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Understanding the Intellectual Approaches of the Archaeology of 'Rōhaṇa' from the 1840s to 1960s: A Literature Review

K.V.J. Koshalee

Abstract

The archaeology of Rōhaṇa entails a focus on comprehending 'Rōhaṇa' from material perspectives. Originating in the mid-19th century CE, this approach evolved with diverse theoretical, methodological, and technological dimensions in alignment with the scholarly context of its time. This paper constitutes an investigation into the available sources explaining the progression of archaeological studies on Rōhaṇa from the 1840s to the 1960s, highlighting the contributions of individuals often identified as British Colonial Officers, Antiquarians, and Archaeologists. While extant research has predominantly centred on elucidating Rōhaṇa, it has overlooked an exploration of the intellectual practices of the scholars involved. Consequently, this paper aims to comprehend the intellectual approaches employed in existing scholarly works on Rōhaṇa. This study uses qualitative methods in secondary research to analyse sources such as published accounts and reports by British officers, archaeological field reports and other significant studies by local scholars. Examining the methodologies, findings, and conclusions of these selected studies reveals their collective contribution to the intellectual understanding of Rōhaṇa from a material perspective. In conclusion, antiquarian methods initially identified Rōhaṇa as the southern administrative division, with Māgama serving as its capital. Subsequently, archaeological initiatives expanded this knowledge through field methods, providing insights into regional settlement patterns. Over time, inquiries into the historicity of Rōhaṇa emerged, evolving the understanding of this region by the mid-20th century.

Keywords: Antiquarians, Archaeological Studies, Historicity, Māgama, Rōhaṇa

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INTRODUCTION

What is 'Rōhaṇa'? Is it a geographical region or a cultural identity? Does it have clear physical boundaries, or do social constructs shape it? Is it a concept rooted in history or applicable to the present day? Interpreting 'Rōhaṇa' poses a complex challenge, transcending its conventional identity as a mere ancient administrative division of ancient Sri Lanka. A comprehensive understanding of Rōhaṇa should be attained by exploring it from various angles, moving beyond its historical significance. Hence, three critical perspectives can be suggested to shed light on the contemporary implications of this concept: (a) Presentism, (b) Historicism, and (c) Materialism.

The exploration of Rōhaṇa or Ruhuṇa can commence from an anthropological standpoint, focusing on how contemporary society perceives it. In present-day usage, the term 'Ruhuṇa' (රුහුණ) is commonly spelt, reflecting linguistic changes from its ancient forms such as Rōhaṇa (රෝහණ), Ruhuṇu (රුහුණු), and Rūṇu (රුණු) found in literature¹ and inscriptions², while preserving the original meaning. For the general populace, Ruhuṇa serves as a 'symbolic label' for the southernmost region of Sri Lanka, encompassing the present administrative districts of Galle, Matara, and Hambantota. This

perspective differs from historians' definitions. However, these notions significantly influence public perception of Ruhuṇa, highlighting the profound impact of presentism on how we understand and interpret its past.

Historicism, as applied to the concept of Rōhaṇa, involves examining it as a historical phenomenon through the lens of historians and scholars well-versed in Sri Lanka's history. This historical approach predominantly relies on literary narratives, including various chronicles (such as *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa*, *Sīhalavatthuppakaraṇaya*, *Rasavāhini*, *Dhātuvāṃsa*, *Aṭṭha katā* and *Sadharmālamkāraya*) authored by historiographers as well as epigraphical texts, to construct a continuous history of Rōhaṇa (See Gunasinghe, 1968; Ranawella, 2011, Perera, 2014). The primary objective of these historicists is to demarcate the geographical boundaries of Rōhaṇa within the island, establish a chronological framework by tracing the lineage of rulers, reconstruct the political, administrative, economic, social, and religious aspects of a particular era, and ultimately gain a comprehensive understanding of the entire history of the island leading up to the foreign occupation of the country's southern regions. Rōhaṇa is often defined as a settlement, principality, or 'kingdom' of uncertain origin that has transformed over time;

¹ See verse 10 in chapter nine of *Mahāvāṃsa*. Refer to Buddhadata, 1959, p. 53.

² See No. 169-Fragmentary Slab-inscription from Tissamahārāma, Panākaḍuva Copper Plate and

Kaniccigala Gāvuta Pillar Inscription. Refer to Paranavitana, 2001, p. 269; Ranawella, 2007, p. 186.



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however, it acquired its name with the migration of the 'Aryans' to ancient Lanka around the sixth to fourth century BCE (Gunasinghe, 1968, pp. 20-23; Ranawella, 2011, pp. 19, 31; Perera, 2014, pp. 151-153). The central focus of historicism about Rōhaṇa is to explore its origins, evolution, and continuity systematically and comprehensively while substantiating the accounts and information provided by historiographers. However, it is essential to highlight that this perspective will not be addressed here, as the primary emphasis of this paper remains the study of the archaeological past of Rōhaṇa.

The approach to comprehending Rōhaṇa from a material perspective, which also can be termed an archaeological perspective, includes antiquarian and archaeological viewpoints. Early Portuguese, Dutch, and English explorers directed their efforts towards the maritime regions in the western and southern parts of the country, attracted by the strategic significance of ports and forts in those areas. Their explorations and documentation were primarily motivated by objectives related to church missions, economic interests, and military considerations. The evolving interest in sites of historical significance gained momentum through the contributions of various explorers spanning from the early 19th to the 20th century, notable among them being Colin McKenzie (1801), Robert Percival (1803), James Cordiner (1807),

J.W. Bennett (1843), James Selkirk (1844), Samuel Baker (1855) and Donald Ferguson (1911). It is imperative to acknowledge that most explorers documented these sites based on personal observations and subjective opinions, often needing a scholarly perspective (Gunawardhana, 2009, p. 16). Consequently, the historical concept of Rōhaṇa remains unfamiliar to many. During British colonial rule, many officers interested in antiquities began documenting ancient monuments and inscriptions in the region (Somadeva, 2006, p. 49), particularly after the 1840s. Prominent individuals involved in this effort include Major Forbes (1840), Charles Pridham (1849), Sir James Emerson Tennent (1859-1860), Paul Goldschmidt (1877), and Edward Müller (1883).

