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Maritime Archaeology and Sri Lanka: Globalization, Immigration, and Transformation in the Underwater Archaeological Record

ABSTRACT

Assuming that maritime archaeology conducted in Sri Lanka is new to most readers, the present paper has been written with a dual purpose. First, it tries to give some background to the birth and growth of the discipline in this country and shows its involvement in ICOMOS—ICUCH (International Council on Monuments and Sites—International Committee on the Underwater Cultural Heritage) activities. Second, it tries to deal with the focus of the 2013 SHA conference by addressing three sites, each of which can be developed into a case study relating to the conference themes. Sri Lanka was always a place where East/West shipping interacted, whether before or after A.D. 1500, and was also always conscious of the looming presence of India. This paper, however, deals only with material aspects in the period after 1500.

Introduction

The present discussion—the result of a collaboration between an elderly pathfinder and a youthful practitioner—will address the conference themes of “globalization, immigration, transformation” not directly but indirectly, letting the material presented do the speaking. Devendra, who introduced maritime archaeology to Sri Lanka, “signs-off” with this paper, while Muthucumarana hopes to carry the torch into the future; together they here share their experiences and insights. Hence, this discussion falls into the genre of the *guru-shishya paramparawa* (teacher-pupil continuum): learning passed down the generations. In the context of this issue, this approach draws heavily on the personal recollections and experience of an individual who was at the center of the discipline’s development in Sri Lanka over the last few decades, with additional commentary from someone that individual has mentored. To the extent that this

may entail a slightly more anecdotal approach than is typically the case in *Historical Archaeology*, this should be seen as connecting a specifically Sri Lankan academic tradition with Alasdair Brooks’s stress on the role of personal experience in global and regional historical archaeologies, as outlined in the present issue’s introduction.

Sri Lanka has both documentary (Geiger 1912:54) and archaeological evidence (Kapitan 2009:168–170) for a civilization that spans over two-and-a-half millennia. The period after A.D. 1500 is, to us, but “yesterday”; long before this date regional maritime contact is recorded on potsherds and in rock inscriptions, retrieved inland watercraft that have been dated to nearly 500 B.C., and there is at least one maritime wreck site that promises to be Asia’s oldest. Thus, with regret, only Sri Lanka’s “yesterday” will be dealt with in this paper. Regretfully, too, only a small sample of relevant sites and studies can be included here (Figure 1).

The Development of Underwater Archaeology in Sri Lanka

The first exposure of Sri Lanka to underwater archaeology was in the very early 1960s, when a team of sports divers, including the late Rodney Jonklaas, the late Mike Wilson, and the late Arthur C. Clarke (perhaps better known to many *Historical Archaeology* readers as a science-fiction author), discovered an unknown wreck in the “Great Basses” (a rocky outcrop off the southeast coast, topped by a lighthouse). This contained sacks of silver coins that had been minted in Surat, India. What is now the Sri Lanka Archaeology Department (but was then the Ceylon Department) was at that point unacquainted with maritime archaeology and, when informed by Clarke and Wilson that the respected maritime archaeologist Peter Throckmorton was available to assist with research, invited him to conduct an underwater survey, an invitation which he accepted. Throckmorton (1964) himself wrote that while researching Roman wrecks in the Mediterranean he heard of two “treasure hunters” who had discovered a wreck in Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then still

