

Chinese, Persian and Tamil

Roads Engineer H. F. Tomalin in 1911 made an astounding find while he was taking a turn to Cripps road in the Southern city of Galle, Sri Lanka. His trained eye noticed something peculiar in the stones which had been used to construct a culvert. On further investigation he discovered a 600 year old slab embedded as a part of the culvert. This brings to mind similar stones from Harappa civilization in modern Pakistan used to construct a railway track when Harappa belonged to ancient India.

This slab became so popular as it was the only one of that nature in the country and elsewhere that it came to be known as the famous trilingual slab. It carried messages in three different languages namely Chinese, Persian and Tamil. The slab measured four feet nine inches in length, two feet six inches in breadth and five inches in thickness.

On either face of the top portion, of which the two corners are rounded there is a carving of two dragons facing each other symbolizing Chinese traditional sculpture. The back of the slab has also been nicely smoothed though there is no writing.

The inscribed area measures three feet eight inches by two feet three inches and is enclosed within a floral border. This area is unequally divided into three parts where on the right hand side the Chinese script occupies a space measuring three feet eight inches by ten inches; a space measuring one foot nine inches by one foot three and a half inches is occupied by the Tamil inscription and the remaining portion of the stone, measuring one foot seven inches by one foot four inches contained an epigraph in Persian characters.

Today this unique slab attracted scholars from all over the world lies in the Colombo National Museum for deeper research and study. On the request of the British Ambassador E. Backhouse, the text and translation of the Chinese version was obtained and is given below as extracted from Epigraphia Zeylanica.

His majesty, the Emperor of the great Ming dynasty has despatched the eunuchs Ching-Ho, Wang Ch'ing-Lien, and others to set fourth this utterance before the Buddha, the World-Honoured One, as follows:

"Deeply do we reverence you, Merciful and Honoured One, whose bright perfection is wide embracing, and whose way of virtue passes all understanding, whose law enters into human relations, and the years of those great Kalpa or period are like the sand of the river in number; you whose controlling influence ennobles and converts, whose kindness quickens, and whose strength discerns, whose mysterious efficiency is beyond compare".

"Whereas Ceylon's mountainous isle lies in the south of the ocean, and Buddhist temples are sanctuaries of your gospel, where your miraculous responsive power imbues and enlightens. Of late, we have despatched missions to announce on our mandate to foreign nations, and during their journey over the ocean they have been favoured with the blessings of your beneficent

protection".

They escaped disaster, or misfortune and journeyed safely to and from. In everlasting recognition of your supreme virtue, we, therefore, bestow offerings in recompense, and do now reverently present before the Buddha, the Honoured One, oblations of gold and silver, gold embroidered jewelled banners of variegated silk, incense burners, and flower vases, silks of many colours in lining and exterior, lamps and candles with other gifts, in order to manifest the high honour of our worship. To you, Lord Buddha, bestow on them your regard! The list of alms bestowed at the shrine of the Buddhist temple in the mountain of Ceylon of offerings .

1,000 pieces of gold; 5,000 pieces of silver; 50 rolls of embroidered silk in many colours; four pairs of jewelled banners, gold embroidered, and of variegated silk; two pairs of the same picked in red; one pair of the same in yellow; one pair in black; five antique brass incense burners; five pairs of antique brass flower vases picked in gold on lacquer, with gold stands; five yellow brass lamps picked in gold on lacquer with gold stands; five incense vessels in vermilion red, lacquered gold picked on lacquer, with gold stands; six pairs of golden lotus flowers, 2,500 catties of scented oil; ten pairs of wax candles; ten sticks of fragrant incense.

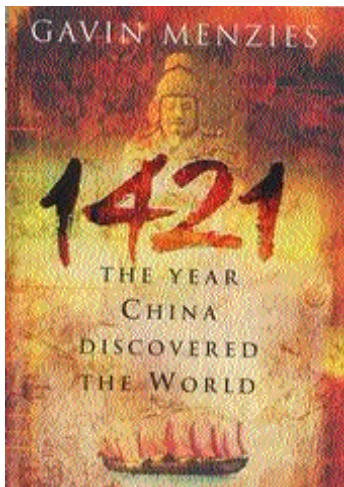
"The date being the seventh year of Yung-lo marked Chich'ou in the sixty year cycle, on the Chia Hsu day of the sixty days cycle in the second moon, being the first day of the month. A reverent oblation".

