

Aspects of Early Sri Lankan History, c. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE – 13<sup>th</sup> century CE

MA Lecture Course, 4 credits

MPhil Lecture Course, 2 credits

Mode of Evaluation: 2 tutorials + end semester examination

This course is offered as part of the basket of non-Indian history courses that students can opt for at the CHS. The aim of the course is to familiarize students with the historical processes occurring in the island country of Sri Lanka, from the early historic period until the early medieval period. Traditionally, the history of Sri Lanka has been understood by Indian scholars either in terms of the Indian colonization of the island or the European colonial presence here. In this course, students will be familiarized with the complex social formations that can be identified through the study of autochthonous forces of change, and the nature of socio-economic transformations and political structures that can be identified. Further, the evolution and growth of religious institutions can be seen as a concomitant to these transformations, as seen from the numerous Buddhist monuments that were constructed across the region. The significance of ideological apparatuses in the growth of state society can be seen in the nature of chronicling of the polity by Buddhist monks from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards. A facet of Sri Lankan history that is often obscured because of the telescoping of the present into the past and vice versa is the presence of state society in the northern part of Sri Lanka from the early medieval period, which appeared to maintain a close linkage with peninsular India. Many of the political and social structures prevalent here closely resemble that which is known for the same period particularly in the extreme south of India. The nature of religious institutions as well as the literary culture of the people in this part reflects a rich tradition of syncretism and in an apparent contradiction, a distinct identity. Finally, a theme that is considered problematic in Sri Lankan historiography relates to the Chola conquest of the region in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, generally labeled as the ‘dark ages’, which needs to be revisited given the recent scholarship on the subject.

## **I. Sources for Early Sri Lankan History**

In this theme, various sources are discussed in terms of their time of composition, questions of authorship and the nature of their content. The literary sources straddle a variety of texts and languages such as the *Mahavamsa* (c. 5<sup>th</sup> century CE), *Dipavamsa* (c. 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century CE) and *Culavamsa* (c. 12<sup>th</sup> century, c. 14<sup>th</sup> century, c. 18<sup>th</sup> century) in Pali, the Sinhala *Mahabodhi Getapadaya* and *Jataka Atuva Getapadaya* (both 12<sup>th</sup> century CE), and the Tamil *Sangam* and *Tevaram* poems. The earliest inscriptions found in Sri Lanka are in the Brahmi script, in the Indo-Aryan Prakrit and Tamil languages. Inscriptions are available from the early medieval period in proto-Sinhala, Sinhala and Tamil. The monuments built by the rulers of Anuradhapura, Polonaruva, Jaffna and Rohana are also an important source for studying Sri Lankan history.

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## II. Material Culture, Political Structures and Social Transformations, c. 300 BCE – 600 CE

Although archaeological and literary evidence points to the possibilities of Indo-Aryan speaking communities living in Sri Lanka as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the sources are fragmentary and it is not possible to draw any major conclusions. Scholars have focused on the period from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC as the early historical period, on the basis of the Buddhist chronicles and the early Brahmi inscriptions numbering more than 1400 collected from over 270 sites in the island. It appears that the earliest phase (c.300-50 BCE) was marked by subsistence agriculture, with some pastoral activity and itinerant trade also visible. The significance of cistern sluices in providing irrigation for a primarily agrarian society from the second century CE is seen as marking the evolution of the state in Sri Lanka. The inscriptions refer to specific titles such as *raja*, *gamani/ gamika*, *aya* reveal rudimentary political structures initially and a gradual accretion of meaning and status to these, as well as the use of newer terms reflecting political power and hierarchy. There is indication of agriculturists, traders, craft specialists and ritual specialists in the literary and inscriptional records, and the growth of the Buddhist monastic institutions. The various sources indicate the continued presence of polities across the island country, in the northern,

eastern and southern areas, despite the growth of a monarchical state in the area known as Raajarata by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.

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### **III. The Making of the Early Medieval, c. 600-1250 CE**

The period from the seventh to the twelfth centuries saw a distinctive transformation of the economy and society in a large part of Sri Lanka, with land grants to monasteries becoming common, and enormous powers related to taxation, questions of law and order and jurisdiction of

monastic power were concerned. The renowned scholar R.A.L.H. Gunawardhana looks at the robe and the plough as distinctive features of this period. The extension and intensification of agriculture and the creation of large-scale irrigational networks across the dry zone can be seen during this period as well as the gradual shift towards the western rain-fed regions, which were the wet zones. There are a number of social groups that are known to us from various sources, indicating a complex social stratification. The political interface between peninsular India and Sri Lanka, which was known from earlier times, took on a new colour with rulers from both sides attempting to interfere in dynastic, trade and other affairs. The Chola presence for less than 100 years had an abiding impact in the form of the rise of the Jaffna kingdom, visible as a political entity from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. From the early historical period, the presence of Buddhism is attested to by the chronicles Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa. The Buddhist Sangha adapted itself to certain socio-economic transformations in the early medieval period, whereby different Nikayas at Mahavihara, Abhayagiri and Jetavana began acquiring property and wielding authority through privileges granted by the state. The Buddhist institutions have been understood as ideological apparatuses through which the state wielded its authority. While there has been little clarity on the part of historians about the characterization of the state in this period, terms such as feudalism, early medieval and medieval are randomly used to distinguish this social formation from the earlier one.

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#### **IV. Religions in Sri Lanka: Monuments, Art, Pantheons and Mythologies**

The question of religious institutions conspicuously occupying a public space in economic and social transactions has been raised in the previous theme, particularly in the context of Buddhism. This is also a time when a number of brahmanical temples are visible, particularly in the latter half of the period. The Tamil Saiva hymns of the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE mention the temple of Tirukettisvaram at Mahatittha in north-western Sri Lanka, while the temples of Polonaruva point to Chola and local patrons of Saivism. There are also a number of Kali temples that came up across the island, perhaps because of the patronage of the mercenary groups from south India who were employed by Sri Lankan rulers. In this section, the Buddhist monuments of Anuradhapura and Polonaruva, the temples of Tirukettisvaram and Tirukonimalai, the tooth relic temples and the shrine for the Bodhi tree, and other specific examples will be taken up for detailed study. Lastly, the mythologies of yakshas and nagas along with those of deities belonging to the Buddhist and Brahmanical pantheon will be discussed.

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## V. The Past in the Present and the Present in the Past

In this theme, some of the dominant historiographical misconceptions that persist in the study of premodern Sri Lanka will be taken up for scrutiny. The Vaddas who appear to be among the earliest inhabitants of the island country barely find representation in early historical sources. Mythologies of colonization by Vijaya and his comrades from western India, and issues related to how the dispersal of the Brahmi script occurred are markers of conflation of the historical with the historiographical. From the colonial engagements with race and ethnicity to more contemporary identity politics, the historical past is not merely a resource but is actively represented in the present. Some of the significant work on this theme will be discussed to allow students a window into historiographical claims and contestations that do not necessarily stem from academic concerns and in fact often project myths and contemporary concerns as historical consciousness.

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