Major Forbes, one of the early British explorers of the historical significance of Rōhaṇa, documented his findings in a two-volume work titled *Eleven Years in Ceylon* in 1840. In the first volume, he provides concise information about Rōhaṇa (referred to as 'Roohoona') and Māgama (referred to as 'Māgam') (Forbes, 1840, pp. 84, 92). In his account, Rōhaṇa is described as a kingdom in the chronological list of the kings; on the other hand, Māgama is depicted as a regional administrative unit under the authority of King Kavantissa. Forbes (1840, p. 156), also includes stories about Vihāramahā Dēvi, the queen of King Kavantissa, who was revered by the local population at the time as the mother of the future



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Buddha Maitreya, and the tales of Dutugemunu, the elder son of King Kavantissa, who is celebrated as a heroic king for his successful expulsion of Indian invaders. These stories are presented in the form of folklore within his book.

Charles Pridham sought to generate interest and provide information about the island as a 'British Colony' for English readers in his comprehensive two-volume work titled *An Historical, Political and Statistical Account of Ceylon and its Dependencies*, published in 1849 (Pridham, 1849a, p. iv). The book presented a contemporary perspective on the island and its history by identifying the country's ancient capitals and notable locations (Pridham, 1849a, p. ix). He initiated the process by gathering various sources, including annals, legendary narratives, accounts from the Portuguese and Dutch, and unpublished manuscripts related to the history of 'Ceylon', with explicit reference to the prior work of Forbes.

Emerson Tennent's book, *Ceylon: An Account of the Island Physical, Historical, and Topographical*, initially published in 1859 and revised in 1860, offers a comprehensive overview of various facets of the island, including a brief historical account. As the Colonial Secretary of 'Ceylon' from 1845 to 1850, Tennent diligently compiled a detailed record of the country, aiming to write a book that depicted the island's contemporary conditions, developments, and influences under

the evolving domestic and political circumstances of his time for official use (Tennent, 2006, p. xxv). Tennent's work satisfied the curiosity of foreigners interested in the newly revealed 'British colony' and addressed a notable gap left by earlier writers. The book's rapid sales and subsequent revisions, including chapters on Buddhism and its evolution in the country, underscored the keen public interest it generated. His antiquarian inclinations are evident in his exploration of abandoned ruins, monuments, and irrigation works scattered throughout the island's interior, demonstrating his multifaceted approach to gathering information through surveys, literary sources like chronicles, Portuguese and Dutch accounts, and consultations with indigenous experts. These approaches may have been influenced by the concurrent antiquarian scholarship in Britain and his experiences in Greece (De Silva, 1996, pp. 13-14), underscoring his enthusiasm for antiquarian pursuits. This commitment eventually culminated in establishing the Royal Asiatic Society Ceylon Branch, where he served as its president from 1846 to 1857 (De Silva, 1996, p. 14; Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, n.d.).

In 1874, Paul Goldschmidt was officially appointed to the Colonial Government of Ceylon to undertake the comprehensive collection of inscriptions discovered on the island. This effort followed some notable



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works by Rhys Davids on inscriptions at Weligama and Dondra in 1871.³ Goldschmidt's initial efforts concentrated on inscriptions within the North-Central province of the country, and he subsequently published a general report in the *Ceylon Sessional Papers*⁴ in September 1875. However, this initial report needed historical contextualisation.⁵ In a subsequent phase, Goldschmidt extended his investigation to encompass the North-Central province, conducting surveys in locations such as Anuradhapura, Mihintale, Polonnaruwa, Dambulla, and the Hambantota⁶ district of the Southern Province (Goldschmidt, 1984b). This second report was published in *Ceylon Sessional Papers*⁷ No.—XI 1877. Over more than two years, he meticulously examined inscriptions, captured photographs, conducted linguistic analyses, transcribed the text into Latin scripts, provided literary translations, and critically arranged the inscriptions chronologically from the early centuries to the 11th century CE. Goldschmidt also attempted to correlate the names of monarchs mentioned in the inscriptions with those documented in the *Mahāvamsa*. His dedicated efforts significantly captured the attention and interest of many European scholars regarding the

inscriptions of 'Ceylon' (Müller, 1883, pp. 4-5).

In 1878, Edward Müller was appointed an Archaeological Commissioner to the government of 'Ceylon.' Initiating his archaeological endeavours in the country, he primarily focused on examining ancient inscriptions dating back to the 13th century CE, culminating in the publication of *Ancient Inscriptions in Ceylon* in 1883. His objective was to compile a comprehensive collection of inscriptions on the island (Müller, 1883, p. 3). Müller's methodology involved reviewing Goldschmidt's previous studies, creating lithographical copies and transcripts, and extensively using photography for documentation. He also provided literal translations and attempted to arrange the inscriptions chronologically based on paleographical evidence. Müller's critique of the conventional interpretation of chronicles as historical texts, instead of seeing them as introductory narratives about Buddhist history and royal lineages, was a distinctive aspect of his approach. Although he acknowledged his archaeological pursuits, his approach bore similarities to antiquarian methods in contemporary scholarship, reflecting the influence of the Royal Asiatic Society of his time.

³ Refer to Davids, 1871a; 1871b.

⁴ This was later reprinted in *The Indian Antiquary*, Vol. V in 1984

⁵ See Goldschmidt, 1984a, pp. 189-190.

⁶ Refer to his third report containing additional explanations of selected inscriptions, including

those at Tissamaharama and Kirinda. See Goldschmidt, 1879.

⁷ Later reprinted in *The Indian Antiquary*, Vol. VI in 1984.



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The first significant archaeological investigation in Rōhaṇa focused on the old settlements in Tissamahārāma and was carried out by Henry Parker in the 1880s (Somadeva, 2006, p. 49). His report was published in 1884 in the *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* under the title *Report of Archaeological Discoveries at Tissamahārāma*.⁸ As an irrigation officer for the Government of Ceylon, Parker diligently focused on ancient irrigation works and their restoration. While constructing a new sluice from the Tissa tank, he unearthed a thick layer of broken pottery and tiles 18 feet below the surface (Parker, 1884, p. 23). Recognising that these fragments differed from contemporary local pottery and displayed letters similar to the earliest inscriptions in the country, Parker turned his attention to archaeological investigation.

Surveys and reports on ancient irrigation works conducted from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries significantly contributed to the rediscovery of ancient Rōhaṇa (Somadeva, 2006, p. 49). Richard Leslie Brohier, also known as R. L. Brohier, who served as the Superintendent of Surveys for the Government of Ceylon, was instrumental in enhancing the understanding of Rōhaṇa through his work on irrigation systems. Under the directive of the Minister of Agriculture

and Lands, he authored and published a comprehensive report titled *Ancient Irrigation Works in Ceylon* in three parts in 1934-35. The report is structured to cover the North-Eastern Part of the country in Part One, the Northern and North-Western parts in Part Two, and the Western, Southern, and Eastern Parts in Part Three. In his report, Brohier underscores the importance of understanding the ancient geography of a country as a key element in unravelling its history (Brohier, 1935, p. 1). He contends that in a country like Sri Lanka, where ancient irrigation works are closely intertwined with its history, it is critical to focus on the physical changes these works may have undergone (Brohier, 1935, p. 1). Brohier's primary objective was to identify the ancient irrigation works of 'Ceylon' and provide a comprehensive summary of the irrigation systems (Brohier, 1935, p. 3). He achieved this by amalgamating his observations from field surveys with the literary history and legends of the country.