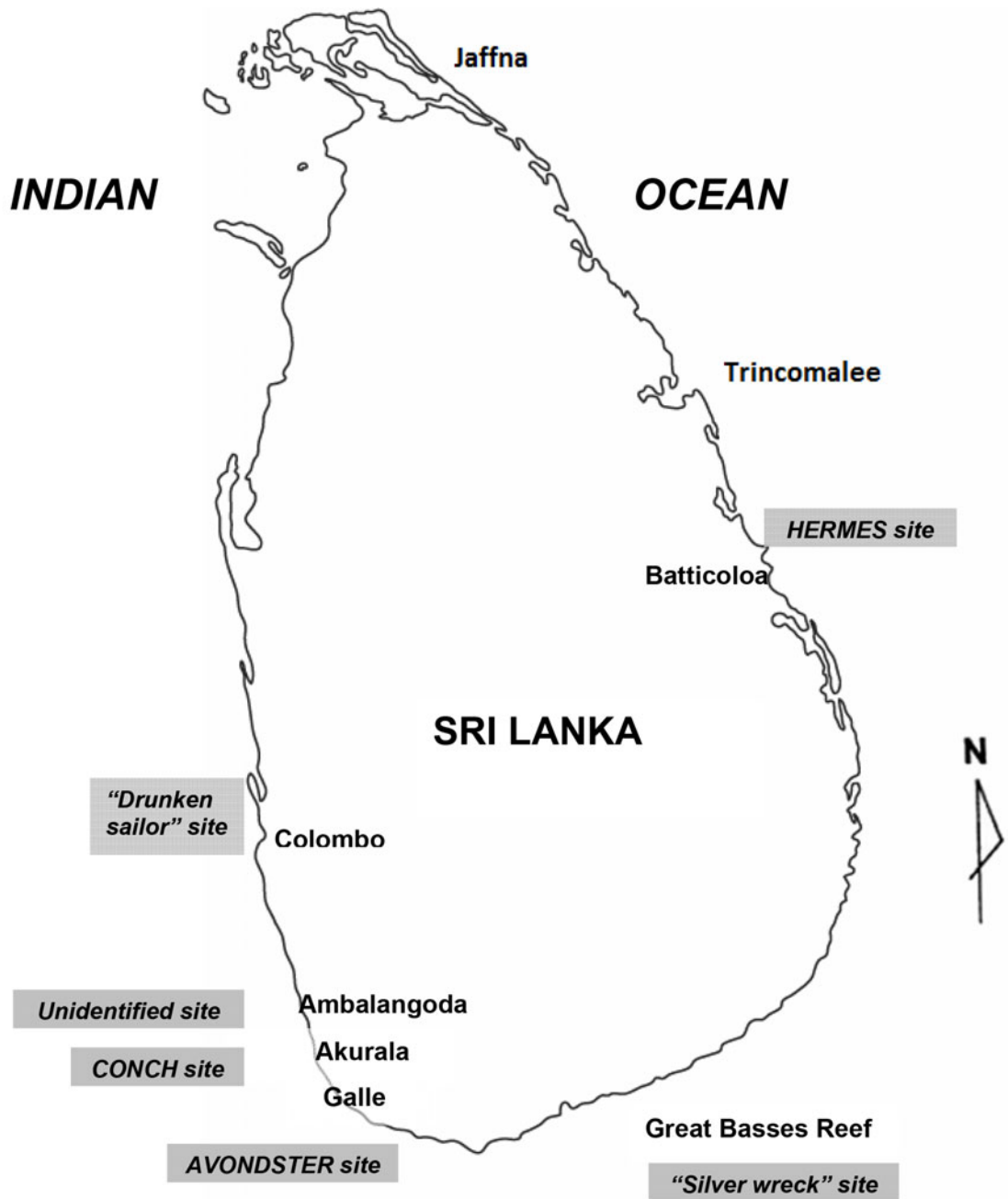


FIGURE 1. Map of Sri Lanka, showing all places mentioned in text. For the purposes of scale, Sri Lanka is ca. 434.5 km (270 mi.) long from north to south. (Map by Somasiri Devendra, 2012.)

called) and established communications with Clarke. Newspaper features were published locally, and scholarly reports published abroad (Clarke 1964; Throckmorton 1971). Even before this scholarly work was produced, several popular travelogues on the region, notably Clarke's *The Reefs of Taprobane* (1957), had whetted public appetite for information on the region, and Clarke also arguably whetted public greed in *The Treasure of the Great Reef* (1966). This project, however, did not herald a beginning of a substantial program of maritime archaeology, remaining an isolated incident. Furthermore, in its naïveté the department lent Clarke several lumps of concreted coins for study abroad. He never returned them. There is one lump at the Smithsonian Institution: official and unofficial attempts to have it returned (Paul F. Johnston 2003, pers. comm.) failed. The whereabouts of the greater part is known, but it cannot be accessed (Sri Lanka Archaeology Department 1992, 1993, 1994a, 1994b).

In its annual reports for 1962–1963 (Godakumbura 1964) and 1967–1968 (de Silva 1970), the department referred to the need to introduce maritime archaeology in Sri Lanka on a more systematic basis, but nothing more substantial resulted. Several other interested parties took tentative action to expand the discipline, but it was only with the formation of a Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU) by the department in 1998 that the discipline was given a firm and lasting foundation. The MAU was later moved to and now functions under Sri Lanka's Central Cultural Fund (CCF).

Before this, however, one of the first attempts at a substantial maritime excavation in Sri Lanka was the Colombo Reefs Archaeological Survey of 1989, the initiative of P. U. Weerawardena of the department, Mark Redknap of the Nautical Archaeological Society and the National Museum of Wales, and Devendra, representing the nongovernmental Maritime Heritage Trust (MHT). This project inadvertently helped to demonstrate the challenges of undertaking research in Sri Lanka in this period. Briefly described as “a survey of underwater archaeological sites within a context of reef environment and geomorphology,” the project won funding from the Royal Geographical Society, the British Academy, and the British Museum (Redknap 1990). The “Drunken Sailor”

rock off Galle Face, Colombo was chosen as a site, not so much for its intrinsic archaeological importance but rather because of the prevailing security concerns, as the state was under attack by both Sinhala and Tamil terrorists at that time (Winslow and Woost 2004). MHT undertook to obtain all necessary clearances. There were no precedents for such a project, and the multitude of ministries, departments, and authorities that had to be accessed and negotiated with was legion. The lack of regulations covering archaeology in territorial waters and the volatile security conditions worked against this initiative. The team and equipment arrived in the country, but only the use of a magnetometer was permitted: diving on the site was not. Thus, when part way through the exercise the magnetometer malfunctioned, the project had to be abandoned (Redknap 1990:185–208). Fortunately, 20 years later Devendra conducted a heritage environmental impact assessment of the South Colombo Port Project, thereby eventually saving the site (Devendra 2000:1–43).

