

The Roman Emperor and the King of Ceylon

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13. *Sat.* 62. 2; 77. 4; 83. 6; 85. 1; 92. 3; 95. 5 and 7; 100. 1; 116. 4.

14. Mommsen, *Strafr.*, pp. 916 and 923.

15. *Cod. Theod.* 9. 18. 1 (but cf. *Iust.* 9. 20. 16).

16. Suet. *Gaius* 27.

17. From Sen. *Ep.* 7. 5: *latrocinium fecit . . . meruit ut suspendatur*, this would appear to have been the normal punishment in his time, but evidently the magistrate could

increase the penalty and condemn *ad bestias*, Marcan in *Dig.* 48. 19. 11. 3 and Callistratus *ibid.* 48. 19. 28. 15.

18. *CP*, XXXVI (1941), 276.

19. *Cic. Pis.* 9. 19.

20. *Tac. Ann.* 4. 62.

21. G. Bagnani, *Arbiter of Elegance* (Toronto, 1954), p. 56.

THE ROMAN EMPEROR AND THE KING OF CEYLON

In the sixth book of his *Natural History* Pliny the Elder tours the fabled lands of the East. One of these is the distant island of Taprobane or Ceylon, which had been drawn into Mediterranean ken by the travelers and geographers of the Hellenistic Age. Pliny duly summarizes the material in Onesicritus, Megasthenes, and Eratosthenes, but proudly adds further information which he himself had gleaned in the principate of Claudius *legatis etiam ex ea insula advectis*.¹

As Pliny tells the story of this embassy, a freedman of Annius Plocamus, tax-farmer of the Red Sea tax, was blown by sea to Ceylon, where he spent six months and learned the local tongue thoroughly. The native king was much struck by the freedman's tales of Rome and was particularly impressed by the uniform weight of Roman denarii; in the end he dispatched an embassy of four men to Rome. Though Pliny does not explicitly say so, the envoys undoubtedly depended upon the freedman as guide and interpreter. In the ensuing sections of the *Natural History* we have what purports to be the report of the embassy on Ceylon; one could only wish that we had also the observations of the embassy to its king on the ways of the Romans.

Pliny's account marks one of the first stages in the direct relations of Ceylon and the Mediterranean; by the next century Ptolemy, in the seventh book of his *Geography*, demonstrates a fair acquaintance with the island. The information in Pliny, however, is still somewhat on the legendary side, and it is not difficult to feel that the interrogation of the Singhalese envoys produced a picture

of Ceylon which was tailored to the Roman scene.

No one seems ever to have studied Pliny from this point of view, but if one does so the reported position of the king of Ceylon is extremely interesting. The brief description of this kingship in my judgment throws much more light on the political thinking of the Roman aristocracy than it does on early Singhalese organization; even more important, we apparently have here one of the very earliest indications of the arguments used by the philosophical opposition to the first-century Caesars.

First, however, to consider the background of the whole story. The contacts between the Mediterranean world and India have long fascinated study-bound students of the ancient world; among the voluminous literature on the subject the most recent essays are by Sir Mortimer Wheeler and M. P. Charlesworth.²

Clearly Roman subjects traded directly with the minor kingdoms of southern India from the time of Augustus, just as had merchants of late Hellenistic times. This trade initially extended by sea only to the Malabar coast, but a land routeled through the Coimbatore gap to the east coast. Most of the Roman coin finds in India occur along this route; near Pondicherry on the east coast a real depot for Roman goods has been uncovered. Roman pottery turned up at this site (Arikamedu) can be firmly dated from the reign of Augustus down to the second century after Christ.³

Roman ships seem initially to have been reluctant to round the southern tip of India (Cape Comorin),⁴ but at some point after the middle of the first century they

may have traded directly with the eastern coast of the peninsula. The Roman coins certainly known to have been found in Ceylon begin with Nero and Vespasian;⁵ by the end of the century fewer hoards occur along the Coimbatore land route, which may have fallen into desuetude. By the reigns of the Antonines an Alexandrian lamp had made its way to Thailand, Roman coins had extended as far as Cochin China, and a Chinese account even indicates that Roman traders had made their way to China.⁶ The freedman of Annius Plocamus would seem to have been the first Roman to visit Ceylon inasmuch as he impressed the king so markedly, but his accidental visit was only one step in the increasing range of Roman trade eastwards. Since Ceylon was not a major objective in the Roman search for pepper and jewels, extensive trade with the island itself does not seem to have developed until the fourth century and later.

Even the existence of Annius Plocamus and his connection with the Red Sea can now be authenticated, for two short inscriptions on the Berenice road to the Red Sea, just published, contain his name.⁷ The inscriptions, scratched in Greek and Latin in a popular cave shelter, commemorate the visit of his slave Lysas in July of A.D. 6. Meredith notes that this was long before the reign of Claudius, but P. Annius Plocamus may have been a merchant or tax-farmer throughout the early decades of the first century after Christ; or alternatively we might postulate a father as trader in the Red Sea under Augustus and a son of the same name as the later tax-farmer.⁸

Annius Plocamus, then, existed and had slaves. It is outwardly likely that one of his freedmen could be blown to Ceylon and make his way back to the Mediterranean world.⁹ Pliny himself was in Rome in the first years of Claudius' reign and could have met the envoys. These facts, none the less, do not prove that the description of Ceylon in the *Natural History* is entirely accurate. Some parts of Pliny's account, indeed, are physically impossible,

and others seem psychologically improbable.

