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A History of Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Sri Lanka, perched at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean, has fascinated travellers, historians, and scholars for centuries. Known as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean," its rich history unspools across thousands of years, marked by the rise and fall of kingdoms, maritime trade, religious transformations, colonial conquest, and modern struggles for unity and prosperity. The story of Sri Lanka is as much about its people as it is about its geography—lush rainforests, rolling hills, pristine beaches, and ancient rivers have shaped the destinies of those who have called the island home.

From the prehistoric caves where the earliest human ancestors dwelled to the bustling cities built by ancient monarchs, Sri Lanka's past is layered with complexity and diversity. The arrival of Buddhism in the third century BCE indelibly shaped its culture and identity, while waves of settlers, traders, and invaders from southern India, Arabia, Europe, and beyond left lasting legacies on its language, customs, and governance. Through centuries of independent kingdoms and dynasties, the island developed a sophisticated civilization, renowned for its monumental architecture, hydraulic engineering, and religious sites, many of which are now UNESCO World Heritage treasures.

Colonial encounters profoundly transformed Sri Lanka's trajectory. The arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 ushered in an era of European domination, followed in turn by the Dutch and, finally, the British. With each wave of colonial rule, the fabric of Sri Lankan society was rewoven, introducing new religions, languages, economic structures, and technologies. The British period, especially, brought fundamental changes—plantation agriculture, modern infrastructure, and a new administrative framework—that would influence the country long after independence.

Independence in 1948 marked not just political emancipation but also the beginning of new challenges. The decades that followed saw Sri Lanka oscillate between socialism and economic liberalization, all while navigating fraught ethnic relations exacerbated by colonial-era policies and demographic changes. The eruption of a brutal civil war in the late twentieth century cast a long shadow, resulting in immense human and material loss, but the nation's resilience and determination have been evident in its postwar recovery and reconstruction.

This book seeks to present a detailed and balanced account of Sri Lanka's history, offering insights into the distinct periods that have shaped the island's identity—from its enigmatic prehistory to the thriving, tumultuous society of today. By examining archaeological evidence, ancient chronicles, foreign travelers' reports, and modern scholarship, readers are invited to journey through Sri Lanka's moments of greatness

and adversity alike.

As Sri Lanka continues to find its path amidst the opportunities and challenges of the twenty-first century, understanding its past is essential—not just for Sri Lankans, but for anyone interested in the enduring interplay of culture, power, and place in the shaping of human civilization.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Pearl's Embrace - Geography and Environment

Sri Lanka, an emerald tear falling from the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, owes much of its singular charm and tumultuous history to its unique geographical position and diverse environment. An island of relatively modest size, roughly 65,610 square kilometers (25,332 square miles), it nevertheless encompasses an astonishing array of landscapes, from sun-drenched coastal plains to mist-shrouded mountain peaks. This geographical tapestry has not only provided abundant natural resources but has also dictated patterns of settlement, facilitated trade, and served as a strategic prize for empires throughout the ages.

Positioned in the Indian Ocean, just 31 kilometers (19 miles) off the southeastern coast of India, Sri Lanka's proximity to the mainland has been a double-edged sword. It has historically allowed for a constant flow of people, ideas, and goods, forging deep cultural and commercial ties with the subcontinent. Yet, this closeness has also exposed the island to continuous external influences, often in the form of invasions and migrations, which have profoundly shaped its demographic and political landscape. The Palk Strait, a shallow and narrow body of water, separates the two landmasses, dotted with a chain of shoals known as Adam's Bridge or Rama Setu, a natural bridge that has played a role in both ancient legends and modern debates about connectivity.

The island's topography is dominated by a central massif in the south-central region, rising majestically from the surrounding plains. This highland complex is a dramatic contrast to the flat, fertile coastal belts that encircle it. Pidurutalagala, the highest point at 2,524 meters (8,281 feet), stands sentinel over a region characterized by rolling hills, deep valleys, and cascading waterfalls. This mountainous heartland is the source of nearly all of Sri Lanka's major rivers, which radiate outwards like spokes on a wheel, carrying vital water to the lowlands and the sea. The Mahaweli Ganga, the longest river, carves its path eastward before emptying into the Bay of Bengal, a lifeblood for agriculture and ancient civilizations.

