sri Lanka became numerous and close by reasons that went beyond economics to cultural and religious life of the Muslim community. With the rapid expansion of Islam in the Arabian region and beyond, the Sri Lankan-Arab relations expanded to even a larger Muslim connection with Persia, India and the Far East. "By means of this intercourse which they (Muslims of Ceylon) kept up through the Persian Gulf and Bussorah and all the countries under the Caliphate with Bagdad on the one side and through the Arabian Gulf and Egypt with all Mohammedan powers settled along the Mediterranean and of Spain on the other side they introduced from these countries to Ceylon many original works in Arabic on Mohammedan law and many translations into Arabic of the most valuable of the Greek and Roman classics on Medicine, Science and Literature".³¹ Thus this Sri Lankan-Arab contact from pre-Christian times, confined perhaps only to trade, blossomed into a cultural and religious relationship and attained its high water mark in the 14th and 15th centuries. Fall of Bagdad in the 13th century and the confusion which followed in Iran and North India and the commencement of European activities in Asia in the 16th century not only adversely affected the Arab settlers of this country but disrupted this country's relationship with the Arab lands.

As the early Arabs were linked to this Island by its attractive items of trade and servicing facilities for their vessels and a significant part of them had settled down mainly in the ports and made the Island a home, away from home, it is likely that these Arab settlers came to constitute the nucleus of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. In embracing Islam they were not following an alien religion but a religion of their own native soil which had been adopted by the large majority of the Arabs. In addition it is believed that at the very first century of Islam large numbers of Hashemite Arabs migrated to this country with their families in large numbers to evade persecution of the Umayyads.³²

Historical crosscurrents of this region shed much light on the Arab-Sri Lankan relations as the invasion of Sind in 710 A.D. by the Arabs is connected in some way to the presence of Arabs in this Island. The following account is from Tennent's *Ceylon*. "It is a curious circumstance related by Seladory who lived in the court of the Caliph of Bagdad in the 9th century, that an outrage committed by Indian pirates upon some Mohammedan ladies,

³⁰ *Education in Ceylon*. – A. M. A. Azeez – A Centenary Volume 1969 Govt. Press. Colombo. P. 1148.

³¹ Communications of Sir Johnstone reproduced in I. L. M. Abdul Azeez's *Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon*. 1907. Colombo. Pp 51-61.

³² S. M. Usuf. Op. Cit. Ch. V.

the daughters of Arab merchants who had died in Ceylon and whose families King Dathopatisa II (700 A.D.) was sending to their homes in the Tigris Valley, served as a plea under which Hajjaji the tyrannical governor of Iraq directed the first expansion for subjugating the Hindu King of the Valley of Indus."

Even before the Umayyad usurpation of power in the then Tung Muslim state, the conquest of Alexandria by the Arabs in 638 A.D. impaired this country's direct trade with Byzantium Empire which led to the development of commercial relations of Sri Lanka and Yemen in South Arabia or Hadramaut.³³ And Codrington observes³⁴ "Muslims are first heard in Ceylon in the 7th century and gold coins of the dynasties of Egypt and hither Asia from that time but in particular of the 12th and 13th centuries are found in the west of the Island".

Besides the wind pattern and the vagaries of the weather which compelled the early voyagers of the Indian ocean region to seek anchorage in Sri Lankan Ports, its precious stones, pearls and ivory were the primary inducements in the earliest phase of Sri Lankan trade. As long as the traditions go the Island's pearls, precious stones, ivory and spices have drawn the foreigners to its shores. The early Semitic Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Persians and Arabs have had trade relations with this Island which they called by different names (Taprobane, Serendib, Sahilan and Jazirat-al-Yakut - meaning Island of gems). The early traders were followed by the Chinese who entered the arena of sea faring trade about the 8th century. "Of these, the Arabs more than the rest, began to show more than an incidental interest in Ceylon."³⁵ Arab trade settlements came to be found along the coasts which are today confirmed by archaeological evidence of Islamic pottery³⁶ in Mannar and even in the interior of the land as brought to light in the Abeygiri excavations.³⁷ Many Kufic inscriptions dated 9th to 11th centuries such as those of Mannar (Puliyantivu, Vettiamarippu and Ellupitiya inscriptions); Puttalam (Pomparippu inscriptions) and the Colombo inscriptions of Imam Abu Bakaya confirm the permanency of early Arab settlements as the two Trincomalee Kufic inscriptions discovered in the vicinity; of Fort Ostenberg are evidence of Arab settlements in that town. It has been suggested³⁸ that the area around Chapel Hill in the Trincomalee Dockyard might have served as an Arab burial ground. With the expansion of Arab trading

³³ G. C. Mendis – Early History of Ceylon, 1940. Calcutta.

