

THE FIRST URBANISATION OF SRI LANKA: AN INVESTIGATION INTO NAGARA SITES REFERRED TO IN THE EARLY BRAHMI INSCRIPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses references to nagara (town/urban settlement) sites recorded in Early Brahmi inscriptions from the Early Historical Period (3rd century BC to 1st century AD) in Sri Lanka. It also discusses their attested or probable locations. At least ten such sites are known, none so far subjected to detailed archaeological research.

The first urbanisation of Sri Lanka is widely understood as a development that occurred in the period between the 4th century BC and the 3rd century AD (*Mahavamsa* X: 73-103; Deraniyagala 1972; Seneviratne 1987; Bandaranayake 1987; Manatunga 1987b; Allchin 1989). However, the rise of Anuradhapura, the earliest known urban settlement in Sri Lanka, can now be dated to the 8th-7th centuries BC as a result of recent excavations (Deraniyagala 1992: 710). This site gradually developed as the capital of the Sri Lankan state and marked the culmination of the first period of urbanisation.

Anuradhapura has been a focus of interest since the inception of archaeological studies in Sri Lanka, but few researchers have paid attention to the mechanism of urbanism at this site (Paranavitana 1936; Deraniyagala 1958; Silva 1979). Periodic excavations at the citadel of Anuradhapura have been carried out since 1969 by S. Deraniyagala (1972, 1992).

Apart from Anuradhapura, a few other sites have been identified archaeologically as belonging to the first period of urbanisation in Sri Lanka. These include Mantai, the major port of the Anuradhapura Period; Magama, the principal "city" of the southern territory of Ruhuna; Kantarodai, a site in the Jaffna peninsula of northern Sri

Lanka; Kelaniya, another settlement site situated in close proximity to the present city of Colombo; and Vijitapura, a fortified stronghold close to the 12th century capital city, Polonnaruwa.

Mantai (Matota or Mahatitta) has been sporadically excavated over a period of several years (Carswell *et al.* 1984: 3-80). Magama, which is the present Tissamaharama, was first excavated in the late 19th century (Parker 1884: 1-92); systematic excavations at the site were commenced again recently and are still in progress (S. Deraniyagala, pers. comm.). Kelaniya was found by chance when a large "Black and Red Ware" settlement site was discovered recently at Pilapitiya, near ancient Kelaniya monastery (S. Dissanayake, pers. comm.). Vijitapura has not yet been excavated or explored, although a fortress has been tentatively identified with the help of aerial photographs (Fernando 1984: 115-118).

Other settlements belonging to the first period of urbanisation have not yet been precisely located. However, textual and epigraphic sources which relate to this period indicate the existence of several other possible urban settlements. This paper deals with some of these, which are revealed by Early Brahmi inscriptions dating between the 3rd century BC and the 1st century AD. This is an attempt to draw attention to their existence and to locate them tentatively within the spatial context of the Early Historic landscape of the island.

THE NAGARA SITES

At least ten placenames ending with the term *nagara* or *nakara* occur in the Early Brahmi Inscriptions which have been discovered in different parts of the island.¹ These two words mean "town" or "urban settlement" (Monier-Williams 1986; Sorata 1952). Even though it is not certain whether these words were used in this sense



Figure 1: The nagara sites of Sri Lanka

in all possible cases, the fact remains that they were not used haphazardly. Some Indian topographical studies based on epigraphical sources have also suggested that places referred to as *nagara* can be considered urban settlements (Gupta 1973: 56; Ray 1987: 101). However, it must be kept in mind that the name alone is not indicative of the precise status of the settlement.

Almost all the Early Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka are found in Buddhist monasteries and mention various donations made to them. The placenames bearing the suffixes *nagara* or *nakara* (hereafter both are referred to as *nagara*) in these inscriptions were either the home towns of donors or areas in which donated features such as tanks, settlements or land were located. Thus, we can

assume that most of the *nagaras* were located not far from the monasteries in which their names were recorded.

Spatial analysis of the distribution of *nagara* sites mentioned in the Early Brahmi inscriptions (Manatunga 1987b; Bandaranayake 1992) indicates that they were located in densely populated regions and that some were rich enough to maintain several non-productive institutions such as monasteries. *Nagara* sites are often situated in river valleys, sometimes on the river banks, on the ancient trade routes that linked the inland with the coastal regions. Some were closely associated with areas rich in natural resources utilized in the Early Historic Period, often associated with irrigation tank networks. Some of these tanks can also be correlated with those referred to in inscriptions (Nicholas 1957; 1959; Paranavitana 1970; Seneviratne 1984; 1987; 1989).