On the positive side, however, was the public interest generated by the aborted Colombo Reefs work. At the Sri Lanka Archaeology Department's Centenary Seminar, the papers read by Redknap (1990) and Devendra et al. (1990:123–138) on the importance of Sri Lanka's maritime heritage received wide acceptance. At the end of the conference, a resolution was adopted that 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.” The same resolution went on to propose “that the unit should interact with all statutory bodies, academic institutions, NGO organizations and remain the dominant institution administering such a discipline” (Devendra 1993:10).

Not long after, ICOMOS created a Scientific Committee on Maritime Archaeology, and Devendra was appointed to the working committee tasked with bringing it to life. What resulted is now the ICOMOS International Committee on the Underwater Cultural Heritage (ICUCH), of which Devendra remains a member. Sri Lanka, which hosted its first two-day workshop as part of the ICOMOS 10th General Assembly and International Symposia (30 July–7 August 1993) and a business meeting in November 2003,

benefited from the work of ICUCH, including the ICOMOS Charter and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention.

About the same time, the Archaeological Department, the CCF, Sri Lanka's Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology University of Kelaniya, and the Maritime Archaeology Department of the Western Australian Maritime Museum (MADWAM) pooled their resources to set up a multipurpose pilot project to train maritime archaeologists, provide conservators with skills specific to maritime archaeology, and, additionally, compile a database of shipwrecks in Galle Harbor (where the expansion of the existing port was being contemplated). Project management and recruitment of volunteer counterpart divers were undertaken by the MHT and the Sri Lanka Sub Aquatic Club (SLSAC); Jeremy Green of MADWAM gave leadership and direction (Green and Devendra 1993:123–124). The pilot project proved successful, and it was expanded into a continuing program, within funding limits. Several seasons of work followed, the most important being a side-scan sonar survey of the seafloor of the Bay of Galle for sites of archaeological interest (Green et al. 1998:2–49).

From among the 26 significant sites (of a possible 160), the 17th-century wreck of the Dutch East India Company, or VOC, armed merchantman *Avondster* was chosen as the most promising and led to an agreement between Sri Lanka and the Netherlands for the first maritime archaeological excavation in this country. This wreck (described in more detail below) is of specific relevance to the present volume, as it is not only a physical manifestation of globalization within the maritime archaeology of south Asia, but also demonstrates how 17th-century globalization continues to impact not just the archaeological record, but also the very process of heritage management in modern Sri Lanka.

A significant point of law surfaced during the discussions of how to undertake research on the site. Sri Lanka had designed an application for an excavation license, based upon the guidelines in the annex to the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (Devendra 2001; Parthesius et al. 2003:76–81). Among the guidelines to the comprehensive application form, the need to provide the exact location of the site (for protection purposes) and

title to the site (in terms of international law) were made mandatory. An example of need for the latter was provided:

In the *Avondster* project such a question did arise, but was settled before it became a problem. The Netherlands' government claimed the wreck; as the successor to the Dutch East Indies Company (V.O.C.) but this claim is not sustainable in Sri Lanka. Apart from Sri Lanka's national claim to all property lying in its territorial sea (*vide* the Maritime Zones Law of 1976 and the 1998 Amendment to the Antiquities Ordinance), there was an older claim. Britain had annexed several Netherlands' oversea possessions during the Napoleonic wars but, when the time came the British, under the Treaty of Amiens of 17 March 1802, restored all these to the Netherlands and Spain, respectively, save for Sri Lanka (Ceylon) which, under Clause 5, states: "The Batavian Republic cedes and guarantees in full property and sovereignty to his Britannic Majesty all the possessions and establishments in the Island of Ceylon that before the war belonged to the Republic of the United Provinces and to their East India Company" (Devendra 2001).

British possessions in the island and pre-vailing territorial seas were transferred to Sri Lanka in 1948. The Netherlands therefore had no viable claim.

The *Avondster* project itself did, however, take place successfully. The justification was the significant presence of several VOC ships in the bay, which was articulated thus:

On a methodological level, the VOC wrecks in the context of the harbour and city of Galle offer interesting possibilities to relate history and archaeology. The presence of four or five identified and well-documented wrecks within this harbour [Geinwens (1776), *Dolfijn* (1663), *Barbestejn* (1735), *Hercules* (1661) and *Avondster* (1659)] offers the potential for a broad interdisciplinary study of the ships, the harbour, the city and the organization of the VOC. In a broader perspective, this case study can answer questions about the Asian shipping network and its organization. Therefore the Galle Harbour Project offers a chance to study VOC shipping in its Asian context. The ships discovered so far represent different aspects of the Dutch trade with Asia; being well documented and from an important period, they can shed light on the function and activities of the harbour (Green et al. 1998:46).