When the envoys marveled at the stars visible in the Italian heaven and asserted the Great Bear was not to be seen in Ceylon, they reflected an enduring truth; but when we learn that the moon appears above the horizon in Ceylon only from the eighth to the sixteenth day of the month, that Ceylon is 1250 miles long, that the Chinese have flaxen hair and blue eyes, something has certainly gone wrong in translation if in no other respect. On turning to the customs of the island Pliny notes that the price of grain was never inflated and that there were no law courts and no litigation; some of this sounds as if it were cast "in conscious opposition to Rome."¹⁰ Legend appears as well, for in Ceylon *vitam hominum centum annis modicam!*

The tendency of civilized peoples to view foreign lands, especially distant and poorly known parts, in the romantic light of "the noble savage" is a persistent one both in ancient and in modern times. Difficulties of translation at times suggest such perversions of the truth, but far more often psychological attitudes lead men to mirror in their pictures of other civilizations the problems and ills of their own society. In the Roman period one thinks at once of Tacitus' description of the Germans; in Pliny himself the tendency is quite obvious in such bits as the notice of Barbitace on the Tigris River, where gold was hated and so was buried lest anyone use it.¹¹

Against this background may be placed Pliny's statements on Singhalese kingship:

... eligi regem a populo senecta clementiaque liberos non habentem, et si postea gignat, abdicari, ne fiat hereditarium regnum. rectores ei a populo XXX dari, nec nisi plurium sententia quemquam capitis damnari; sic quoque appellationem esse ad populum et septuaginta iudices dari; si liberent ii reum, amplius XXX iis nullam esse dignationem, gravissimo probro. regi cultum Liberi Patris, ceteris Arabum. regem, si quid delinquat, morte multari, nullo interemente, aversan-

tibus cunctis et commercia etiam sermonis negantibus.¹²

At first sight the account has an air of the improbable. Contemporary literary evidence from Ceylon itself, unfortunately, does not exist, but valuable material is available in the Great Chronicle (*Mahavamsa*), written down in its present form in A.D. 463–79. This chronicle revolves about the relations of the kings and Buddhism and so is fairly full on the names of the rulers in the kingdoms of Ceylon. The kings seem to have succeeded by hereditary right, apart from a certain amount of poisoning by their queens, who raised now a guard, now a water carrier, to be their consorts. There is no suggestion that kingship in Ceylon was elective.¹³

When one looks at Pliny's account in the light not of Ceylon but of the Roman principate, its main lines seem to fall at once into focus. Students of the Empire have too often minimized its strong tendency in practice toward hereditary succession; regardless of constitutional theory, sons were usually expected to succeed their fathers on the throne.¹⁴ In the Julio-Claudian line the efforts from Augustus on to maintain a family succession are clear. The son of Tiberius died early, thanks to Sejanus; when Gaius was assassinated, his infant child, though a daughter, was immediately murdered; Claudius, the ruler at the time of our story, had a son Britannicus who would certainly have succeeded his father had not Claudius married Agrippina.

The principate was also recognized by this time to have strong tendencies toward autocracy. Gaius, who had told his mother *memento omnia mihi et <in> omnis licere*, had obviously not shared the "gentle disposition" required of the Singhalese monarch.¹⁵ Claudius, who came into power through the action of the praetorian guard, displayed outward respect to the Senate and essayed to maintain its dignity, yet he curbed the freedom of movement of the senators, watched their actions in other respects quite carefully, and seriously encroached on senatorial functions. His

secret trials, moreover, were a scandal of the reign, which Seneca fiercely attacked in his bitter satire, the *Apocolocyntosis*; the emphasis in Pliny's Ceylon on the existence of thirty governors who alone could impose capital punishment may well have a contemporary application to Claudian Rome.¹⁶

In sum it appears probable that the description of the limited, elective kingship of Ceylon circulated in the reign of Claudius was phrased to fit the Roman scene. The year 41 was a crucial one in the development of the Roman monarchy, far more so than the year of 68–69 which has gained undue prominence through the survival of Tacitus' *Histories*. The last real effort to unseat the principate had petered out as the Senate wrangled on the death of Gaius; thereafter the aristocracy could hope only to ameliorate the character of the autocracy under which they must live.¹⁷

The ground of debate was so moved from the Senate floor to the studies of philosophers, especially those of Stoic tinge. This famous philosophic opposition had already begun to appear under Tiberius and Gaius and was to bulk large in the reigns of Nero and the Flavian emperors; one of its important tenets was the election of the best man as ruler.¹⁸ Modern accounts of the opposition have usually connected this argument with the fact that Vespasian had two sons, but the tale of Pliny suggests strongly that the idea was already bruited in the era of Claudius, who himself had a son.