Almost all these *nagara* sites were patronized by rulers and their close relatives, while some *nagaras* were donated to the monasteries by kings themselves. Famous rulers of Anuradhapura, the most powerful ruling house of the period, and rulers of local chiefdoms have been identified among the patrons (Paranavitana 1970). On the one hand, royal patronage of these sites indicates their socioeconomic importance as well as religious significance. On the other hand, patronage of a particular place by the ruling élite could have led to the development of settlements in the surrounding areas as well.

Inscriptions referring to the *nagara* sites and their surroundings clearly indicate the fundamental characteristics of contemporary urban society; which comprises elements such as social hierarchy, ethnic complexity, craft specialisation and trade. The donors mentioned in these inscriptions ranged from the “great king” (*maha raja*) to the village headman (*gamika*). Most of the donors were chiefs (*parumaka*), representing the élite of the society. Among the élite, some followed professions that prevailed only in the urban setting, such as *nagara-gutaka* (mayor) or *rupadaka*, superintendent of the mints (Paranavitana 1970).

Craftsmen such as ironsmiths (*kabara*), coppersmiths (*tabakara*), potters (*kubala*), lapidarists (*manikara*) and weavers (*pehekara*) figured among the donors to these monasteries. It is evident that these donors also came from a range of professional groups such as teachers (*acariya*), actors (*nata*), physicians (*veja*) and elephant trainers (*ati adaka*). Merchants (*vanija/vanika*) and those in related professions such as treasurers (*badagarika*) and accountants (*ganaka*) patronized these Buddhist monasteries as well. Some inscriptions refer to trade/craft corporations (*puga/puka*), which are considered to be a

characteristic feature of urban and semi-urban settlements rather than of villages (Seneviratne 1987: 164). References made to foreign corporations (*puga kabojjiana*) and mariners (*navika*) in these inscriptions indicate the presence in this society of merchants engaged in long distance trade. Donors who identified themselves as *kaboja* and *dameda* seem to be minor ethnic groups, probably assimilated into this society as a result of their widespread trading activities (Paranavitana 1970).

Interestingly enough, some *nagaras* mentioned in the inscriptions can also be identified with towns marked on Ptolemy's map (McCrinkle 1927).² These particular places could have been well known commercial centres in the island by the 2nd century AD. Pliny mentions that Tabrobane (Sri Lanka) had seven hundred small market towns (Paris 1951: 293). This statement, though probably an exaggeration, perhaps denotes the presence of several urban settlements which were known to the western world during the Early Historic Period.

The capital cities of the different kingdoms which flourished throughout the history of Sri Lanka appear to have been located in those regions previously occupied by *nagaras*. Moreover, some of the *nagaras* of this first period of urbanisation might have flourished for a long period of time, thus contributing to the development of later cities in these regions.

Two inscriptions at the monastery of Ranagirimada, in the Upper Daduru Oya valley, refer to donations made by the citizens of *Aba Nagara* (Paranavitana 1970: inscriptions 969, 962). *Aba Nagara* can be easily identified with the town called Anoubingara, mentioned by Ptolemy, on the basis of similarities between the two names and Ptolemy's locational references for it. *Aba Nagara* could have been situated in the Ambattakola Janapada region, mentioned in the *Mahavamsa*, which can be identified as the territory including Ranagirimada (Nicholas 1959: 106). Both *Aba Nagara* and *Ambattakola* seem to be derived from a common root, as "Aba" is the Sinhalese version of the Pali word "Amba" (Paranavitana 1970: 102). This shows that *Aba Nagara* was an important settlement of that region and either lent its name to it or derived it from it.

Descriptions given in the *Mahavamsa* (XXVIII 20-35) reveal that *Ambattakola Janapada* was the place where silver was discovered during the time of king Duttagamini Abhaya (161-137 BC) of Anuradhapura. It further reveals that a trade route capable of being traversed by wheeled vehicles linked this region with the Central Mountains (*Mahavamsa* XXVIII 20-22). The *Mahavamsa Tika* refers to a sugar mill in *Ambattakola Janapada* dur-

ing the time of king Mahachuli Maha Tissa (77-63 BC) (Malalasekera 1937: 52).