Further archaeological research of Rōhaṇa was carried out by scholars such as S. Paranavitana, C.W. Nicholas, and many others up until the 1960s. Since the 1970s, there has been a significant increase in scholarly works, including archaeological project reports, articles, and doctoral theses, contributing to a deeper understanding

⁸ Some information disclosed in the report was later incorporated into Parker's noteworthy publication, *Ancient Ceylon*, published in 1909. This encompasses significant stupas and reservoirs of Rōhaṇa and materials such as coins discovered

during his excavations at Tissamahārāma. The report was later compiled into a book titled *Archaeology of Tissamahārāma*, released by the Academy of Sri Lankan Culture in 1998, accompanied by a Sinhalese translation.



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of archaeological aspects (Somadeva, 2006, pp. 50-51). Significant works include the KAVA Project⁹ (1992)¹⁰, the Galle Harbour Project (1992)¹¹, the Godawaya Ancient Shipwreck Excavation (started in 2011)¹², and the Rajagala Archaeological Project (initiated in 2012)¹³ alongside several other initiatives conducted by the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology. Noteworthy doctoral theses include those by Raj Somadeva (2006) and Prishantha Gunawardhana (2009).

Examining Rōhaṇa from a material perspective is crucial because it provides diverse resources, each offering distinct theoretical, methodological, and technological insights developed over 180 years or more. Starting in 1840, these studies have helped shape our understanding of Rōhaṇa through intellectual ideas that can only be explored through a systematic literature review. Previous research on Rohana has been limited to specific goals and hasn't provided an overall picture of how scholars have understood it over time. This paper explores the intellectual approaches to Rōhaṇa based on previous archaeological studies. Given the extensive timeframe and the volume of studies on Rōhaṇa, this research is segmented into two phases: the first spanning from the 1840s to the 1960s, which marks the contribution of different individuals and the second

covering the 1970s to the present, focusing on more extensive project-level studies with increased educational and institutional support. This study explicitly examines scholarly works on Rōhaṇa from the 1840s to the 1960s, covering the first phase in detail.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a research methodology focused on gathering literature on antiquarian and archaeological records of monuments and sites in the southern part of Sri Lanka during a specified timespan. The selection was made through purposive sampling to target significant accounts directly contributing to the archaeological understanding of Rōhaṇa. It involves analysing published accounts and reports by British colonial officers, archaeological field reports, and other relevant studies conducted by local scholars on Rōhaṇa. The methodologies, findings and conclusions of the selected studies are analysed to elucidate their contributions to the intellectual understanding of Rōhaṇa from a material perspective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Early Antiquarian Interest in Rōhaṇa

Early antiquarians who explored and documented Rōhaṇa were British colonial officers serving in 'Ceylon'

⁹ Also known as Sri Lanka-German Archaeological Project in the Southern Province.

¹⁰ Refer to Weisshaar, Roth, & Wijeyapala, 2001.

¹¹ Refer to Green & Devendra, 1993.

¹² Refer to Muthucumarana, 2019, p. 1666.

¹³ Refer to Kannangara, 2018, p. xv.



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across various domains. This section reviews the antiquarian contributions of Forbes, Pridham, Tennent, Goldschmidt, and Müller.

Forbes' interest in the historical aspects of Southern Sri Lanka is evident in the second volume of his book. In this volume, he dedicates an entire chapter to his journey to Māgama, undertaken to examine the ruins and other remnants of antiquity in the maritime regions of the southern and southwestern parts of the island (Forbes, 1994, p. 162).¹⁴ During his visit, he meticulously studied the antiquity and stylistic features of the statue at Kuṣṭarājagala, along with associated folklore (Forbes, 1994, p. 170). He also reported the tales of seven bodhi trees in Matara, as well as Vishnu and Buddhist temples and inscriptions in Dondra, a Buddhist monastery and inscription in Vāṇḍuruppe, to connect the conditions of these remains at his time of visit with folklore and the literary narratives found in the chronicles (Forbes, 1994, pp. 172-182). Forbes initiates his account of Māgama by introducing its contemporary conditions as an extensive and fertile yet thinly populated and unhealthy district, later exploring its historical significance. He introduces Māgama, also spelt as 'Roohoonoo Magam,' as having served as the capital of the Rōhaṇa (alternatively 'Roohoonoo' or Ruhuna, as per his references) division

of the island, a fact drawn from the literary narratives that attribute its founding to King Mahānāga and his successors, extending to the time of King Dutugemunu's heroic reign (Forbes, 1994, pp. 180-184). Forbes provides dates for the principal ruins at Māgama, including the Tissa tank, and the Buddhist sites at Meṇik Vihāra, Yaṭāla Vihāra, Tissamahā Vihāra, and Saṇḍagiriya, suggesting their origins before the second century BCE, as supported by literature (Forbes, 1994, pp. 186-189). His approach to antiquarian study primarily focuses on assessing the historical value of the ruins, their current state, and their alignment with literary accounts and folklore.

Pridham extensively discusses the contemporary and historical conditions of the country's southern region in the second volume of his account. Notably, he documents Māgama, also known as 'Magaama' or 'Roohoonoo Magaama,' located eight miles from the mouth of Kirindi Oya, as the capital of the Rōhaṇa division, founded by King Mahānāga according to historical chronicles (Pridham, 1849b, p. 584). He references the location of 'Māgrammum' on Ptolemy's map but hesitates to accept it as Māgama based on the word's etymology (Pridham, 1849b, p. 585). Pridham draws connections between the current topography and past conditions of the

¹⁴ This travel account, published as the eighth chapter titled 'To the city of Magam' in his book, details his journey from Colombo in 1834 to

Māgama via the Galle Road, passing through Weligama, Matara, Dondra, and Hambantota.



