

Sri Lanka is one of the best sources of prehistoric studies in South Asia. Over 180 prehistoric sites have been found including undisturbed human habitats dating to 100,000 years perhaps even 200,000 or 500,000 years. 20,000 years is reached at excavation level of 8 feet depth in Sri Lanka.

Stone Age settlements have been found in a series of cave excavations. Dates were based on radio-carbon assay and thermo luminescence analysis. Tests were done on more than 50 sections of these sites. The excavated sites held skeletons. India has only about six or seven skeletons in the whole of India. Sri Lanka had many more.

Batadomba Lena site near Kuruwita, in Ratnapura has yielded some of the earliest evidence of Homo sapiens in South Asia. The site is dated 31,000 to 12,000 BP. Seven adults and one child were recovered from a level dated to 18,000 BP. Food remains included mollusks, large cats resembling lions and tigers, giant squirrels, porcupines, monkeys and arboreal gastropods. Shell beads, and small points of bone and antler, were also found.

Beli Lena, Kitulgala dated 30,000 to 3500 BP yielded 26 skeletons and an enormous quantity of food remains, People had eaten a lot of mollusks, which are soft bodied hard shelled animals like snails. They also ate giant squirrel, porcupine, flying squirrel, small rodents, pig, sambhur, and gal veralu. Much of the food now available in the wild would have been available to prehistoric man. These are eaten today by the forest villagers of Sinharaja. Findings also indicated that rock salt had been brought in from the coast.

Several hearths were excavated at Beli Lena, They appear to have been used for preparing food. They were small indicating that they would have been used for small groups. Seeds of wild banana (ati kehel), kekuna and wild breadfruit (wal del) were found. Beli lena man seems to have baked the wild breadfruit under hot ashes and eaten the aril and seeds. This finding is the first indication of plant exploitation during the Mesolithic period in the Indian sub continent.

Fa Hsien cave in Yatagampitiya near Bulathsihala in Kalutara district had six burials including children and infants. Two skeletons were coated with red ochre. More than 15 skeletons were recovered from Bellan Bandi Palassa near Embilitiya .These findings indicate that the minimum size of the hunter gatherer bands in Sri Lanka would have been 15-25 individuals with maximum about 50.

Aligala site, near Sigiriya yielded food remains of mollusks, wild boar, purple faced leaf monkey, and grey langur, which would have been formidable game to track. Also small game, porcupine, flying fox, black necked hare and iguana. Bones had been subject to pounding, burning, cutting and scraping. The lime quarries at Ambalantota and Hambantota also provided evidence of human settlements. They contain shell deposits (mizzens) of what the ancients had eaten. Skeletons perhaps 6,000 years old were also found.

A limited amount of prehistoric cave art was found in the eastern coast. Twenty items were found in a sequence. Rock art was also found at Uva, Tantirimale and Dorawaka (Kegalla district.) Drawings included bow and arrow, elephants, leopard, iguana and humans.

Siran Deraniyagala says "Ours was the earliest form of stone tool technology." The geometric microliths found in Batadomba Lena make this site Asia's earliest reliably dated site for such implements. This is so significant that Batadomba Lena has been considered for a World Heritage site.

Stone tools dating to 30,000 BP were also found at Kitulgala Beli lena. Also at Alu lena, Attangoda near Kegalle dated to 10,500 BP. Excavations in coastal deposits near Bundala and Patirajawela yielded a small flake stone industry dated to 125,000 or 75,000 BP. Bundala had similar material. Ancient Sinhala man eventually used very sophisticated tools, mainly quartz. Europe took to stone tools only 12,000 years ago.

Homo sapiens started in Africa. The next link is provided by Bundala. Bundala site yielded tools which were 125,000 years old. The tools were very advanced. Bundala findings provide a link on how Homo sapiens moved after leaving Africa. These findings are very important. Nothing comparable has been found elsewhere. Sailing time from Sunda Straits to Australia was two weeks. The ocean current goes from Timor to North Australia but does not return, so those who drifted to Australia got stuck there.

