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The History of Sri Lanka

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Island's Beginnings: Geology and Early Human Settlement
- **Chapter 2** Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Sri Lanka: The Balangoda People
- **Chapter 3** The Dawn of Agriculture and the Early Iron Age
- **Chapter 4** The Indigenous Vedda: Culture and Continuity
- **Chapter 5** Protohistoric Interactions: Links to South India
- **Chapter 6** Origins of the Sinhalese: Prince Vijaya and Foundational Myths
- **Chapter 7** The Anuradhapura Kingdom: Emergence and Growth
- **Chapter 8** Buddhism in Sri Lanka: Arrival and Transformation
- **Chapter 9** The Golden Age of Anuradhapura: Art, Architecture, and Society
- **Chapter 10** South Indian Invasions and Political Change
- **Chapter 11** The Fall of Anuradhapura and Chola Occupation
- **Chapter 12** The Polonnaruwa Period: Resistance and Revival
- **Chapter 13** Hydraulic Civilization: Irrigation and Agricultural Innovation
- **Chapter 14** The Decline and Fragmentation of Traditional Kingdoms
- **Chapter 15** The Jaffna Kingdom and Tamil Influence in the North
- **Chapter 16** Dawn of Colonialism: The Arrival of the Portuguese
- **Chapter 17** Resistance, Conflict, and the Rise of Kandy
- **Chapter 18** Dutch Rule: Trade, Law, and Cultural Imprints
- **Chapter 19** The British Ascendancy: From Colony to Crown
- **Chapter 20** Socioeconomic Transformation Under British Rule
- **Chapter 21** Ethnic Relations and the Roots of Modern Conflict
- **Chapter 22** The Road to Independence: Nationalism and Political Change
- **Chapter 23** Post-Independence Sri Lanka: Nation Building and Challenges
- **Chapter 24** Civil War and Reconciliation: 1983–2009
- **Chapter 25** Sri Lanka Today: Democracy, Crisis, and the Quest for Stability

Introduction

Sri Lanka, often referred to as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean," is a land where history and legend intertwine amidst lush landscapes, ancient cities, and vibrant cultures. Its past stretches astonishingly far back, with evidence of human presence on the island reaching as deep as 125,000 years—perhaps even older. Over the millennia, Sri Lanka has been shaped by its geography, situated at the crossroads of the maritime routes that linked East and West. This strategic location ensured repeated encounters with traders, travelers, and invaders, all of whom left indelible marks on the nation's cultural and historical tapestry.

The story of Sri Lanka is one of continuity as well as change. From the earliest hunter-gatherer societies to the birth of sophisticated urban civilizations, the island's journey encompasses remarkable technological and societal developments. The legacy of the Balangoda people, the enduring traditions of the Vedda, and the ancient chronicles that narrate the arrival of Prince Vijaya together lay the foundational myths and realities of the Sri Lankan people. These origins are as much about adaptation—shaped by environmental changes, migrations, and interactions—as they are about enduring spirit.

The rise of magnificent kingdoms, such as Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, heralded an era of unprecedented prosperity, monumental architecture, and spiritual transformation. The introduction of Buddhism and its seamless integration into local governance, art, and daily life remains a defining feature of Sri Lankan identity. Yet, the island was also a theatre of power struggles, both from within and without, as South Indian dynasties, European colonial ambitions, and internal rivalries shaped the destiny of its peoples.

Colonial encounters profoundly altered Sri Lanka's social, economic, and political structures. Portuguese, Dutch, and eventually British rule introduced new religions, trade routes, crops, laws, and ideas which, in turn, disrupted old ways while fostering new dynamics. The effects of these centuries of foreign domination are visible even today, manifesting in language, law, architecture, and demography.

In the post-independence era, Sri Lanka has faced profound trials: the quest to reconcile ancient identities with modern nationhood, the tragedy of ethnic conflict, and the challenge of forging inclusive economic and political frameworks. The lengthy and devastating civil war underscored the deep divisions but also called forth movements for peace, justice, and reconciliation. As the country navigates the complexities of the 21st century—both celebrating achievements and seeking solutions to persistent challenges—its story commands both reflection and hope.

This book traces the arc of Sri Lanka's history from its earliest beginnings to the unfolding present. It is a journey through time that seeks to illuminate not just the political events and leaders, but also the cultural, social, and economic dynamics that have made Sri Lanka a unique and resilient nation. Through understanding the past in all its complexity, we gain a clearer view of the challenges and opportunities facing Sri Lanka today and in the years to come.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Island's Beginnings: Geology and Early Human Settlement

Sri Lanka, a teardrop-shaped island in the vast Indian Ocean, holds within its ancient rocks and sediments a geological narrative that stretches back billions of years. More than 90 percent of the island's surface is composed of Precambrian strata, some of which are an astonishing two billion years old. These metamorphic rocks, once sedimentary layers, underwent a dramatic transformation through intense heat and pressure deep within the Earth's crust during mountain-building epochs.

This ancient geological foundation is part of a larger Precambrian craton, a stable block of the Earth's crust that was once integral to the supercontinent Gondwanaland. Imagine a world where the landmasses we know today were stitched together in a grand continental quilt. Sri Lanka's bedrock was, at that time, connected to the craton of the Indian subcontinent. It wasn't until around 200 million years ago that the forces within the Earth's mantle began to pull Gondwanaland apart.

The Indian plate, carrying both India and the nascent Sri Lanka, embarked on a slow but steady journey northeastward. This grand continental drift culminated approximately 45 million years ago in a colossal collision with the Asian landmass, an event that spectacularly crumpled the Earth's crust to form the majestic Himalayas. After this immense geological drama, the piece of crust forming Sri Lanka gradually separated from the Indian plate. Fortunately for its inhabitants, Sri Lanka sits centrally on the Indian plate, meaning it experiences relatively few earthquakes or major volcanic events today.