Post-1500 Maritime Sites in Sri Lanka

Having described some of the disciplinary and historical context for the development of maritime archaeology in Sri Lanka, the following section consists of an account by

Muthucumarana (for whom the *Avondster* was his first major project, and who is now a senior member of the MAU), with some input from Devendra, of some of the more significant post-1500 maritime sites in our country.

The *Avondster* (1659)

The *Avondster* was originally discovered during fieldwork designed to train a core group of Sri Lankan archaeologists and conservators in underwater archaeology. The training work was collaboratively done by a team from Western Australia and Sri Lankan governmental and nongovernmental institutes. The *Avondster*, one of several Dutch East Indiamen wrecked in the vicinity of Galle Harbor, was identified from archival evidence (Green et al. 1998:22–23).

The *Avondster* is an important site for many reasons. It is a fine example of shared heritage between Sri Lanka and the Netherlands. It also had its links to England, in that the *Avondster* was originally an English ship, captured and modified by the Dutch and originally used for the Batavia–Netherlands run. According to the VOC archives, the vessel was 30 m long and constructed in two decks. She is first recorded as the *John and Thomas*, owned by the English East India Company at the time she was captured by the Dutch in 1641. She was renamed the *Avondster* and dispatched to Batavia. Reflecting the general fortunes of the East India Company, she made two relatively straightforward out-and-back voyages and was then deployed increasingly in the regional trade, making only one more voyage to England in 1650.

After she was captured during the First Anglo-Dutch War, the *Avondster* was sent to the Netherlands and stayed for a few months in 1654; there was probably some refitting and modification at this stage. Then she was commissioned for the trade between Europe and Asia, mainly to Batavia but also to Japan, and was carrying valuable cargo and important people. There are records to prove that she had even provided passage to elephants. Repairs being costly, she was relegated, after a long career, to short-haul coastal voyages, and wrecked on 2 July 1659 while anchored in Galle Harbor. When she sank, the *Avondster* was still in the service of the Dutch East India Company (Green et al. 1998:21–26,50–60; Parthesius et al. 2003).

The choice of the *Avondster* as a maritime archaeology research site was initially based mainly on the physical condition of the site rather than the identity of the ship. After the ship was discovered in 1993, the site was surveyed; it became clear that the wreck was increasingly exposed through changes in the dynamics of the seabed, and it was considered important to implement a rescue archaeology project to safeguard this important site. Nonetheless, it took until 2001 before the excavation of the *Avondster* was initiated. It was funded by the Netherlands Cultural Fund and, as noted above, was primarily undertaken as a capacity-building exercise for maritime heritage management in Sri Lanka (Parthesius et al. 2003:4–5). The Sri Lankan MAU was mobilized for the project, and a team of archaeologists and conservators were trained to implement effective and professional maritime archaeology for the country. From 2001 until the end of 2004 important sections of the ship were excavated and conserved in situ (Figure 2). The purpose of this account is to give an outline, from a Sri Lankan perspective, of the main archaeological research undertaken on the *Avondster*.

Three major excavations were undertaken at the bow, stern, and amidships, respectively. During the excavation of the bow area a large quantity of coiled rope was located, protected by layers of sand. In addition, a collection of pulley blocks, wheels, deadeyes, and cannonballs were found. The rope and wooden artifacts appeared to be well preserved but, in fact, were quite vulnerable to damage. Furthermore, the rope was spread all over the bow section, complicating the fieldwork. The excavation area was subsequently covered to protect the site for future research (Figure 3) (Parthesius et al. 2003; Parthesius 2007a, 2007b).

The excavation of the midship area was both the most necessary—from a rescue perspective—and most successful excavation undertaken on the *Avondster*. The team managed to reach the hull at the base of the vessel and excavate a cross section of the ship. When this was done, a barrel was found at the western border of the trench. The excellent condition of this barrel suggested that the original contents might be preserved, and it was left in situ for future research. Many artifacts associated with the crew were recovered, such as spoons, plates, Asian



FIGURE 2. Exploration of the *Avondster*. (Photo by Rasika Muthucumarana/Maritime Archaeology Unit, 2002.)



FIGURE 3. *Avondster* test trench, showing artifacts in an undisturbed state. (Photo by Patrick Baker/MAU, 1996.)

and European storage jars, ceramics, an iron pot, dunnage, and conch shells. Of the cargo, a significant quantity of areca nuts, coal, and barrels with pine resin were recovered (Parthesius 2007a, 2007b). All of these artifacts, including the ship itself, help to demonstrate in material form the growing global links and transformations that European trade was bringing about in this period. For example, the Dutch bricks used in the ship's galley (Figure 4) and the typical British "hanging knees" provide evidence of the Dutch refit and the English origins of a ship that sank off the coast of Sri Lanka. After recording the bottom of the ship, the trench was covered over, and a layer of plastic netting was placed over the excavation area to delineate the boundaries for any future fieldwork.