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region, describing it as a predominantly forested and sparsely populated village known for salt production. Once well-irrigated and agriculturally productive, this area is discussed in the context of its historical transformation. He identifies key historical sites, including Tissa Tank, Meṇik Vihāra, Yaṭāla Vihāra, Tissamahā Vihāra, Saṅḍagiriya, and Kirinda Vihāra, providing historical narratives of their origins (Pridham, 1849b, pp. 584-585). Furthermore, Pridham explores adjacent areas in the Southern part of the country, such as Kataragama, renowned for Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries; Tangalle, featuring an ancient stupa and a small fort; Mulkirigala Buddhist cave temple; Dondra, housing ruins of a Hindu and Buddhist temple; the Seven-Bo trees, Dutch constructions, and various structures in Matara; and Kuṣṭarājagala statue at Weligama. He carefully documented these locations through field surveys, examination of present architectural features, recording rituals, and exploring historical and oral narratives.

In his book, Tennent (2006, p. 289) explores the geographical and historical significance of Rōhaṇa, alternatively spelt as 'Rohuna' or 'Rohunu', interpreting its name as the "act or instrument of ascending, as steps or a ladder"; however, the source of this interpretation remains unknown. He identifies Rōhaṇa as one of the three geographically established administrative divisions in the country,

located in the southern part, including the mountain zone, and defined by natural boundaries such as the sea to the east and south, as well as the Mahaweli and Kalu rivers to the north and west (Tennent, 2006, pp. 288-289). Notably, a portion of Rōhaṇa, near Tangalle, retained the name 'Roona' at Tennent's time. He further highlights Rōhaṇa's historical role as an independent regional ruling division that frequently resisted invasions, serving as a refuge and place of exile for rulers and royals during times of invasion, political struggles, or in the absence of the rightful sovereign at the northern capital, and providing support for their eventual return and restoration. Additionally, Tennent notes that Rōhaṇa stands out as a region where the predominant language is Sinhalese, and its forests are inhabited by aborigines, with a larger population than in other divisions (Tennent, 2006, pp. 352, 360, 365). Furthermore, he discusses the literary evidence of foreign trade, particularly in the southern part of the island, and its connection to 'Mahagam' (Māgama), the capital of Rōhaṇa (Tennent, 2006, p. 377). Tennent's understanding of Rōhaṇa showcases its geographical and historical significance, providing information about its etymology, population, and political and economic contexts to the readers of his era by examining written records, folklore, and personal exploration.



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Goldschmidt's primary scholarly focus in Hambantota centred on the ancient city of Tissamahārāma, where a significant stupa constructed during King Mahānāga's reign was undergoing restoration during his visit (Müller, 1883, pp. 4-5). Goldschmidt conducted extensive surveys in Hambantota, visiting various temples in the Matara and Galle districts, although he has yet to discover any significant inscriptions during these visits. He diligently recorded numerous inscriptions and fragments found at various sites, including Tissamahā Vihāra, Palaṭupāna, Kirinda, Ranna, Wīrakeṭiya, Mulkirigala, Baṇḍagiriya, and others. Goldschmidt (1984b, p. 321) observed distinctions between the ancient dialects of the 'northern' and 'southern' regions by examining the language used in inscriptions from the North-Central and Southern provinces. Notably, the report does not mention the term Rōhaṇa and instead uses the historical reference 'Māgama' and the contemporary name 'Tissamahārāma.'

Müller's first fieldwork took him to the Hambantota district in Sri Lanka, where he aimed to continue Goldschmidt's unfinished work and explore other areas of historical significance. His treatment of the term 'Rōhaṇa,' or a similar designation, is notably limited in his report. Instead, he predominantly associates this term with the contemporary region of

Tissamahārāma and other locales where inscriptions have been unearthed, including Kirinda, Ambalantota, Paṭanangala, Kataragama, and Dondra, etc., without establishing a direct correlation to Rōhaṇa. Within his work, Rōhaṇa is characterised as the southern division of the country, functioning both as a geographical concept governed by regional rulers and as a refuge for the royal family concerning historical accounts. At the outset of the book, Müller (1883, p. 22) introduces Rōhaṇa and engages in a scholarly debate, challenging the idea that the early migrants with Vijaya were destined for 'Runa Raṭa'¹⁵, as documented in the historical text *Rājāvaliya*. He also posits that 'Indian' immigrants occupied the entire island except on the densely forested west coast (Müller, 1883, p. 23). Müller further aligns his study with literary narratives that depict Māgama as a 'kingdom' founded by Mahānāga in the third century BCE, alongside other regional rulers of Māgama, as evidenced in inscriptions. His interpretation suggests a perspective in which Rōhaṇa functions as an administrative division encompassing the country's southern region, with Māgama serving as its capital, now known as Tissamahārāma. Consequently, his study investigates the historical authenticity of ancient monasteries in Tissamahārāma and its adjacent areas and reservoirs like Dūra and Tissa, relying on information

¹⁵ A variation of Rōhaṇa, which means the 'southern kingdom.'



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derived from inscriptions. Given the exclusive concentration on inscriptions, Müller's endeavour offers an introductory overview of Rōhaṇa based on historical sources rather than a comprehensive understanding, emphasising the historical significance of contemporary geographical locations.

Early Archaeological Investigations

Early antiquarian pursuits in Rōhaṇa were primarily directed towards exploring the geography of Māgama, known as Tissamahārāma at that time. Through their documented findings, these antiquarians effectively conveyed the historical importance of Māgama as the ancient capital of Rōhaṇa. This knowledge garnered considerable interest from subsequent colonial officers, particularly those specialising in irrigation projects, but it notably extended into an archaeological setting. Noteworthy figures in this transition include Henry Parker (1884) and Richard Leslie Brohier (1930), although they were not officially designated archaeologists.

The earliest significant archaeological investigation in Rōhaṇa focused on the ancient settlements in Tissamahārāma and was conducted by Henry Parker. His careful excavations revealed ancient materials, prompting him to write an extensive report on his findings. This report reached into his interpretations of social conditions, commerce, and the state of education

during an early period in the history of Southern Sri Lanka. Parker's motivation for these investigations stemmed from the realisation that early historical accounts predominantly focused on the Northern capital at Anuradhapura.