Pubaga Nakara is another possible urban settlement mentioned in an inscription found at Peddava (Mahamukalanyaya), situated about 7 km south of Rangirimada (Paranavitana 1970: inscription 1195). This monastery site was located in the source region of the Daduru Oya, while a ruined fortress called Parana Nuwara (old city) was situated on the bank of the stream about 1 km away from the monastery site. Parker (1909: 252-3) and Brohier (1934: 6-7) described these two sites and correlated the ruined fortress with the town mentioned in the inscription.

The town of Podouke, mentioned by Ptolemy and indicated by him to be on the bank of the river Sonnai where it flows out of the mountains, may well be *Pubaga Nagara*, at the source of Daduru Oya which is already identified as the river Sonnai (Nicholas 1959). The name Podouke itself means "market town" and was also applied to a place in South India, believed to be the famous Arikamedu in Pondicherry (Wheeler *et al.* 1946).

The above-mentioned locations of Ranagirimada and Peddava are situated on the peneplain northwest of the Central Mountains. The two passes through which one can reach the mountain from the northwest are located in this region. The distribution pattern of the inscription sites, as well as the descriptions given in the chronicles, clearly show that these passes were used in the Early Historic Period (Nicholas 1959: 107). Both Ranagirimada and Peddava belong to the present division of Hiriyala in the Kurunagala district, which is one of the most fertile regions and is often the highest paddy producing area in Sri Lanka. Kurunagala, the capital city during the 14th century AD, lies about 8 km south-west of Peddava and 15 km from Ranagirimada.

Two other *nagaras*, *Aca Nagara* and *Tavikiriya Nagara*, are mentioned in two inscriptions (Paranavitana 1970, nos. 1051-1052) with identical contents, found at Tonigala in the Lower Mi Oya valley. These two *nagaras* were donated to the monastery by the great king Gamini Abaya, who is identified either with king Duttagamini Abhaya (161-137 BC) or Vattagamini Abhaya (103-77 BC) of Anuradhapura. These inscriptions further refer to the donation of a tank to the monastery by Parumaka Tisa, who was probably a son of Gamini Abaya and an envoy-mariner (Paranavitana 1970, no. 1054). The monastery at Tonigala is referred to as "Acagirikatisaparava" in these inscriptions. Hence, it is not improbable that the settlement of *Aca Nagara* and the *Acagirikatisaparava* monastery were located alongside each other. As a place dedicated to this monastery, *Tavikiriya Nagara* should

also have been located not far from the monastery, the present Tonigala.

An inscription at Toravamailava, another monastery in the Mi Oya valley, mentions a *Bama Nagara* which belonged to a donor of that monastery (Paranavitana 1979, no. 1037). Among other inscriptions at Toravamailava, those recording donations by a burgomaster (*nagara gutika*), an owner of a tank and the treasurer of a great king are notable (Paranavitana 1970, nos 1219, 1217-1218, 1035).

Toravamailava is about 35 km west of Yapahuva, the capital city of Sri Lanka in the 13th century AD. This site, like all the other *nagaras* discussed above, is situated in the northwestern province of Sri Lanka. In this region are found not only the highest number of Early Brahmi inscription sites, but also the largest number of irrigation tanks in the island (Cook 1951). Nodular iron stones, which were widely used in the Early Historic Period, are also found in most parts of this province (Seneviratne 1987: 138). The northwestern coast was the landing place for many early migrants from India to the island and it is well known for its rich pearl beds (Gunawardena 1985; Seneviratne 1984).

An inscription in Handagala Vihara, in the Yan Oya valley in northeast Sri Lanka, refers to *Naka Nakara*, where a tank belonging to a donor was located (Paranavitana 1970, no. 1129).³ Two more tank owners are among the donors to this monastery and one of their tanks was known as Nakadobika Vapi (Paranavitana 1970, nos 1130-1131). Five other inscriptions at Handagala Vihara mention donations made by persons whose names were Naga (Paranavitana 1970, nos 120, 128, 129, 132, 133). An inscription at Periya Puliyankulama, a large monastic site, about 20 km north of Handagala Vihara, refers to a local ruling house with a king called Naga (Paranavitana 1970, no. 1381). Some other monasteries of this region bear inscriptions with the names of people called Naga or their relatives. This recurring evidence for the name Naga and the occurrence of the place Naka Nakara (Pali, *Naga Nagara*) does not appear to be coincidence. Perhaps there was a family or clan called Naga and Naka Nakara might have been their main dwelling centre.