The excavation of the stern was carried out in November/December 2004, in the last part of the four-year project. The same technique was used as for the amidships excavation. The excavation continued from the starboard side of the ship where degraded frames and ceiling planking of the hull were uncovered. The initial plan had been to excavate the trench from starboard to port following

the structure of the vessel, but poor visibility and the complications that might have been caused by working on more complex and undisturbed layers caused the team to occasionally move to more trouble-free areas. Significant quantities of rope, musket balls, wood planking, and shipboard equipment were found.

In total, more than 2,074 artifacts were recovered from the site and conserved at the MAU laboratory. The fieldwork produced considerable data on the construction and form of the ship, the contemporary material culture on board the vessel, and, more broadly, important information on maritime interactions between the 17th-century Dutch Republic and Sri Lanka in a period of growing global contacts between different cultures. As less than 30% of the site has been excavated, it retains the potential to answer future questions and reveal more information about this important phase in Sri Lankan and Dutch history (Figure 5).

Following the excavation, the entirety of the site was covered with plastic netting for protection and future investigations. Since then, the



FIGURE 4. *Avondster*: Dutch ship's galley built during the refit after the ship's capture. (Photo by Patrick Baker/MAU, 2001.)

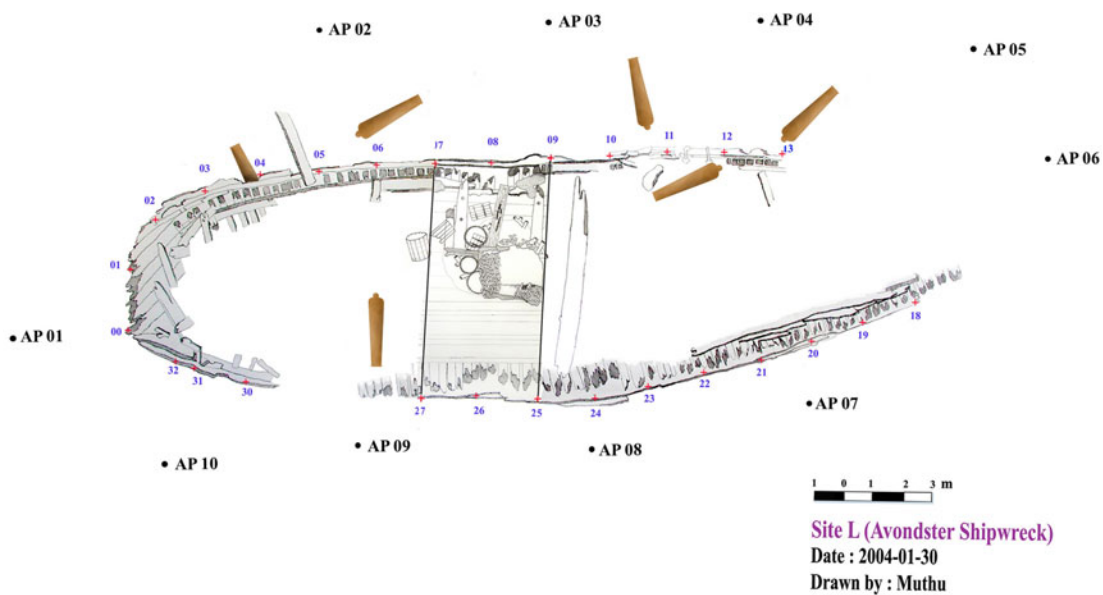


FIGURE 5. *Avondster* project site plan. (Plan courtesy of the MAU, 2004.)

practice of in situ conservation has become an integral component in the practice of marine archaeology in Sri Lanka in an effort to protect a vitally representative part of cultural heritage for the future.

The “Silver Wreck” (1702)

Muthucumarana has also had an opportunity to explore a site (or what remained of the site) that had first been discovered by Arthur C. Clarke in the 1960s; it also exemplifies Clarke’s ambiguous role in the development of underwater archaeology in Sri Lanka. Since the 1960s the site has become a focus of treasure hunting—almost a paradise for modern underwater piracy. This activity was initially led by Clarke, via a commercial company he started in the U.S., the Great Basses Treasure Company (a subsidiary of the Spanish Main Treasure Company), specifically to finance and profit from the looting of the site (Clarke 1966). Many local imitators followed and divided the site and its

artifacts among themselves. With the arrival of state-regulated maritime archaeology nearly 50 years after Clarke’s initial discovery, the site came under administrative control, and Muthucumarana’s account, below, gives an overview of this later period of state regulation.

