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par

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**« Croyances religieuses et réseaux maritimes  
en Inde du Sud et à Sri Lanka (VIe-IXe siècles) »**

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## Résumé du projet de recherche

Ce projet de recherche post-doctorale consiste à explorer, pour l'Inde du Sud et Sri Lanka à la fin de l'Antiquité, les mécanismes d'imbrication des croyances religieuses et des savoirs maritimes qui apparaissent lors des échanges commerciaux. Ma réflexion porte plus particulièrement sur la transmission des savoirs et la circulation des objets au sein des réseaux sociaux formés par les différentes religions en présence : bouddhisme et christianisme pour l'essentiel, mais aussi brahmanisme et jainisme. Les sources littéraires, épigraphiques, archéologiques et iconographiques constituent l'appui principal de la documentation.

L'état de la recherche dans ce domaine offre un aspect contrasté et assez cloisonné, partagé entre des études qui abordent le commerce maritime sous ses aspects techniques, politiques ou économiques<sup>1</sup> et des travaux qui s'intéressent aux croyances religieuses par le biais des textes ou des traditions artistiques<sup>2</sup>. Or la période concernée coïncide avec un moment où l'Inde du Sud et Sri Lanka se trouvent au carrefour de ces réseaux. Sri Lanka en particulier se présente comme un intermédiaire entre la Chine et l'Inde d'une part, la Perse, les royaumes d'Himyar et d'Axoum de l'autre<sup>3</sup> : les VI<sup>e</sup>-VII<sup>e</sup> siècles constituent un moment de transition dans l'organisation des réseaux sociaux et commerciaux, tant dans la mer d'Arabie que dans le golfe du Bengale. D'un côté, les réseaux chrétiens<sup>4</sup> s'étendent depuis l'ouest jusqu'au cœur de l'île ; de l'autre, les tendances mahāyāniques du bouddhisme deviennent majoritaires durant le VI<sup>e</sup> siècle et suscitent le développement de nouveaux sites et objets religieux<sup>5</sup>.

Il est donc particulièrement intéressant d'aborder ce moment et cette région dans une approche globale, susceptible de saisir l'articulation entre les diverses croyances en présence (monothéistes et polythéistes) et les modalités de leur implication dans ces réseaux maritimes, tant à l'est qu'à l'ouest, afin de comprendre les transferts de sens, de contexte ou d'iconographie entre l'Asie du Sud et les horizons culturels d'Europe et d'Asie du Sud-Est. L'examen des découvertes récentes permet de mettre en lumière ce moment clef de l'histoire de la région et de mieux saisir son rôle de carrefour culturel.

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<sup>1</sup> G. K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade : International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC-AD 305* (Londres : Routledge, 2001) ; R. McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China* (Londres : Continuum, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> H. P. Ray, *The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Maritime Links of Early South Asia* (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1994). Voir aussi les travaux de Jason Neelis, Janice Stargardt ou Robert Brown pour les objets ; Sven Bretfeld ou Stefan Baums pour les textes.

<sup>3</sup> Cosmas, *Topographie chrétienne*, XI, 13-15.

<sup>4</sup> E. H. Seland, "Early Christianity in East Africa and Red Sea/Indian Ocean Commerce", *African Archaeological Review*, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> O. Bopearachchi, "Sri Lanka and the Maritime Trade: The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara as the Protector of Mariners", in *Asian Encounters: Networks of Cultural Interactions* (New Delhi : Delhi University, 2011).

## Activités en rapport avec le projet de recherche

Cette recherche a donné lieu à une présentation lors de la « Matinale Anhima », le 8 janvier 2016 à l'INHA, consacrée au thème « Objets trouvés ». Celle-ci, centrée sur les croix nestoriennes de Sri Lanka, consistait à réfléchir sur le statut de ces objets, leur « vie », leur circulation. Trouvailles fortuites sans contexte, « objets trouvés », donc, ces objets ont voyagé ou bien ont été fabriqués sur place, et se sont transformés, ont sans doute changé de sens au gré de ce transfert, pour se fondre dans un nouvel univers à dominante bouddhiste à Sri Lanka et brahmanique en Inde.

