



Siran Deraniyagala's Contribution to Maritime Archaeology in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This appreciation of Siran Deraniyagala traces certain steps taken, which promoted and established maritime archaeology in Sri Lanka. He made the Archaeological Impact Assessment (AIA) of a project for Galle Harbour possible by expanding the mandate of the Archaeology Department to cover the territorial sea, thus providing the Department with oversight and statutory control over this vast area. He made it possible for the Department to conduct such surveys even when it lacked specialists in its own cadre and freed the Department from having recourse to supplementary votes for non-budgeted activities by making the project proponents bear the cost of AIAs. The significant impact Deraniyagala had on Maritime Archaeology of Sri Lanka is described and gratefully acknowledged.

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An Archaeological Impact Assessment (AIA) of a proposed development project for Galle Harbour was conducted in 2007. It was the first such survey initiated at a maritime site in Sri Lanka. This brief appreciation traces certain steps taken, with significant foresight, by Dr. Siran Deraniyagala, steps that made such an Assessment possible within the limits imposed on the Archaeological Department. In brief, Dr. Deraniyagala

- expanded the mandate of the Archaeology Department to cover the territorial sea, thus providing the Department with oversight and statutory control over this vast area.
- made it possible for the Department to conduct such surveys even when it lacked specialists in its own cadre
- freed the Department from having recourse to Supplementary votes for non-Budgeted activities by making the project proponents bear the cost of AIAs.

The survey was conducted, for the Sri Lanka Department of Archaeology, by the Western Australian Maritime Museum. The opening passage of that Report reads as follows:

“Following discussions between the Sri Lankan Department of Archaeology (SLDA) and Department of Maritime Archaeology, Western Australian Museum (WAM), WAM was engaged as a consultant to undertake a maritime archaeological survey of Galle Harbour as part of an Archaeological Impact Assessment (AIA) process. The scope of the consultancy was to carry out a maritime archaeological survey and provide a report to the SLDA outlining the impact of the proposed Galle port development on the underwater cultural heritage of Galle Harbour. The survey took place between 14 November and 2 December 2007” (Anderson et al., 2007).

The Archaeology Department of Sri Lanka was first drawn into the maritime field in 1962-63, as recorded in the Annual Report for that period (Godakumbura, 1964). It was next mentioned in the Annual Report for the year 1967-68 (de Silva, 1970). Between then and 1986, various initiatives were taken by state institutions and non-governmental actors (see Devendra 2007 for a comprehensive appraisal). However, the Archaeology Department was drawn into this field, obliquely at first, in 1986 at the “First National Archaeological Congress” conducted by the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology, when P.U. Weerawardena, of the Archaeology Department, presented a paper entitled “A Theoretical Framework for Maritime Archaeology and the Maritime History of Sri Lanka” (Weerawardena 1986). Subsequently, the Department, at its Centenary Seminar (1990), adopted a Resolution which recommended:

“that the Archaeological Department, at the start of its second century, establishes a marine archaeology unit with all the necessary statutory powers to assume control of and to initiate all marine archaeological activity in the country”

and proposed:

“that the unit should interact with all statutory bodies, academic institutions, NGO organisations and remain the dominant institution administering such a discipline.” (Devendra 2007).

The incumbent Director General, Dr. Roland Silva, who was also wearing the hat of President of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS International), carried this decision further by joining the CCF (Central Cultural Fund), PGIAR (Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology), NGOs and the Maritime Museum of Western Australia to undertake training a core group in the techniques of underwater archaeology at Galle whilst,

simultaneously, undertaking a preliminary survey of shipwrecks in the Galle Harbour. During that decade several proposals were being put forward to expand the commercial port of Galle, all of which would impact the historic underwater landscape of the bay. Unfortunately, the Department – by then, under the leadership of Dr. Deraniyagala – lacked both the funds and expertise to undertake an impact survey or assessment.

Against this backdrop the Minister of Cultural Affairs, Hon. Lakshman Jayakoddy, visited Galle and observed that the harbour development project would affect the archaeological heritage of the site. He called for all published reports on the previous seasons' work. He contacted me requesting that I could undertake to continue the work. I agreed provided it was conducted by the Archaeological Department and funds would be made available to the Department. He then decided that a rescue operation had to be mounted with expertise from abroad, that it must be sanctioned at the Cabinet level and that inter-ministerial linkages must be set in place.

Cabinet approval was granted and a sum of 15 million rupees was to be allocated for the project. The matter was then assigned to the Archaeology Department to be translated into action. What followed was a programme led by the Department, deploying personnel/volunteers from the CCF, PGIAR and the Western Australian team. Over two seasons a systematic survey of underwater Galle was undertaken. This entailed a side-scan sonar survey, a preliminary pre-disturbance survey, rescue and retrieval of minor artefacts, processing and conservation, and the training of archaeologist-divers and conservators. Finally, the first proper maritime archaeology report was compiled / published for the Department (Green & Devendra, 1993) and later also published internationally (Anderson et al., 2007). All these were carried out under Dr. Deraniyagala's leadership.

Dr. Deraniyagala had recognised that the Department needed strengthening by Law. While such strengthening would, largely, affect terrestrial archaeology, it would also provide for the new discipline of maritime archaeology. Sri Lankan waters were already attracting the unwelcome attention of salvors, with support from influential quarters. An initiative to establish a properly constituted Maritime Archaeology Unit (under the Archaeological Dept.) had failed to get off the ground in the 1990s. Dr. Deraniyagala therefore moved the "Antiquities (Amendment) Act No. 24 of 1998" both to rectify existing shortcomings in the Antiquities Act and to provide some 'damage control' to maritime archaeology.

This Amendment provided the Department with two very important powers, as far as maritime archaeology was concerned. The first was that the concept of "Archaeological heritage" was extended to mean "subterranean and underwater sites" and to cover the "territorial sea" as defined in the Maritime Zones Law, No. 26 of 1976". The other was that the Department was empowered, by a new Sect. 43, to undertake Archaeological Impact Assessment (AIA) surveys of proposed development projects by qualified persons who are not employees of the Department, and for the survey to be undertaken at the cost of the project proponent. These two new powers cleared the way for the Department to recruit specialist personnel/institutions from outside the Department and for the Surveys to be financed outside of the Department's voted funds.

Dr. Deraniyagala also realised that maritime archaeology, in practice, required a more flexible approach than the Department was able to provide. He thus transferred the fieldwork component to the Central Cultural Fund, but with the Department retaining statutory control. This led to the establishment of the Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU) of the CCF. Thus, by the time it became necessary to conduct an Archaeological Impact of the proposal to develop the Galle port, Dr. Deraniyagala had provided the Department both the power to conduct surveys and a financial base to undertake them. Although Dr. Deraniyagala had retired from office by 2007, he had empowered the Department to appoint the Western Australian Maritime Museum as Consultants to carry out the Survey and for the project proponent to provide the funds. The Report was submitted in 2007, to the Department and published by the Department of Maritime Archaeology, Western Australian Maritime Museum No. 235 of 2007.

I am deeply appreciative of this opportunity to explain, albeit briefly, the impact Dr. Deraniyagala had on Maritime Archaeology. But for him, the new discipline would not have found its wings. On behalf of all who contributed their little to this cause in the early days I thank him for the umbrella he held over us.

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