The circumstances under which the Great Basses “Silver Ship” was found in the 1960s have been described above. The ship, of the type commonly called “Surat junks,” was carrying a cargo of silver coins packed in sacks. Such coins were not used as currency; their value, rather, was as bullion—in other words, in the intrinsic value of the metal. All the coins were from India’s Mogul Empire, then at its peak under the rule of Aurangzeb, and all bear the same face value and date: 1702. They were minted in Surat, in the west of India (Figure 6).

The wreck is situated between two reefs just beneath the Great Basses lighthouse (Figure 7). Large quantities of silver have been taken off the island and sold by divers. Some coins are found in the Smithsonian, courtesy of Clarke,



FIGURE 6. “Silver Wreck”: sample of coins collected by the MAU. (Photo courtesy of the MAU, 1993/1994.)



FIGURE 7. “Silver Wreck”: view of part of the site. (Photo courtesy of the MAU, 2009.)

but the great majority was stolen, advertised for sale, described as from “the land of Arthur C. Clarke” (Joseph P. Trabuco Auctioneers, Inc. 1993), and sold to or kept in private hands. To this day, there are websites that use Clarke’s name to sell artifacts—or “sunken treasure”—from the site to the general public (Taj Mahal Sunken Treasure 2012). Many of the artifacts have been made into jewelry and are sometimes secretly sold in Sri Lanka even today.

The wreck has been visited and documented several times during the last two decades by the MAU, once with archaeologists from the Maritime Archaeology Department, MADWAM. This was done at the request of the Sri Lanka Archaeology Department in response to Clarke’s bid to regain de facto ownership of the site and salvage the “tons” of silver said to be there still. Due to rough seas, high oxygen concentration, and the warm temperature of the water, MAU

found that all the organic remains of the wreck were long gone. Eighteen large cannon and three iron anchors are the only evidence visible to the naked eye today. As divers continue to find silver coins from the seabed between these two reefs, there may well be other artifacts located in the vicinity, though this requires further research. Where the *Avondster* offers material evidence of the influence of globalization in 17th-century Sri Lanka, the “Silver Wreck” offers a more ambiguous example of the impact of immigration on the archaeological record in the modern world. Clarke’s arrival in Sri Lanka may be an atypical example of a single immigrant, but the nature of the looting and popularization of the site were only possible in the modern globalized world. It may be mentioned, in passing, that there had been others who tried to tempt the authorities, such as Eric Surcouf (Sri Lanka Archaeology Department 1990) and Mike Flekker

(Sri Lanka Archaeology Department 1994c), but none actively harmed the archaeological environment in the same manner as Clarke.

European Shipwrecks of the 20th Century

Muthucumarana's personal knowledge of Sri Lanka's maritime heritage also extends to later ironclad ships. While these have yet to be examined archaeologically, a few of these are described here in order to show the potential of Sri Lankan maritime archaeology and the general influence of post-1500 globalized trade and colonialism on Sri Lanka's underwater archaeological record.

Many 18th- and 19th-century shipwrecks of ironclad ships can be found along the coastal belt of Sri Lanka. Most of these are British merchant ships and warships of the Second World War. Among these there are some significant historical ships like the SS *Conch*, and the linked sites of HMS *Hermes* and HMAS *Vampire*.

The *Conch* (sunk 1903) was one of the world's first oil tankers, and was built by W. Gray & Company of England in 1892. Such ships were built with large tanks inside the ship in order to carry oil in bulk safely. The *Conch* was part of a fleet belonging to M. Samuel & Company, which later became the Shell Oil Transporting Company (Muthucumarana 2010). She sank near Akurala, on the south coast of Sri Lanka, on her way to Madras in India from Novorossiysk on Russia's Black Sea coast. The site is very famous among wreck divers internationally, partially because of its history, but also because of its location in clear blue water. It is believed to have no archaeologically significant artifacts now—having being stripped of all portable items—but a systematic study can yet yield archaeologically significant information about the ship as a whole (Figure 8).

HMS *Hermes* was the world's first ship to be specifically designed and built as an aircraft carrier (Friedman 1988:73). Launched in 1919,