The 10th century market town of Nannaru, near Padaviya, about 20 km north of Handagala Vihara, is already suggested to be the same place as the early *Naka Nakara* (Nicholas 1959: 87). Several such market towns involved in long distance trade were present in this region between the 10th and 12th centuries AD (Pathmanathan 1987). The presence of a series of Megalithic burial sites (Seneviratne 1984) in the region

and references to trades and trading corporations in the Early Brahmi inscriptions indicate that the origin of those market towns goes back to the Early Historic Period.

An inscription at Hennanegala, in the Maduru Oya valley in the eastern peneplain of Sri Lanka, mentions a donation of a settlement called *Kasaba Nagara* and five other settlements (Paranavitana 1970, no. 406). This grant was made by the father of Gamini Tissa and by Majima Raja, both of whom were likely to be of royal descent (Paranavitana 1970: ix). There is no more evidence to indicate the urban status of this settlement, but the location of Hennanegala shows that it could have been a nodal point on the road between Anuradhapura and Mahagama, and also on the road between the East coast and the Mahavali valley.

Uti Nagara, another possible urban settlement, is mentioned in an inscription found at Kongala in the southeastern coastal plains, close to the mouth of the Kumbukkan Oya (Paranavitana 1970, no. 538). Eleven inscriptions are known at Kongala (Paranavitana 1970, nos 538-548) and seven have been found at Bovattegala (Paranavitana 1970, nos 549-555), about 1 km away from Kongala. Both these sites are located north of Kumbukkan Oya, while two other sites, Mandagala (Paranavitana 1970, nos 576-599) and Kottadamuhela (Paranavitana 1970, nos 556-575), with 24 and 20 inscriptions respectively, are located south of the river.

These inscriptions, as well as the descriptions given in the chronicles, indicate that Uti Nagara could have been a settlement of the Uttiya Janapada, most probably serving as the main ruling and dwelling centre of that territory. According to the *Mahavamsa* (XXII 13-15), Aya Uttika, the younger brother of king Tissa of Kelaniya, having roused the wrath of the king on account of being the queen's paramour, fled and established his abode elsewhere. His new settlement was subsequently named after him. The *Vamsattappakasini*, the commentary to the *Mahavamsa*, says that this location was called Uttiya Janapada and that it was located near the sea (Gunawardena 1985: 431). An inscription at Bovattegala (Paranavitana 1970, no. 550) refers to a king Uti, who is not identified with any known ruler of the island but who seems to be the same person as Aya Uttika or Uttiya (Uti being the Sirihalese form of the Pali *Uttika* or *Uttiya*) of the above descriptions. Another inscription found at Mandagala (Paranavitana 1970, no. 577) refers to a person belonging to the family of Kalanika Tisa, probably king Tissa of Kelaniya.

Several other inscriptions found at this cluster of sites refer to donations made by various merchants, craftsmen and members of the trade/craft corporations

(Paranavitana 1970, nos 546, 553, 585, 591). This further indicates the presence of an urban settlement somewhere close to these monasteries (Manatunga 1987a). These inscription sites are situated close to two coastal bays. An extensive pottery site with Roman coins has been found at Patanangala in close proximity to these bays as a result of recent explorations (Priyantha Karunaratne, pers. comm.).

Three other *nagaras*, from the Maha Oya valley, in the western part of the island, deserve mention. These are *Siva Nagara* and *Niliya Nagara* mentioned in the Yatahalena inscriptions (Paranavitana 1970, nos 794, 796a) and *Batasa Nagara*, which is referred to in the Lenagala inscription (Paranavitana 1970, no. 786). These inscriptions mention that land grants from these *nagaras* were made to the monasteries of Yatahalena and Lenagala by two members of a royal family. According to the inscriptions, this family was descended from a brother of (king) Devanapiya, and consisted of four successive rulers. They were Aya (Prince) Duhatara, his son Aya Siva, his grandson Aya Duhatara and great-grandson Gamini Siva (Paranavitana 1970, no. 792). The land grants from Siva Nagara to Yatahalena monastery were made by Gamini Siva. Thus, Siva Nagara must have been closely associated with him and seems to be named after him or after his grandfather, both of whom bore the name Siva. Niliya Nagara is mentioned in another inscription at Yatahalena, which does not, however, refer to a particular donor. Considering the fact that Nilaya Nagara means "residence town" (Monier-Williams 1986: 558), it appears to have once been the abode of this royal family.