Parker initially directed his attention towards understanding the contemporary and historical significance of the area. He chose Tissamahārāma, near Hambantota, to focus on irrigation works as a modern locale. This area was recognised for an enormous stupa built by King Mahānāga and the Tissa tank. Parker extensively explored the ruins of Tissa and Dūra tanks, discussing their role in irrigation, adjacent Buddhist monasteries, the residents, and the surrounding neighbourhoods. During his visit, Parker noted that the site of ancient Māgama, the capital of the Southern part, referred to by villagers as 'Māgampura Nuwara' (the Southern metropolis), retained its original name. However, he observed that a few significant ruins were buried below the ground level (Parker, 1884, p. 18). In his general observations, Parker identified key Buddhist monastic sites, analysing their layouts centred around the Tissa tank and drawing comparisons with Anuradhapura when necessary. He also remarked on the absence of lay building ruins. Parker provided extensive descriptions of prominent monasteries such as Saṅdagiriya, Tissamahārāma, Yaṭāla, and Meṇik Vihāra, presenting historical narratives



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of patrons, inscriptional information, and the contemporary conditions as ruins. His notable argument regarding the historical significance of Rōhaṇa centred on the inference that Māgama was the landing place for early migrants from Northern India (Parker, 1884, pp. 11-17; 1909, p. 241). This conclusion was drawn from visible ruins, inscriptional evidence, descriptions in literary sources, and support for King Vijaya's capital being located in the city of Māgama in the Southern part of Sri Lanka. Additionally, he proposed that the name 'Tambapanni', as mentioned in the literature, was changed with the settlement of Price Rōhaṇa, which then became the name for the entire Southern region, with Māgama replacing an appellation as its capital. This argument contributes to the ongoing historical inquiry into Rōhaṇa and Māgama within the scholarship of that period.

Parker's archaeological endeavours encompassed a comprehensive range of modern archaeological methods, including field explorations, excavations, and meticulous materials recording, focusing on stratification, mapping, sketching, dating, conjectural reconstructions, and interpretations. During field explorations, he identified the extensive ruins of Māgama, sprawling across a forested area beneath the ground level. These ruins comprised boundary walls, foundations, fragments of brick, tile, pottery, and scattered stone pillars,

indicating significant residential and monastic constructions. The crucial sites within the area were carefully mapped (Figure 1). Parker conducted archaeological excavations to deepen his systematic investigations, paying careful attention to stratification. He identified and carefully recorded archaeological finds with observable details accompanied by drawings (Figure 2). The site's complex stratification, extending up to 18 feet below the present surface, revealed various layers containing substantial fragments of tiles and earthenware. The lowest stratum was four feet thick in some parts, ranging from six (6) to 18 feet below the current surface. Parker attempted to date these layers by considering the position of remains in soil layers, accounting for cultural and natural formations. For example, the stratum at 14-18 feet below, containing in situ remains of a fire, such as undisturbed ashes, charcoal, and burned and fragmented bones (from which the marrow had been extracted), was dated before the construction of the tank, based on its water leakage and flooding. Upper layers were dated by the presence of early Roman coins from the first century CE (Parker, 1884, pp. 25-26). He asserted that the most ancient remains were deposited on the gravel. Other unearthed materials from these excavations were classified into structures (houses and stupas), household utensils, tools, weapons, foods, playthings and toys, personal ornaments, money, industries and commerce, foreign trade, education,

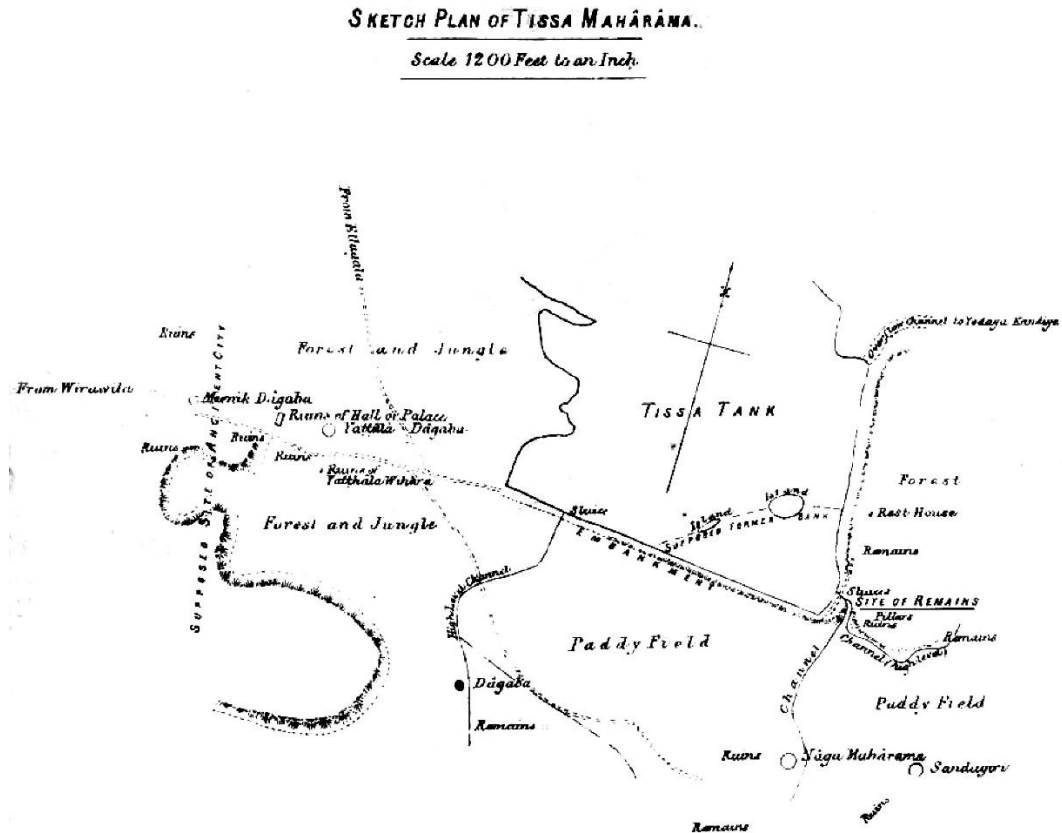


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and burials. The materials were classified according to their types, and in some instances, comparisons were

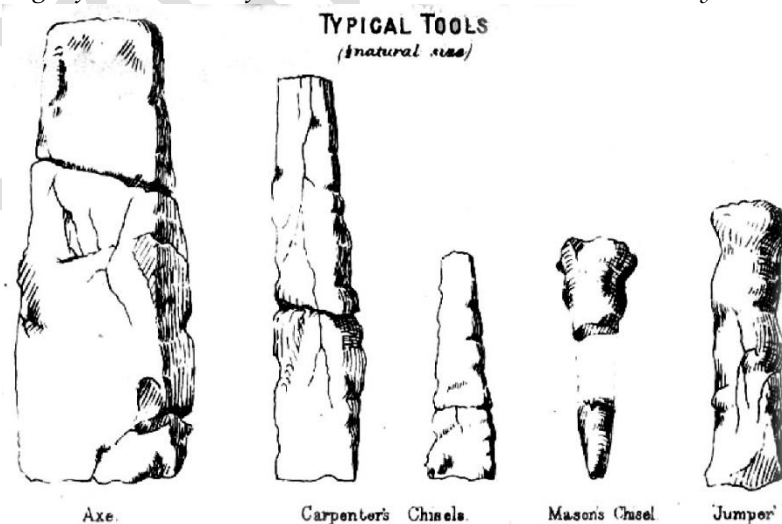
made with findings from other sites, particularly in the case of coins.