³⁴ A Short History of Ceylon. 1926. London.

³⁵ Ceylon – A Pictorial Survey of People and Arts – M. D. Raghavan. 1962. Colombo. Intro; p. xxv.

³⁶ The Excavations at Mantai – John Carswell. Ancient Ceylon No. 7 Vol: I 1990. Colombo. 1990.

³⁷ Conducted by UNESCO-Sri Lanka Cultural Triangle Project. C. D. N. of 7-8-85.

³⁸ Journal of R.A.S. Ceylon – Volume XIv. New Series 1970.

activities and the spread of Islam in this region, the number of these settlements should have increased advancing even to the interior of this country as confirmed by the Anuradhapura-Puttalam road and the Puttalam-Kurunegala Road Kufic inscriptions.

The Canton uprising of 762 A.D. in which there was a wholesale massacre of foreign traders, most of whom were Persians and Arabs confined Arab trading activities to a restricted region to the West of the Straits of Malacca. Turn of events that followed this change made Sri Lanka prominent as an entrepot where the Chinese, Arabs, Persians, East Africans and Indians met for exchange of goods. Political disaster of foreign traders in China did not affect in any way the trade in the region. It only shifted the arena to many entrepots in the South East Asian region, Such as the Indonesian archipelago, Malayan Straits, South India and Sri Lanka. This was followed in the subsequent century of the disorganization of the Arab empire. Political cohesion of the Arabs under Abbaside, which undoubtedly made Arab-Muslims' trade activities in the region flourish came to be adversely affected by the internecine struggles that followed the demise of the great Caliph Haroun-al-Rashid (786 - 809). And the destruction of Siraf Port on the Persian Gulf towards the end of the 10th century could not have but activated this downward trend of maritime activities of the area. With the eventual destruction of Bagdad in the 13th century by the Mongols, Arab-Muslim trade was no longer dominant, nevertheless the Muslims of different nationalities united under a single faith carried on their commercial activities along with the Hindus, Malays and Chinese who shared the oceanic trade of this region.

Tamerlane's Samarkand, Mahmud's Gazni and Berber's Farghana had been important focal points linking the old caravan trade from China, South Asia and West Asia, but Hadramaut had the merit of linking the world's foremost overland and oceanic routes. And Arab contact with Sri Lanka until the decline of the South Arabian kingdoms was closely linked to the Arab dominance of South Asia. This imperious position of the ancient world in Afro-Asia crumbled with the rising power of Europe with its voyages of discovery at the turn of the 15th century. These voyages of discovery were a part of the general enlightenment, Renaissance in Europe, which in the 17th and 18th centuries led to a scientific and industrial revolution which gave Europe dominance over the world. The supremacy of the oceanic trade routes in the East rested in Arab and Muslim lands because they were accommodating and tolerant in their commercial dealings with the diverse nationalities of Afro-Asia. Even as Berber the Moghul was completing his decisive victory at Panipat in 1526, the Portuguese had

announced their arrival at the Gates of India to be followed by the Dutch, French and British. It was the brilliant foresight of Albuquerque to see clearly that the Indian Ocean could be controlled only by taking over the Arab Oceanic Empire from Moluccas to Hormuz. In this scheme of theirs Sri Lanka became a vital link, halfway between Far East and the East coast of Africa. And this policy for the first time introduced an element of armed conflict in the maritime and trading relations of Asian nations. As a consequence, Arab-Sri Lankan relations diminished with the progressive increase in European control of the Island from 1505. The immense stretches of Steppes and deserts in Afro-Asia had been for millennia 'waterless seas' which led to the evolution of caravan trade. "The revolutionary western invention was the substitution of ocean for the Steppe as the principal medium of word communication".³⁹ This marked the death knell of Asian supremacy in trade and the state of cultural co-existence in the multi ethnic oceanic region and this could not but disastrously affect Arab-Sri Lankan relations for the next five centuries that followed.

³⁹ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, p. 70, Oxford, 1948.