The island's geological makeup, dominated by these ancient metamorphic rocks, is a treasure trove of mineral deposits. Within its depths lie iron ore, zinc, manganese, nickel, and even precious gems like rubies, sapphires, topaz, and spinel. While the island boasts these riches, the tumultuous history of the country has meant that the development of large-scale mining operations, particularly for tourist-friendly show mines, has yet to truly take off. Beyond its crystalline core, Sri Lanka also features more recent geological formations, including small fragments of Jurassic sediment in the Puttalam District and a more extensive belt of Miocene limestone along the northwest coast.

This ancient geological stage, shaped by continental shifts and fiery subterranean forces, eventually became home to early human inhabitants. Archaeological evidence paints a picture of human presence on the island reaching back an astonishing 75,000 to 125,000 years, with some indications suggesting an even earlier presence, possibly

as far back as 500,000 years. These early occupants were quintessential hunter-gatherers, adept at utilizing the resources their environment offered.

The prehistoric record of Sri Lanka is generally divided into the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and early Iron Ages. The earliest tools unearthed by archaeologists are rough stone implements, typical of Paleolithic peoples. As time progressed, around 28,000 years ago, finer tools crafted from quartz and chert began to appear in the archaeological record. These early toolmakers were quite ingenious. For instance, tiny stone tools known as microliths, some dating back 45,000 years, have been discovered in sites like Fa-Hien Lena cave in the island's tropical rainforests.

These microliths were not merely quaint curiosities; they were sophisticated implements, likely forming part of composite weapons used for hunting. Interestingly, while similar tools in Europe and Africa were primarily used for hunting medium to large animals in grasslands, in Sri Lanka, these miniaturized tools were employed to hunt smaller, tree-dwelling creatures like monkeys and giant squirrels. This suggests a remarkable adaptation by early *Homo sapiens* to the challenging and resource-rich rainforest environment. The consistent use of this stone tool technology for an extended period, from around 48,000 to 4,000 years ago, indicates its immense success and stability in the tropical setting.

Among the most significant discoveries related to these early inhabitants are the remains of what has been termed "Balangoda Man." This refers to anatomically modern humans from Sri Lanka's late Quaternary period, first identified from sites near Balangoda. The earliest evidence of Balangoda Man dates back around 38,000 years ago from archaeological sequences, with skeletal remains reliably dated to 30,000 BCE, making them the oldest reliably dated record of anatomically modern humans in South Asia.

Skeletal analyses reveal that Balangoda Man possessed distinctive physical traits. They were relatively robust, with thick skulls, prominent brow ridges, heavy jaws, short necks, and noticeably large teeth. They were also quite tall for their time, with males estimated to be around 165 centimeters (5 feet 5 inches) and females slightly shorter. This stature was significantly taller than the average modern-day Sri Lankan populations. Evidence from archaeological sites suggests they were skilled hunter-gatherers, relying on the rich biodiversity of Sri Lanka's forests for sustenance. Their diet included a variety of plant and animal resources, such as fruits, nuts, tubers, deer, and wild boar.

The material culture of the Balangoda people included not only geometric microliths but also cruder choppers, pestles, mortars, hammer stones, grinders, and nut stones. They also demonstrated an early form of artistic expression, with geometric engravings on bone and antler artifacts. The presence of shell beads and other ornamental objects further hints at their appreciation for personal adornment and

possibly symbolic or ritualistic activities. There is also strong evidence that these groups regularly used fire and even domesticated dogs, camping alongside them.

One fascinating aspect of Sri Lanka's prehistory is its periodic connection to the Indian subcontinent due to fluctuations in sea level. Over the past million years, several land bridges formed and disappeared, with the last such connection occurring around 5000 BCE. These land bridges, notably the chain of shoals known as Adam's Bridge or Rama Setu, would have facilitated the movement of both human and animal populations between the two landmasses. The Palk Strait, a shallow body of water separating Sri Lanka from India, was entirely exposed as dry land during the Last Glacial Period, which ended about 11,700 years ago, as sea levels were significantly lower. Around 7,000 years ago, with rising sea levels during the Holocene, this land bridge submerged, creating the strait we see today.

The indigenous Vedda people, who still inhabit parts of Sri Lanka, are widely considered probable direct descendants of these earliest inhabitants, the Balangoda Man. They are often referred to as Wanniyala-aetto, meaning "People of the Forest," a fitting title for a community with such deep roots in the island's natural environment. The Vedda traditionally led a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle, relying on bows and arrows for hunting, fishing, and gathering wild honey and yams. While many have integrated into modern life, some still maintain their traditional ways in jungle homes near national parks and reserves. Their culture and spirituality are deeply intertwined with nature and ancestral worship, with rituals and ceremonies often involving offerings to forest spirits.

The Early Iron Age in Sri Lanka, radiocarbon-dated to approximately 1000–800 BCE, marks another significant chapter. Archaeological findings at Anuradhapura, a site that would later become a grand ancient capital, reveal a settlement of about 15 hectares by 900 BCE. This suggests early urban development, as the settlement expanded to 50 hectares by 700 BCE. During this protohistoric period (1000–500 BCE), Sri Lanka shared cultural traits with southern India, including distinctive megalithic burials, pottery, iron technology, and farming techniques. The introduction of iron technology to Anuradhapura is dated to around 950 BCE, with evidence of early Iron Age inhabitants using iron, horses, and pottery, alongside small-scale agriculture. This cultural complex, which spread from southern India, points to a period of significant interaction and exchange between the island and the subcontinent, long before the traditional historical narratives begin.

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