Figure 1: The Map of Tissamahārama by Parker



Source: Parker, 1884

Figure 2: Drawings of Tools Found from Excavations at Tissamahārama by Parker



Source: Parker, 1884



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Dating is another crucial method employed by Parker in his study. To enhance his literary investigations and establish the chronological context of significant constructions in the region, he seized the opportunity to inquire into the rulers' chronology in the country. This involved compiling and refining a chronological table of rulers. He applied palaeographical dating to letters engraved on pottery pieces, inscriptions, and Roman coinage discovered in various layers. Parker presented a palaeographical table comparing the scripts with those of Asokan and Sri Lankan inscriptions. Additionally, he undertook a classification of bricks discovered at various stupas and ruins in Māgama, arranging them in chronological order. This classification aimed to propose probable dates for the structures based on the characteristics of the bricks.

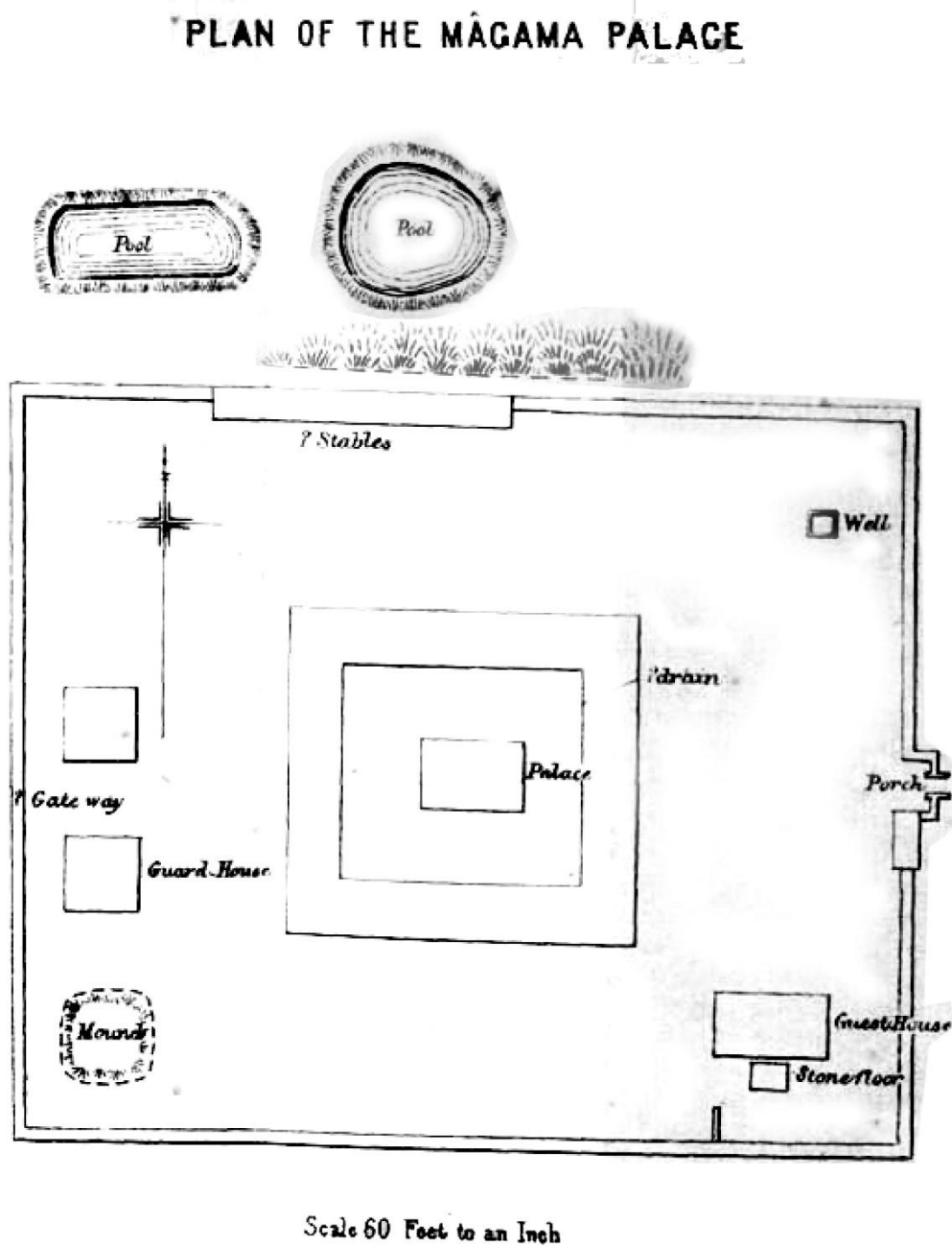
Parker's study offers compelling empirical evidence confirming the extensive urban nature of Māgama, serving as the ancient capital of Rōhaṇa. He presents a ground plan for the Māgama palace, scaled at 60 feet to an inch (Figure 3), along with a conjectural reconstruction. According to his findings, the palace likely

supported a tiled roof and had at least one upper story, aligning with possible dates derived from literary sources (Parker, 1884, pp. 74-77). His discoveries shed light on the large residential village within Māgama, encompassing artisans from diverse social groups and statuses. He estimates population density on the west side of the Tissa tank by noting an extensive spread of pottery and tiles, reaching half a mile into the jungle (Parker, 1884, p. 19). Through his excavations, Parker emphasises Māgama's significance as a pivotal hub in foreign trade—a major port city in southern Sri Lanka dating back to the pre-Christian era, serving as a meeting point for traders from the East and West (Parker, 1884, p. 20). His archaeological efforts in interpreting these findings mark a significant turning point in understanding Rōhaṇa during the late 19th century. His approach relies heavily on the newly revealed material culture of Māgama, providing insights into various aspects of contemporary society beyond its historical and religious conditions. This methodology significantly expands the modern knowledge of Māgama as the long-discussed Southern capital, particularly in its urbanised form.