Grants from Batasa Nagara to Lenagala monastery were made by Prince Duhatara, the son of Aya Siva of the Yatahalena and Lengala inscriptions. This Batasa Nagara might have been the same as Ptolemy's Bumasai, which is likely to be a distortion of Batasa, marked more or less in the same area where Lenagala is located.

Both Yatahalena and Lenagala are situated in the foothills of the Central Mountains, facing the pass leading to the Kandy Plateau. Megalithic burial sites at Galatara and Padavigampola (Seneviratne 1984) are also located in this foothill area. Dambadeniya, the capital of Sri Lanka after the decline of Polonnaruva, is also situated in the same region, about 20 km west of Yatahalena.

An inscription found at Bambaragala, in the Mahavali valley of the Central Mountains, mentions *Cita Nagara* as a place where a mansion was located which was donated to the monastery (Paranavitana 1970, no. 815).⁴ Three other inscriptions (Paranavitana 1970, nos 814, 816, 817) have been found at this monastery and one of them refers to a donation made to it by a member of a

royal family (Paranavitana 1970, no. 814). Gonavatta, a monastery just 5 km away from Bambaragala, has an inscription which refers to a lineage of five successive rulers (Paranavitana 1970, no. 813). This reference might indicate that this mountainous area was under a separate ruling family in the Early Historic Period (Paranavitana 1970 lxi; Gunawardena 1985: 14). *Cita Nagara*, the only *nagara* mentioned in an inscription found in the Central Mountains, might have been the main ruling centre of that particular family. Kandy, the capital of the last kingdom of the island and the second city of present day Sri Lanka, is situated in the same region about 20 km southwest of Bambaragala.

It is clear that the *nagaras* discussed above could, in some cases, be considered as urban settlements which emerged during the first period of urbanisation in Sri Lanka. It is still not understood precisely which settlements among them were definitely of urban status, or what degrees of urbanisation might be expected in such sites.⁵ None of the places mentioned above, with the exception of *Pubaga Nagara*, have been identified with locations of any archaeological habitation sites. Hence, field investigations are necessary to increase understanding of these settlements, which occupy such an important potential place in Sri Lankan early history.

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NOTES

1. The *Mahavamsa* mentions seven other places, apart from Anuradhapura and Vijitapura, which carry the suffix *nagara*. They are *Tammanna Nagara* (vii.39), *Kalaha Nagara* (x.42), *Kanda Nagara* (xxi.7), *Kota Nagara* (xxv.13), *Pajjota Nagara* (xxv.51) and *Mahela Nagara* (xxv.48-49). The *Mahavamsa Tika* adds one other, *Nivattagiri Nagara* (Geiger 1960: 49). Upatissagama, the ruling centre of Minister Upatissa, successor of Prince Vijaya, is referred to as *Upatissa Nagara* in the *Dipavamsa* (9.37) and is described as a place which had a well-arranged market and streets. All these *nagaras* mentioned in the chronicles were closely associated with the ruling élite.

2. Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning *Magana Nagara*, which is referred in some Later Brahmi inscriptions. This *Magana Nagara* is correlated with Margana of Ptolemy's map, located on the northwestern coast of Sri Lanka (Nicholas 1959).

3. *Naka Nakara* is mentioned in another inscription, likely to be somewhat later in date, found at Tammannagala (Vadakahagala) about 50 km south of Handagala Vihara. The same inscription refers to Labunakara, identified as Labugama, the settlement given its name by Prince Pandukabhaya in the 4th century BC and correlated with the modern Labunoruva which is about 3 km away from the inscription site (Nicholas 1959: 172-3).

4. The same name occurs in a 2nd century inscription found at Tonikallu, in the lower Mahavali valley (Nicholas 1959: 42). This reference is evidently different from the Cita Nakara of the Bambaragala inscription.

5. Nicholas (1957: 73-74) thinks that the references to *nagaras* in the inscriptions and chronicles are far too numerous to have been always cities or towns in the generally accepted senses of these terms. However, he suggests that some were very probably fortified posts, manned by small garrisons of soldiers, commanding tactical points such as fords, passes and important routes.

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