Homo sapiens and his ancestor had lived side by side in Sri Lanka together with extinct animals. Ceylon has produced fossils of man like beings who belong to the transition stage from ape to man. This discovery bridges the gap that had existed between findings in Africa and those in Java and China. The fossils were first found in gem pits in Ratnapura. The fossils were named 'Homo sinhaleyus Deraniyagala' and 'Homo sapiens balangodensis'. 'Balangoda man' is dated to the middle period of the Stone Age. Veddahs are linked to them.

Fossils of Balangoda Man were found at Fa Hsien, Bellan Bandi Pellassa, Beli Lena and Batadomba Lena sites. Remains of at least 30 individuals have been found. Fossils were also found at Tun Modera on Vak Oya stream near Labugama. There is also evidence of habitation in Pal Horu Kanda on Labugama estate. Remains of kitchen debris and implements were found at these sites.

Balangoda man was taller than today's man and far more active. Estimated stature is 174 cm for males and 166 for females, which are much greater than the present day height in Sri Lanka which is 160 cm for males and 150 cm for females. The lower jaw was very robust, the chin pointed, teeth usually large. Balangoda man had the largest teeth of all pre-historic people. Balangoda man ate a wide range of animals including monkeys, porcupines, spotted deer, birds such as spur and jungle fowl, snakes, pythons and rat snakes, hard and soft shelled terrapins, fish, freshwater crustaceans and mollusks. Today, there are Sinhalese living in the remoter villages of Sinharaja who do not hesitate to eat most animals

Balangoda Man appears to have settled in every nook and corner of Sri Lanka ranging from the damp and cold high plains such as Maha Eliya (Horton Plains) to the arid lowlands of Mannar

and Wilpattu and the steamy equatorial rainforests of Sabaragamuwa. The camps were small, rarely exceeding 50 square meters in area suggesting occupation by not more than a couple of nuclear families. Balangoda Man kept domestic dogs. The indigenous 'Sinhala hound' resembles other early dogs such as the dingo of Australia.

In the late Stone Age, Homo sapiens moved from food collection to food production. Food production developed at different times in different parts of the globe. Horton Plains has emerged as one of these centers of origin. Prematilaka says there was domestication of oats and barley in 17,000 BP in Horton Plains . . . There was cattle rearing as well. Plant domestication started in Sri Lanka round the same time as in the Fertile Crescent of Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Palestine.

Diane Hawkey analysed prehistoric dental data. She found that Sri Lanka data showed affinity with recent Melanesian and Australian aborigines. She also found that Iron age Sri Lankans were more similar to present day Sinhalese than to Tamils, Veddahs or Stone Age Sri Lankans. The data showed gene drift, not gene flows. This means that prehistoric south Asian populations were indigenous populations. The emphasis till now was on external population flows into South Asia. However she found that Sinhalese in Pomparippu came from Bay of Bengal region.

Sri Lanka seems to have leapt from the Stone Age to the protohistoric Iron Age by-passing the Bronze Age. The only evidence of the Bronze Age is a tiny piece of copper found in Mantota excavations. Iron technology could be seen in Sri Lanka by 10,000 BC. The 1984 Anuradhapura excavations found evidence of Iron Age. Iron tools were found at the level dated to 900 BC. There are similar findings in very small amounts at Sigiriya and Tissamaharama, but nothing like the massive find at Anuradhapura.

Ibbankatuwa site findings indicate that at the proto historic level, the ancients had houses which were fairly strong, made of granite and stone with clay walls having thickness of 30 to 40 centimeters. Ibbankatuwa appeared to be a semi urban site inhabited by an elite group. There were grinding stones and terra cotta dice indicating an indoor game. Archaeologists complain that Buddhist monks have destroyed possible prehistoric archaeological findings by clearing caves and fumigating them. This prevents carbon dating. Monks continue to take over caves even today, thereby eliminating useful findings.

The writings of P.E.P Deraniyagala, D. Hawkey, T.W. Wikramanayake and talks by Siran Deraniyagala and H. Namalgamuwa were used for this essay.

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