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Figure 3: The Map of Māgama Palace at Tissamahārama by Parker



Source: Parker, 1884

It is also noteworthy that survey reports on ancient irrigation works conducted by Brohier contributed to the rediscovery of ancient Rōhaṇa. In Part III of his report, Brohier explores Ruhūṇa, also known as ‘Ruhūṇu Raṭṭa’ (or the ‘Southern Kingdom’). In this

section, he focuses on the region’s well-known ancient geographical boundaries and modern topography, specifically emphasising past cultivations facilitated by irrigation rather than centring on matters of royalty and religious developments.



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Given the vast expanse of Ruhuṇa, Brohier organises his discussion based on the ancient works dedicated to supplementing, regulating, and optimising water supply for irrigation purposes. To achieve this, he introduces a re-division of Ruhuṇa according to the area's characteristics, the irrigation methods necessitated by the distinctive features of different zones, and the ancient irrigation schemes. This approach leads to three main divisions: (a) the portion south of the Kalu River, (b) the southeastern portion encompassing the catchment areas of four principal rivers—Walaḷave, Kirindi, Meṇik, and Kumbukkan—and (c) the northwestern portion, which comprises the highlands (Brohier, 1935, p. 13).

In the first division, Brohier observes that the region's physical conditions, including marshlands, submerged plains, swamps, and regular rainfall, generally made artificial irrigation unnecessary. However, he notes evidence of small tanks that increased notably in the Matara area. Consequently, Brohier documents a few large and small tanks in Weligama, various irrigation works—some restored and others in ruin—scattered throughout the Matara District, and the remnants of numerous tanks that attest to the ancient population's skill in collecting and distributing water across the dry region from Tangalle to Hambantota (Brohier, 1935, pp. 14-15).

Brohier provides valuable insights into ancient Ruhuṇa, concentrating on the

second division encompassing the catchments of the four major rivers. He conducts extensive surveys to document the present functions and remnants of storage tanks, anicuts (diversion structures), channels, and their intricate network with paddy fields. Kirindi Oya receives particular attention for offering productive and fertile lands to early settlers at ancient Māgama (Brohier, 1935, p. 22). While offering a concise history of Rōhaṇa and Māgama based on literary sources, Brohier meticulously describes notable historical sites, including large stupas, their remnants, architectural features, and technological aspects. Through field surveys and observations of archaeological remains, abandoned paddy fields, traces of extinct settlements, and the modern topography of large tanks, Brohier endeavours to demonstrate that ancient Māgama was once a residence for royalty and a densely populated centre of magnificent cultivation. He extensively details the functions of old tanks and their system expansions to ensure a regular water supply for the growing population, provides relative dating for these developments, and presents possible imaginary reconstructions. Based on empirical evidence, Brohier (1935, pp. 24-25) concludes that the reservoirs on both banks of Kirindi Oya signify a steady increase in population in the Southern Kingdom, necessitating the expansion of cultivation. The decline of Māgama is attributed to the failure of irrigation works. Expanding his surveys beyond



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the Kirindi Oya catchment to the east, Brohier records abandoned tanks in the area as representations of the earliest irrigation works under the sponsorship of King Kavantissa and Dutugemunu. He also highlights the historical significance of locations such as Kataragama, Situlpavva, and Sēruvila.

Significantly, Brohier's survey extends across the traditional geographical boundary of Rōhaṇa, encompassed between the Kalu and Mahaweli rivers. His efforts result in more comprehensive conclusions not restricted solely to Māgama. Brohier emphasises that, despite the eastern portion being governed by regional rulers and thus yielding an imperfect reality to the metropolitan state, it still contributed significantly to the irrigation systems more intelligently (Brohier, 1935, p. 40). Overall, Brohier's records primarily focus on major river basins in Rōhaṇa, providing substantial evidence of early human settlements, population expansion, and agriculture that were predominantly centred on the economic aspects of the region. His survey contributes valuable insights into the historical development and significance of irrigation works across the broader landscape of Rōhaṇa.

Influence of Historical Archaeology

The inquiries led by Goldschmidt, Müller, and Parker, while possibly evaluated through modern archaeological perspectives, significantly improved the

understanding of Rōhaṇa before the initiation of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon (now known as the Department of Archaeology). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the subsequent investigations by the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, established in 1890, did not sufficiently encompass the archaeological landscape of the region. The first Commissioner, H. C. P. Bell, primarily focused on the North-Central province and some parts of the North-Western, Eastern, Sabaragamuwa, and Central Provinces. Surprisingly, there were no efforts to continue archaeological work after Parker's significant contribution. E. R. Ayrton, the Archaeological Commissioner succeeding Bell, dedicated his visits to studying the antiquities of the Southern Province in 1914. During this expedition, he recorded his observations at various sites, offering scholarly notes, copying inscriptions, and creating detailed plans and drawings (Senaveratne, 1920a; 1920b; 1921a; 1921b; 1921c). Unfortunately, despite his comprehensive efforts, Ayrton could not publish the results of his investigations due to his untimely death in Tissamahārāma (Senaveratne, 1920a, p. 39). This work, however, lacks substantial mentions of Rōhaṇa, with only a few references to kings' affiliations and literary connections. Until the 1990s, the Department of Archaeology conducted limited work on ancient Rōhaṇa, mainly comprising explorations, excavations, and restorations at Dondra, Mulkirigala,



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Mahiyāṅga, Buduruwagala, Nīlagiriya, Śāstravela, Tissamahārāmaya, Yaṭāla, Saṅdagiriya, Sēruvila, and fortifications at Galle and Matara (Hettiaratchi, 1990, p. 47; Fernando, 1990, pp. 87-111). The primary focus during this period was to designate these sites as archaeological reservations rather than engaging in comprehensive research. However, by the mid-20th century, the emphasis on exploring Rōhaṇa had shifted towards the historical events of the Kavantissa-Dutugemunu reigns (Wijayapala, 1990, p. 121), and explorations uncovered several monuments, inscriptions, and caves adorned with paintings.

During Senarath Paranavitana's tenure, a modest increase in knowledge about Rōhaṇa can be observed. His publication, *The Shrine of Upulvan at Devundara* (1953), focused on the monument under the Department of Archaeology's purview, aiming to analyse its architecture, discuss the ancient deity worshipped there, acknowledge the presence of ancient remains in the modern temple area, and understand its historical significance. The content covers anthropological, historical, and architectural aspects, detailing the identification of the shrine and the god Upulvan, along with insights from inscriptions. The archaeological study included measurements, plans, assessments of interior and exterior

elements, examinations of roofing, floor, decorations, landscape, and restorations, and a catalogue of objects found, such as a hoard of Portuguese coins (Paranavitana, 1953, pp. 6-10). The discussion concludes with comparisons of similar shrine architectures in ancient Lanka and India, emphasising the unique architectural affiliations of the Devundara shrine (Paranavitana, 1953, pp. 8-10). While offering a comprehensive account of the long-occupied religious site in ancient Rōhaṇa, the study lacks sufficient contextualisation or emphasis on the broader historical importance of Rōhaṇa.