The late Prof. Senarat Paranavitana, the first professor of archaeology of a Sri Lankan University and the first Sri Lankan Commissioner of Archaeology sent a set of ink impressions of the Persian portion of the inscription to Indian archaeologist Ghulam Yazdani who had it translated by an epigraphist of the Archaeology Department in Hyderabad Khwaja Muhammed Ahmad.

The badly worn out Persian portion suggests that the offerings might have been made to Allah, a prophet or some Moslem priest because the word Islam is mentioned. The deciphered content is mentioned below.

...../The great King.....by royal order.....Ming.....has been sent to pay homage.....to seek and help and...../.....it is known...../.....for.....and these miracles...../.....has been sent...../.....is known...../ to pay his respects.....embroidered cloth, incense burners, flower baskets.....and lamp oil...../.....for king of favour has sent these presents, so that/ ... light of Islam/ the presents are as detailed below.

Gold one thousand 'misqual', silver five thousand 'misaqual'.....embroidered articles fifty in number.....fifty in number.....embroidered articles four..... altogether two pairs/one pair yellow.....one pair incense burners of copper, five in number/stand of copper, five in number.....five pairs..... red stands with gold work./Antique lamp stands five in number red stands worked in gold five in number wooden with gold work five in number/.....lamp oil.....



1421 - The Year China discovered the World

I read a review of this book by Gavin Menzies in your newspaper recently. Your readers may be interested to know that in this book Gavin Menzies makes several references to Ceylon.

Most interestingly he draws attention to a stone tablet placed by the Chinese in this country somewhere near Galle during their voyages of discovery. One notable point on the maps is Dondra Head.

Many of our historians, archaeologists etc. have written much about Chinese voyages. What is new about Gavin Menzies is that he makes out a strong case for the Chinese voyages proceeding beyond Africa to the "New World", the South Pole, the North Pole and the West Coast of America. The stone tablet discovered by an Englishman in 1917 near Galle is now apparently in the Colombo Museum. I would like to make mention of two of the many writings on this subject.

1. Sino-Lanka connection - 2000 years of Cultural Relations by Rohan Guneratna
2. Ancient Ruhuna, Sri-Lanka German Archaeological Project in the Southern Province, Volume 1 by H.-J. Weisshaar/ H. Roth / W. Wijepala

I am attaching a copy of an extract from Rohan Guneratna's book. Perhaps it will stimulate discussions among the readers. The most interesting part about the Chinese stone tablet is that the inscription is in Chinese, Persian and Tamil. Perhaps our note-worthy scholars can throw light on the language of the inscriptions.

P.I. Pieris.

.....date.....seventh year first of the month.

This Persian translation can be interpreted in a number of ways dependent on the interpreter's nature. As the avenues in such an event will be great. I would like to relate a very interesting story with specific reference to the Buddha in the Chinese script, and Islam in the Persian epigraph which is not very relevant but may be an analogy.

Malta is an island south of Italy, East of Spain and North of Libya, a Mediterranean island inhabited by a mixture of Europeans with a semitic tint. They have been subjected to a number of invasions by the Mohomedians and as a result the Maltese language can be called a mixture of Italian and Arabic.

When the Maltese Christians pray in their mother tongue they refer to god as Allah even

though the term Allah is strictly used by Mohammedians all over the world.

Returning to the original story of the trilingual inscription it will be correct to state that the foot prints of the Buddha was treated as the prints of Allah by the Moslem traders who were in the island. This is probably why the Moslems worship Sri Pada or Adams Peak which is said to have the foot print of the Buddha.

In Epigraphia Zeylanica Prof. Paranavitana gives a detailed account regarding the trilingual slab with reference to the Tamil portion of which we will carry a summary.

The translation of the Tamil inscription by Prof. Paranavitana is with the aid of Mudaliyar C. Rasanayagam undoubtedly one of the finest writers among the Tamil community in the country. Hail !.. The great King of Cina (China), the supreme overlord of kings, the full orb moon in splendour, having heard of the fame of the Lord, presents the following as offerings, in hand of the envoys Cinvo (Ching-Ho) and Uvincuvin (Wang Ch'ing Lien) to the sacred presence of the Lord Tenavarai-nayanar in the Kingdom of Llanga (this is the Tamil word for the land of the

copper vessels of antique copper for keeping incense, five black stands (probably ebony), ten copper vases for holding flowers, ten black stands, five wick (or oil) holders for standing brass lamps, five black stands, six pairs of lotus flowers made of wood and gilt, five gilt caskets for putting agil (agalochum) in ten pairs of wax candles, 2,500 katti (Chinese unit) of oil and ten pieces of sandalwood.