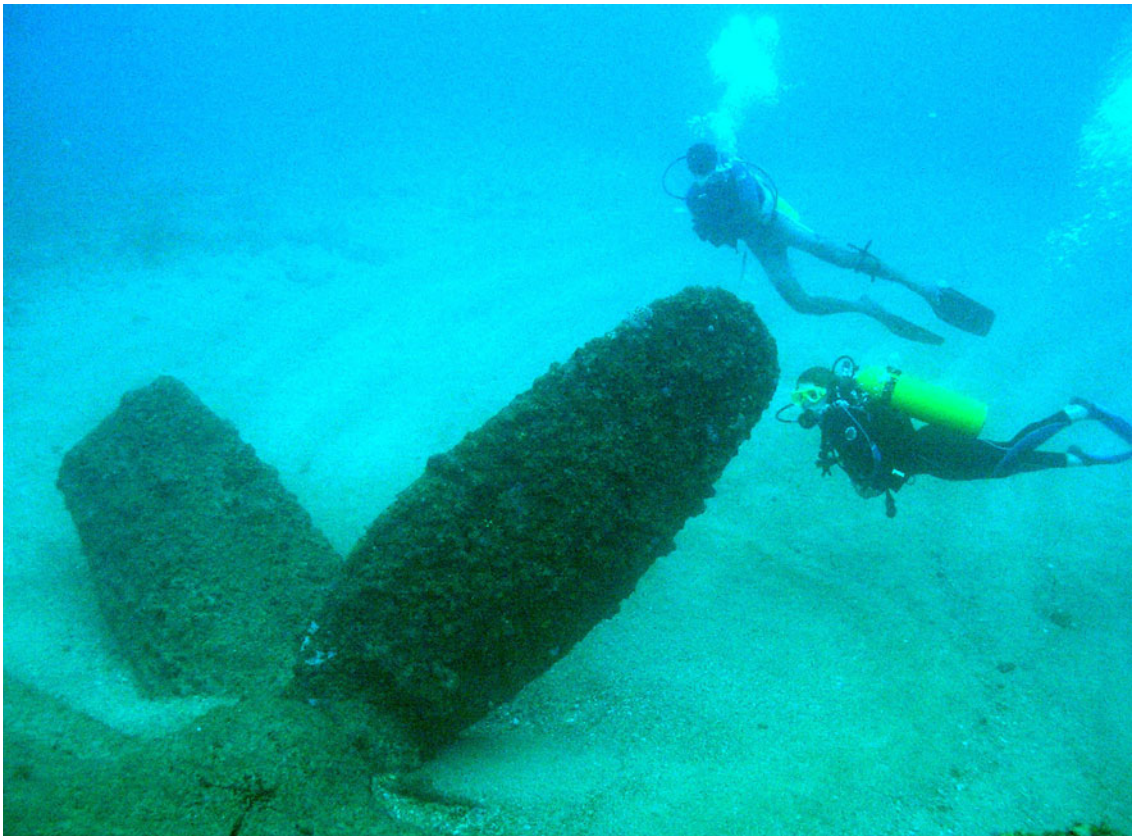


FIGURE 8. The SS *Conch*. (Photo courtesy of the MAU, 2006.)

she served in the United Kingdom's Royal Navy for 23 years; she was docked in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, after the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in February 1942. Carrying vintage biplane Swordfish torpedo bombers, she was realistically not a serious threat to the Japanese during World War II, nor was the small British fleet based in Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known) of which she was a part. The same Japanese fleet that had mounted the attack on Pearl Harbor entered the Indian Ocean under Vice Admiral Nagumo's command in 1942 to seek out the remnants of the Allied fleet. This Japanese fleet bombed Colombo Harbor on Easter Sunday, 1942, and then moved on to Trincomalee. Heeding the order to leave the harbor and seek safety at sea, *Hermes* steamed out escorted by HMAS *Vampire*, leaving her aircraft on shore. Both were spotted by Japanese aircraft off Batticaloa (south of Trincomalee), bombed, and sunk on 9 April 1942. *Hermes* sank with the loss of 307 men, including the captain; *Vampire*'s captain and seven crewmen were also killed (Green and Souter 2005). The wreck of the *Hermes* is lying on the seabed at more than 50 m in depth, while the *Vampire* has never been located. The CCF collaborated with Prospero Production to make a 2004 video on the search for the *Vampire* called *Vanishing Ships of War*, in collaboration with the Finance Corporation of Australia; it was telecast on the Discovery Channel Canada and ABC Television in Australia. A semifictionalized account of the start and progress of maritime archaeological work on Galle Harbor called *Teardrop of Treasure* was produced at the same time.

The fates of the *Conch* and the *Hermes* show how the global 20th-century world is still manifesting the consequences of the “vaulting ambition” (to take a phrase from Shakespeare) that had originally brought Vasco da Gama to the Indian Ocean. Then, as in the 20th century, the desire for trade and political aspirations were the motivators. While these sites have yet to be excavated, they offer considerable potential for exploring these themes in south Asia.

The Ambalangoda Wreck Site

While the focus of discussion has previously been European-associated sites in Sri Lankan waters, these are not the only post-1500 sites in

the region. The story now shifts to another wreck site, this time that of a ship of south Asia that might—or not—be of Sri Lankan origin.

