

Presentation 9: Havens and Harbour Cities in Sri Lanka as Revealed in Medieval Travel Accounts and Maps by Dr. Ananda Abeydeera (Sri Lanka)

The presenter gave an address illustrated by slides showing maps of Sri Lanka from Greek, Italian, Arabic and Chinese manuscripts. These cartographic documents were shown to illustrate the island of Sri Lanka's configuration which offered potential harbour facilities through ages to Indian Ocean seafarers. Mantai-flouriehed between 5th century BC and 13th century AD as an international mart on the Western coast of the island and was known to the early Greeks under its Hellenized form of Mondouttou. Hondouttou appears in the first known map of Sri Lanka by Claudius Ptolemy in the 2nd century AD and bears witness to its importance as a harbour. Cosmas Indicopleustes, the Greek traveler of the 6th century AD who wrote an account of Sri Lanka provides us with avid description of the trading activity of Hantai which he qualifies as the most important emporium in the Indian Ocean of his time. The Arab sea-firer a knew Sri Lanka as Serendib Island and Adam's Peak, the 2nd highest mountain of the country was also known to them as a prominent land fall point. Adams Peak, therefore occupies an important position in all the cartographic documents of the Arabs and in the map of Serendib drawn by Al-Idvisi in the 12th century it figures also as a centre of pilgrimage to the Muslims. Ibn Battuta who undertook this pilgrimage in the 14th century evokes a number of harbour cities in Sri Lanka in his account of the island: Colombo was the seat of an Abyssinian pirate who exercised naval power whereas in Gialle in Southern Sri Lanka, a Muslim ship captain extended to him hospitality. The Arabic tombstones found in Gialle and the Sufi inscription discovered in Colombo bears evidence to the presence of Islam in the 10th century AD. Beruwala situated about 29 miles south of Colombo, has a small bay and an anchorage for ships. It was known to the 14th century Franciscan Missionary friar Giovanni Dei Marignolli who calls it Pervillis and to the 15th century Chinese traveler Ma Huan who calls it Pich-lo-li which appear in the Mao Kun Hap. Toponyms such as Pervillis and Colombo were known to the Franciscan Fra Mauro of Venice who drew his world map in 1459. Although he knew that they were ports of the island he did not know their location and erroneously placed them on the south and eastern coast of Sri Lanka in his map. Many

harbour cities such as Colombo, Galle, Beruwala and Negambo later became important administrative and military posts of maritime Sri Lanka under the Portuguese and the Dutch.