Prof. Paranavitana mentions that some peculiarities in the Tamil inscription are common to the South Indian script at that time. This shows that the Tamil people had very close connection with South India even during that period and the Sri Lankan Tamils were never an isolated community from the South Indians.

Like the Chinese version, this record is dated in the second month of the seventh year of Yung or Yung Lo, the Chinese Emperor whose reign begins in 1403 in china. It is possible to conclude that this so-called God Tenavarainayanar, whom the Chinese Emperor had heard, is the Buddha. This is because the Tamil people named the Buddha by this expression and elevated him to the status of a god. With regard to the identification of this god, Prof. Paranavitana and famed Portuguese historian Fernando de Queyroz has another inter-related interesting explanation.

Prof. Paranavitana says, "As regards the name Tenavarainayanar, it may be stated that Tenavarai is Tamil form of the Sinhala Devinuvara or Sanskrit Devanagara, English Dondra or the city of god. The temple in this city called the Devundara devala has a copper plate of the reign of King Vijayabahu the seventh mentions a Brahmana named Tenavarapuramal. The form Tenuwara in that name as Tenavare which, obviously, is closer to the Tamil form 'Tenavarai' than the Sinhala 'Devinuwara'.

Devundara is well known as the centre of a cult of a deity named Uppalavanna in the Sinhala Chronicle Mahavamsa, who was recently identified as the Puranic Vishnu. He is very often referred to as Divaraja, the King of gods. It is possible that the Sinhala 'Devundara deviyoi' is in Tamil the 'Tenavarainayanar'. Portuguese Queyroz says, at Devundara, his countrymen found 'stone pillars' which the Chinese emperors ordered to be set up with letters of that nation as a token of their devotion to those idols.

Could it be possible that the trilingual slab was originally found at Devundara and later transported to Galle and embedded as a part of the culvert. At this point my thoughts are directed as to whether this incised slab was brought from China. With the creation of enthusiasm among the public and the scholar, undoubtedly the rock type will be analysed without much delay and the answer to this vital question will be known.

According to the trilingual inscription it seems donations of equal weight were offered to the Buddha, Allah and a Hindu god even though it is hard to believe that the Chinese after gaining political ascendancy over Sri Lanka in 1409 made gifts to all denominations upheld by the three races.

What led to the May Floods?

by Dr. Lareef Zubair

Coordinator, Sri Lanka Meteorology, oceanography and Hydrology Network and International Research Institute for Climate Prediction, New York and Upamala Tennakone, Zeenas Yahya, Janaki Chandimala and M.R.A. Siraj NRMS, Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, Polgolla.

Heavy rainfall deluged South-Western Sri Lanka between the 11th and 19th of May 2003. Floods and landslides claimed 260 lives. Schools, homes and other infrastructure destroyed. The historical average rainfall in the South-Western corner between Ratnapura, Galle and Colombo for May is 275 mm. The heaviest rainfall on record is 600 mm during 1936; the lowest is 18 mm in 1953. So the regional average rainfall for 2003 of 450 mm is high but not extreme. But last May's rainfall was concentrated in a few places and in one week and particular on the 17th. The heaviest rainfall for May 2003 of 899 mm was recorded at Gonapenigala Iranganie Estate and the third heaviest rainfall of 755 mm was recorded at Panilkande Estate. The monthly rainfall in Ratnapura was 718 mm with half of that falling on the 17th of May.

What caused the Deluge?

What were the weather conditions that led to this rainfall? Strangely, it turns out that it was due to a cyclonic storm. Strange because, there has been no record of such a storm making landfall in Sri Lanka during May. This is one reason why people were caught unawares.

The 2003 cyclonic storm did not make landfall in Sri Lanka but was far away in the Bay of Bengal! The storm started 700 km to the East of Sri Lanka on the 11th of May and made its way to the North and North-East until it reached Myanmar on the 20th. As seen in the rainfall estimates for the Indian ocean, there was heavy rainfall along the path of the cyclone and in a spot far away in South-Western Sri Lanka.