In April 1998 fragments of timber and other artifacts were recovered from the shore in Ambalangoda (southwest Sri Lanka, near Galle) where a fisheries harbor was being planned. Fishermen and their families would collect and sell these artifacts. Timber had apparently been found on the shore previously, but in 1998 artifacts were particularly evident and collecting increased, resulting in widespread reportage in newspapers (Devendra 2007:276–277), radio, and television. Devendra alerted Gihan Jayatilaka and Nerina de Silva, a diver and conservator working on the Galle Harbour Project, who were coincidentally passing by the site (Jayatilaka and de Silva 1998). They found that the potential site had been covered by sand. However, the people in the fishing village were not unwilling to talk or show some of the artifacts they still retained. Large quantities of cowries, one of a set of weights, ivory-handled tongs for handling pearls, small coconuts typical of the Maldives, pottery sherds, pieces of Chinese porcelain, a well-worn quern, and fragments of coir rope were seen and photographed. An image of an unknown god had been sold. This material culture was quintessentially south Asian, but the vessel appeared to postdate 1500, as evidenced by the descriptions of the sold artifacts, including a cannon, a boatswain's spike, a small cannonball, and, most interestingly, an astrolabe. Fortunately, it was still possible to photograph many of these objects (Figure 9). Although the 1998 report recommended that the site be brought under the protection of heritage legislation, nothing was done due to the planned fisheries harbor.

In 2007, however, the MAU was able to access the site when the contractor's construction dredger began to bring up artifacts. The MAU team surveyed the area and talked to local residents who had been collecting hundreds of kilograms of cowry shells stored in large copper jars. Copper plates and jars were found, some of the plates inscribed with Arabic letters (Figure 10). There were rumors in the local community that bronze cannons had also been found, but none were seen by the research team. Unfortunately, local government officials were not keen to hand over the items to the Sri



FIGURE 9. Ambalangoda site: some privately owned artifacts from the site (camera-lens cover indicates scale). (Photo courtesy of Nerina de Silva, 1998.)



FIGURE 10. Ambalangoda site: copper plate inscribed in Arabic. (Photo by Rasika Muthucumarana/MAU, 2007.)

Lanka Archaeological Department, the statutory owner, and the MAU was unable to undertake detailed seafloor survey with the available equipment and has been forced to wait for the next routine dredging of the harbor to be undertaken by the commercial dredgers.

Identification of the ship is necessarily based on circumstantial evidence. Quite apparent is that the ship was an Asian one, and the crew's cooking and other utensils are from various Asian countries. She could have been an Arab, south Indian, Sri Lankan, or Maldivian ship. She had been on a return voyage from the Maldives, to judge from the cowrie shells that formed the greater part of the cargo; the Maldives were known to export cowries (Light 2010). In 1998 Devendra hypothesized that she was a *thoni* from Jaffna. *Thonis* were large cargo ships, locally built but superficially copying European ships: a hybrid form of Indian Ocean shipbuilding culture (Devendra 2002). Hornell (1943) was the first to note and comment on the ritual aspects of the *thoni* bow, where a shrine to the god Shiva was typically placed. Before a launch or voyage, a crew member acted as priest, and all joined in the prayers, smashing (as was the custom) a coconut as an offering. Since the deck was wooden, a quern would have been used onboard. It is therefore significant that smashed coconuts, a quern, and the image of a god have all been recovered from the site. This evidence is yet to be tested, however.

Muthucumarana, with the experience of the 2007 exploration behind him, can now suggest another explanation, that the vessel is an Arab trader. The copper plates (one with fragmentary Arabic text that translates as "this ... belongs/made for Abdul Razak") and the money cowries may point to trade with Africa and the Middle East where cowries were used until the 18th century. An Arab vessel might have followed a trade route across the Arabian Sea to the Arab community in Beruwela (near Ambalangoda) before changing course westward; this vessel sank before this westward journey. While much of this discussion remains speculative, the Ambalangoda site provides powerful evidence that post-1500 globalization in the Indian Ocean was not a solely European-driven process; important transformations took place without direct European involvement.

Conclusion

Through the examples above an effort has been made to show how aspects of "globalization, immigration, transformation" have been revealed through the work of Sri Lanka's Maritime Archaeology Unit. All the sites described here demonstrate some aspects of globalization. The *Avondster* and the vessel from the Ambalagoda site, while built in very different contexts, also show how sailors *transform* their craft and themselves in this period, marking the beginning of the end of many vernacular nautical material culture traditions. All of these sites also show how *immigration* was not only a movement of people, but of technology, trade interests, political domination, Christian fundamentalism, and brave new ideas.

In keeping with the focus of the Society for Historical Archaeology, only the post-1500 period has been discussed here; that arbitrary date merely marks (questionably) the arrival of European colonialism to Sri Lanka. But it is worth stressing in closing, that, prior to this date, Sri Lanka had also been an important center in a global trade world stretching from Rome to China, from India to Indonesia, from Indonesia to Madagascar and East Africa. The waters of this area were crisscrossed by "sewn" ships and land routes by caravans of the "ships of the desert"; by traders and by travelers, by mariners, merchants, and monks. The ships of all countries were the vehicles of globalization both in the postmedieval and premodern world, and they carried on board everything—good or bad—that globalization entailed. Aboard them was also an immigrant population that added to the gene pools of all the countries on which they touched, and even created new mestizo communities that preserve a version of the culture of their fathers. All this Sri Lanka has experienced and accepted the inevitability of transformation as, in the major religion of the country: "Change" is the "still point of the turning world."

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