The climate of Sri Lanka is distinctly tropical, influenced by the monsoon winds that sweep across the Indian Ocean. Two primary monsoons dictate the weather patterns: the southwest monsoon, typically active from May to September, brings heavy rainfall to the western and southern parts of the island, nourishing lush rainforests and tea plantations. Conversely, the northeast monsoon, from December to February, drenches the northern and eastern regions. This seasonal variation has profoundly impacted agricultural practices, influencing crop cycles and the development of

intricate irrigation systems by ancient Sinhalese kings to harness and store water.

The island's diverse climate zones give rise to an equally diverse range of ecosystems. The wet zone, primarily the southwestern quadrant, is characterized by high rainfall and supports dense tropical rainforests, rich in biodiversity. These forests, though significantly reduced over centuries of human activity, still harbor a remarkable array of flora and fauna, including endemic species. The dry zone, encompassing the northern and eastern plains, receives less rainfall and is dominated by scrub jungles, grasslands, and a scattering of dry evergreen forests. It is in this dry zone that many of the ancient Sinhalese kingdoms, with their sophisticated irrigation tanks, flourished, demonstrating an ingenious adaptation to the environment.

Beyond the land, Sri Lanka's coastline is a geographic marvel, stretching for approximately 1,340 kilometers (830 miles) and boasting an abundance of natural harbors. These deep-water ports, particularly those at Trincomalee on the east coast and Galle on the south, have been instrumental in establishing Sri Lanka as a vital nexus in global maritime trade routes. From the ancient Silk Road to the spice routes of the European colonial era, ships laden with goods from East and West found safe haven and bustling markets in these harbors, facilitating the exchange of commodities, cultures, and ideas. The island's coastal ecosystems, including coral reefs, mangrove swamps, and lagoons, also contribute to its ecological richness and have historically supported vibrant fishing communities.

The soil types across the island vary significantly, directly impacting agricultural potential. The fertile red-yellow podzolic soils in the wet zone, coupled with ample rainfall, have made it ideal for cultivating crops like tea, rubber, and spices, which became economic mainstays during the colonial period. In contrast, the dry zone's reddish-brown earths, while less naturally fertile, were made productive by the ingenious ancient irrigation systems that supported extensive paddy cultivation, forming the bedrock of the ancient kingdoms' prosperity.

Geologically, Sri Lanka is a fragment of the ancient supercontinent Gondwana, and its basement rock consists primarily of Precambrian metamorphic rocks, some of the oldest on Earth. While the island is not known for significant mineral deposits compared to some other regions, it is famous for its precious and semi-precious gemstones, including sapphires, rubies, and moonstones. The gem-rich alluvial plains, particularly in the Ratnapura district, have been mined for millennia, drawing traders and adventurers to its shores and adding another facet to its economic allure.

The island's position near the equator means it experiences relatively consistent temperatures throughout the year, with less dramatic seasonal variation than temperate regions. Humidity levels, however, remain high, contributing to the tropical feel. This consistent warmth, coupled with adequate rainfall in various parts of the island, supports a year-round growing season for many crops, a significant advantage

for agricultural societies throughout history.

The natural beauty of Sri Lanka is undeniable, from its palm-fringed beaches to its mist-covered peaks. This natural splendor has not only shaped the lives of its inhabitants but has also, in modern times, become a major draw for tourism, a key component of its contemporary economy. The preservation of these diverse ecosystems and the management of its natural resources remain crucial challenges for the nation, as it balances development with environmental stewardship.

In essence, Sri Lanka's geography is a tale of contrasts and convergences. Its island isolation, yet close proximity to a vast continent, its towering central highlands surrounded by expansive plains, and its distinct wet and dry zones, have all contributed to a rich tapestry of human experience. This physical landscape has provided both blessings and challenges, nurturing ancient civilizations, attracting powerful empires, and ultimately shaping the character and resilience of the Sri Lankan people.

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