Why that corner of Sri Lanka got soaked

when a cyclone traveled so far away is a freak combination of geography and wind patterns. In that fateful week unusual North-Westerly regional wind patterns stalled the cyclone in the middle of the Bay of Bengal for a few days and one of the octopus like spiral arms of the cyclone (which draws in expanses of air to feeds its core) gusted over Sri Lanka. During May, the cloud bands that usually deluge Kerala at the end of month hovers over the latitudes of Sri Lanka and the cyclonic gusts entrained these clouds towards Sri Lanka. These moist gusts were interrupted by the Sri Lankan mountains precipitating the deluge on their south-western slopes on the windward side. The rainfall patterns resemble a shadow of Sri Pada or Adams Peak towards the South-West. Later, we found out that Kerala and Tamil Nadu had rainfall deficits in June.

This mechanism of mountain-induced rainfall is the reason why the windward westward slopes of the central mountain ridge running from Kirigalpotta to Hantanna mountains and Knuckles get such heavy rainfall during the middle of the year as strong wind blows from the West. This time however the wind was from the South-West and the rainfall pattern for May 2003 is on largely on the South-Westward slopes. This is why Deniyaya received heavy rainfall while Watawala and Matale received relatively low rainfall last May.

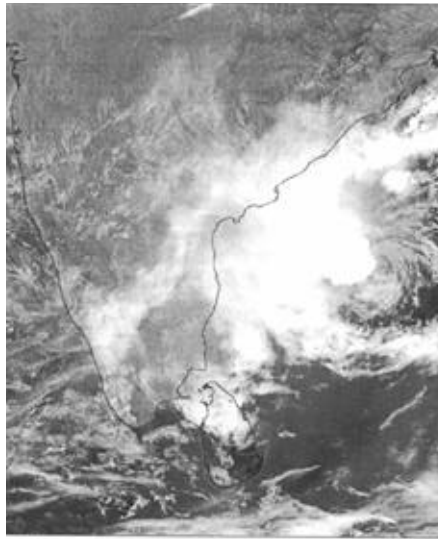
Need for Indigenous Computational Weather Prediction

The major disasters affecting Sri Lanka, namely floods, landslides, droughts and cyclones have hydro-meteorological antecedents. Last May's flooding and landslides and previous hydro-meteorological disasters such as the cyclones in 1978 and 2000 that affected the North-East and the recurrent drought that affects the South-East and North-West underscores the urgent need for local computational weather prediction. Of course, it is not only the matter of issuing hazard warnings that shall reduce damages but also its translation to hazard warning and the

implementation of appropriate communication of warnings and disaster preparedness and mitigation and response systems.

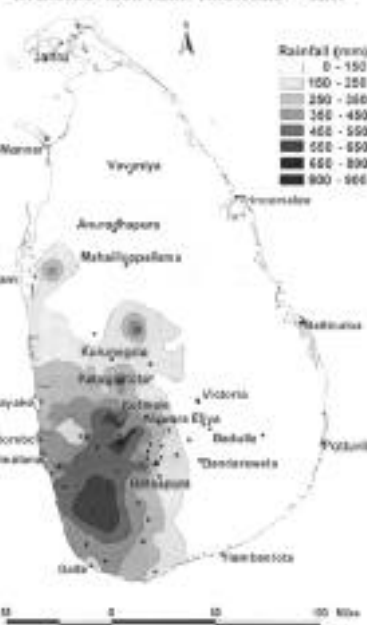
Even with all its shortcomings, computational weather prediction has the potential to forewarn of weather and climate spawned hazards. Indeed, the National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting of India was able to predict high rainfall in Sri Lanka with useful accuracy three days in advance last May 2003. The development of indigenous computational weather and climate prediction capability should be a national priority.

The first author has presented a proposal for developing climate prediction technology to the Ministry of Science and Technology after consultations with senior officials of the Department of Meteorology and other scientists. Given the local availability of computer and Internet resources and skilled scientific and computational expertise, such prediction technology can be developed indigenously in three years as long as there is a sustained will to do it and the right people are engaged and a suitable environment is provided for them to work in.



A satellite image of the cyclone on the 14th of May as recorded by the MODIS sensor of USA's NASA Terra Satellite. The eye of the cyclone is 600 km to the North-East of Sri Lanka and heading away from Sri Lanka. The heaviest deluge in Sri Lanka would come on the 17th and 18th of May when the storm was 1000 km away.

AVERAGE MONTHLY RAINFALL - MAY



Average Rainfall during May based on data collected by the Department of Meteorology from its own stations and volunteer meteorological observers particularly in estates for over a century. The stations used are marked with a bullet point. The rainfall peaks around Watawala and Ratnapura are in the windward side of the mountains such as Pidurutalagala, Adams Peak and Gonagala.