How the "information" gained from the Singhalese envoys was first obtained and then spread one can only guess. It is perhaps doubtful that the envoys, through the freedman-interpreter, told it to Claudius, but this may have occurred. More likely is the supposition that the aristocrats of Rome lionized the strange visitors and in their salons were told—or chose to believe they were told—of a system they would like to have seen in force in their own society.

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NOTES

1. Plin. *NH* 6. 84-91.
2. R. E. M. Wheeler, "Roman Contact with India, Pakistan and Afghanistan," in *Aspects of Archaeology in Britain and Beyond: Essays Presented to O. G. S. Crawford* (London, 1951), pp. 345-81; M. P. Charlesworth, "Roman Trade with India: A Resurvey," in *Studies in Roman Economic and Social History In Honor of Allan Chester Johnson* (Princeton, 1951), pp. 131-43. The earlier literature will be found here and in the first chapter of G. F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Princeton, 1951); M. I. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford, 1941), pp. 926-29, 1555-56; idem, *Storia economica e sociale dell'Impero Romano* (Florence, n.d.), pp. 106-09, 179-82.
3. R. E. M. Wheeler, *et al.*, "Arikamedu: An Indo-Roman Trading Station on the East Coast of India," *Ancient India* (Bulletin of the Archaeological Survey of India) No. 2 (1946), pp. 17-124.
4. Strab. 15. 1. 4 (686 C) indicates that only a few merchants had gone around India to the Ganges River. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, written probably in the middle of the first century, stops on the Malabar coast (Charlesworth, *Studies*, p. 132); J. A. B. Palmer, "Periplus Maris Erythraei: The Indian Evidence as to the Date," *CQ*, XLI (1947), 136-40, would put it early in the second century; cf. his brief note in *CQ*, XLIII (1949), 61-64.
5. Wheeler, *Aspects*, pp. 370, 381 (list of finds). H. W. Codrington, *Ceylon Coins and Currency* (Colombo, 1924), notes a few specimens going back to Augustus (as well as a Republican denarius), but these may not have been turned up locally.
6. Wheeler, *Aspects*, p. 360; Charlesworth, *Studies*, pp. 137-38; F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient* (Shanghai, 1885), is still valuable.
7. D. Meredith, "Annius Plocamus: Two Inscriptions from the Berenice Road," *JRS*, XLIII (1953), 38-40.
8. The most recent discussion of the *rectigal Maris Rubri* will be found in S. J. De Laet, *Portorium* (Bruges, 1949), pp. 306-11.
9. Even though the wind directions and other details in the voyage of the freedman are strange; cf. Meredith, *JRS*, XLIII (1953), 39 n. 3.
10. Herrmann, *s.v.* "Taprobane," *RE*, 2 R. IV (1932) 2269.
11. Plin. *NH* 6. 133.
12. Plin. *NH* 6. 89-91.
13. Cf. the summary in L. D. Barnett, "The Early History of Ceylon," *Cambridge History of India*, I (New York, 1922), pp. 610-11.
14. Cf. J. Béranger, "L'Hérité du Principat," *REL*, XVII (1939), 171-87.
15. Suet. *Gaius* 29.
16. *Apocol.* 12. 2; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 11. 5. 1. The appeal to the people in Ceylon may be a reminiscence of the Republican practice; or one may not go too far perhaps in feeling that it reflects meditation on the part of the more thoughtful senators after their failure to win popular support in 41. Cf. the popular opposition to senatorial *pleonexia* at that time, as described by Joseph. *AJ* 19. 227-28.
17. Cf. my *Civilization and the Caesars*, chap. vi.
18. See, in general, Rostovtzeff, *Storia economica* . . . , pp. 130-40; my "Epictetus and the Tyrant," *CP*, XLIV (1949), 20-29; and my *Civilization and the Caesars*, chap. vii.

AN INDEX LOCORUM CITATORUM TO KÜHNER-GERTH

Nearing completion is a full *Index locorum citatorum* to Kühner-Gerth's *Ausführliche Grammatik d. griechischen Sprache* (2 vols., 1898-1904). It is hoped that the compilation of the *Index* may provide the occasion for the correction of many old and vexatious errata. The more simple of these, e.g. [KG 1.593.10] for *Crit. 415c* read *Cra. 415c*, are readily detected by the indexers. Others, e.g. [KG 1.500. *ad fin.*] for *Dem. 19, 113* read *Dem. 18, 113*, are more deep-seated and can be uncovered

only by laborious checking of the individual reference. The enormous bulk of the references (*ca.* 26,000 in KG I alone) renders such activity impractical. Therefore, scholars are urged to forward whatever helpful marginalia have accumulated through years of use to: William M. Calder III, Box 221, Concord, Massachusetts. Due acknowledgement of such generous contributions will be made in the preface to the *Index*.