Paranavitana's scholarly attention to the historical context of Rōhaṇa is evident in his contributions to the University of Ceylon's *History of Ceylon*, published in 1959.¹⁶ Across various chapters¹⁷, He intricately weaves together the historical narrative of the country, encompassing accounts of King Mahānāga and his successors, regional rulers, Dutugemunu's military campaigns, and his contributions to Buddhism, as well as Rōhaṇa's role in challenging political circumstances. Despite being a distinguished archaeologist, Paranavitana's chapters notably lack substantial archaeological data, relying extensively on literary sources and a limited number of inscriptions as the primary sources of evidential support. However, his

¹⁶ Refer to Ray, 1959.

¹⁷ Please see Chapters II to V and VIII of Book II of Volume I Part I of the *History of Ceylon*.



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contributions further extend to the field of epigraphical studies. This encompasses his examinations of epigraphy discovered in diverse locations, such as Magulmahā Vihāra, Badulla and Kataragama, published in *Epigraphia Zeylanica* volumes three to five from the 1920s to 1960s, accompanied by historical descriptions.

While Paranavitana's contributions to understanding Rōhaṇa are substantial, it is noteworthy that his focus, although not explicitly centred on Rōhaṇa, predominantly revolves around historical archaeology, emphasising epigraphy and literary narratives rather than delving deeply into archaeological aspects. This coincides with simultaneous historical investigations into the island by Mendis (1940)¹⁸ and examinations of Rōhaṇa by distinguished historians like Gunasinghe and Ranawella during the 1960s.

Under the influence of Paranavitana, C. W. Nicholas, in his official capacity as Deputy Commissioner of the Excise Department and later as the warden of the Wild Life Department, further developed the studies of Rōhaṇa in the 1950s. *Texts of the Brāhmī Inscriptions in the Ruhūṇa National Park* (1952) by Nicholas is a descriptive note based on his exploration of the inscriptions and the archaeological remains in the Ruhūṇa National Park¹⁹ in the Hambantota District. The exploration

covers a few ancient Buddhist monastic sites and adjacent rock and cave inscriptions citing the literary facts of their origin and architectural development, religious expansion, spiritual attainments, and patronage by rulers mentioned in Pali chronicles and commentaries (Nicholas, 1952, pp. 126-140). His historical approach to identifying religiously significant places was based on original names mentioned in the literature. In this article, he transliterated cave and rock inscriptions dated from the second century BCE, 66 in the number at Situlpavva rendered from eye copies and compared them with the estampages of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, eleven at Magulmahā Vihāra, two from Sīlavakanda, nine at Gōnagala and Pimburamalgala, one from Ākāsa Cetiya and three at Moderagala (Nicholas, 1952, pp. 129-139). Nicholas's work is a fine example of careful exploration and detailed documentation from a historical archaeology perspective, which he proved by his other publication, *Historical Topography of the Ancient and Medieval Ceylon*, in 1963.

Inspired by the works of Nicholas, Gunapala Senadheera, an independent explorer, contributed to the understanding of Rōhaṇa by publishing the book *Ruhūṇē Aprakāṭa Purāvastu* (literally means *Unknown Antiquities of Ruhūṇa*) in Sinhala in 1964.

¹⁸ Originally published in 1932, a revised edition was released in 1940.

¹⁹ A block reserved for wildlife now called Yāla National Park.



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Targeted towards students of history and Buddhist culture and the general public (Senadheera, 2015, p. 6), the book aimed to cultivate a national interest in Rōhaṇa. His work includes a comprehensive introduction to Rōhaṇa, incorporating literary and inscriptional references. Notably, he proposed a new interpretation of the initial location of King Mahānāga's Kingdom, suggesting it was positioned further east (Senadheera, 2015, pp. 21-22). However, the lack of a coherent historical-geographic approach weakens his argument. Despite this, the publication lists 117 archaeological sites in districts such as Galle, Matara, Hambantota, Monaragala, Badulla, Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee. These extensive field surveys reflect a growing nationalist antiquarian interest in Buddhist monuments and ruins, contributing to the revelation of the country's cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary scholarship, Rōhaṇa's diverse past unfolds through anthropological, historical, and archaeological perspectives. The archaeological exploration, documenting visible remnants after significant transformations and abandonment, is an early method to understand Rōhaṇa. The southern regions (distinct from Rōhaṇa) captured foreign writers' attention during the maritime occupation in Sri Lanka. Despite foreign colonisers' attempts to educate the European

public about this emerging 'British Colony', the concept of Rōhaṇa remained unfamiliar. Nevertheless, these numerous accounts were influential for further explorations to understand the historical significance of the southern parts of Sri Lanka.

These early explorations evolved into antiquarian pursuits during the mid-nineteenth century, preceding the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon. British antiquarians, lacking formal archaeological expertise, identified Rōhaṇa as a Southern administrative division with Māgama as its capital, showcasing a comprehensive intellectual approach. Their methods incorporated material and historical analyses, including observations, detailed field recordings, and integration with literary information and oral traditions. Subsequent studies by Goldschmidt and Müller focused on inscriptions, providing objective insights into antiquarian aspects.

Antiquarian efforts transitioned into early archaeological initiatives led by irrigation specialists, surpassing previous conclusions. Like modern archaeological methods, systematic investigations yielded a comprehensive understanding of Rōhaṇa by the late 19th century. Parker's fieldwork, involving excavations, revealed an extended urban character in Māgama, emphasising social conditions rather than political aspects. Brohier extended this, offering evidence of human



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settlement dispersal across a broader landscape of Rōhaṇa, particularly in major river basins.

Institutional engagement in the archaeological works of Rōhaṇa faced unexpected delays until the mid-20th century for unknown reasons. The understanding of Rōhaṇa declined during this period, revived by individuals like Parnavitana and Nicholas employing historical archaeology—their focus on the historicity of Rōhaṇa and its rulers, aligned with the historical research of the time. While monuments were examined, reliance on literary sources and inscriptions can be highlighted. This approach raised awareness of nationalist efforts to explore and reclaim significant Buddhist archaeological sites in the region by the 1960s.

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