Une part importante de la recherche a consisté par ailleurs dans ma participation au projet d'« *Etude sur Avalokiteśvara* », dirigé par Osmund Bopearachchi (CNRS-ENS) et Sanjyot Mehendale (Université de Berkeley). Il s'agit d'une première étape de cartographie des sites bouddhiques et des réseaux commerciaux anciens de l'île, avec un intérêt tout particulier pour ce Bodhisattva et les sites mātāyaniques.

## Activité en rapport avec le LabEx HaStec

Au sein du LabEx HaStec, ce projet a été présenté lors de la « Journée des jeunes chercheurs HaStec », au sujet de la question des « marchands chrétiens et bouddhistes à Sri Lanka et en Inde du Sud ». La présentation avait pour but de mettre en relief l'organisation et l'interaction des réseaux commerciaux maritimes liés à ces deux religions. Les vestiges archéologiques – objets portatifs, statuaire, inscriptions – permettent d'aborder les trajets de marins, missionnaires, pèlerins ou autres voyageurs qui témoignent de l'activité multiculturelle de Sri Lanka à la fin de l'Antiquité.

## Publications en rapport avec le projet de recherche

Les résultats de cette recherche seront mis en valeur dans la revue à comité de lecture *Heritage : Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology*, publiée par l'Université du Kerala, au sein du volume 3.

## Autres publications

Une monographie sur Avalokiteśvara, issue du projet de cartographie en cours, verra le jour dans le courant de l'année, en commun avec Nuwan Abeywardana et Kellie Powel.

Un article de synthèse sur Alagankulam, site portuaire d'Inde du Sud, est en cours d'achèvement, en collaboration avec Roberta Tomber pour l'étude des amphores et James Lankton pour celle des perles de verre.

Le rapport des fouilles effectuées à Kuchchaveli en 2011, en codirection avec Osmund Bopearachchi et Veronica Ciccolani, est achevé et prévu pour une publication dans *Ancient Ceylon*.

## Développement et résultats de la recherche

Article à paraître dans *Heritage*:

“Trade and cross-cultural contacts in Sri Lanka and South India during late Antiquity”  
(6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries)<sup>6</sup>

The period extending from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century in the Indian Ocean witnesses drastic changes in terms of political, religious and economic organization. The networks of trade and pilgrimage evolve, creating new dynamics in the area. This article aims at defining the place and role of Sri Lanka and South India at the crossroads between the East and West flow of goods and people. The religious practices in connection with maritime exchanges will be considered, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, in order to confront the different approaches of these communities towards the circulation of persons and objects. The geographical location of Sri Lanka at the point of encounter of these networks is a key factor to favor cross-fertilization of ideas, iconographies, concepts and artistic patterns. We would like to examine the archaeological evidence confirming the statement of Cosmas describing the island as a central trade mart and show how this situation gave birth to multiple cultural interactions and creations.

### 1. New situations in the Indian Ocean

#### a) Political and commercial changes

The sixth century monk and geographer Cosmas, said “indicopleustes”, describes Sielediba – Sri Lanka as a central mart and crossroads in the middle of the Indian Ocean:

This is the great island in the Ocean, lying in the Indian sea, called Sielediba by the Indians and Taprobanê by the Greeks. [...] From the whole of India, Persia and Ethiopia the island, acting as intermediary, welcomes many ships, and likewise despatches them. From regions of the interior, i.e. Tzinista and other markets, it imports silk, aloes, cloves, clove-wood, sandal wood, and all the native products. And it re-exports them to the people of the exterior, i.e. to Male, where pepper grows, and to Calliena, where copper is produced, and sesame wood and cloths of various sorts – for this too is a big centre of trade – similarly to Sindou, where musk, costus root and spikenard come from, and to Persia, Himyarite country and to Adulis. In return it gets the produce of each of the afore-mentioned markets, and passes them on to the peoples of the interior, and at the same time exports its own native products to each of these markets<sup>7</sup>.

The Alexandrian traveller indicates through this statement the middleman position of Sri Lanka on the maritime silk road between China on one side, and the Arabian Sea traders on the other, from India, Persia, Arabia and Africa. We will see that the archaeological material discovered on the island for this period corroborates this description. Our question is to know to which extent these networks of trade fostered cultural contacts and gatherings of different populations and beliefs. Before proceeding to the inventory and analysis of artefacts, we would like to make a small detour towards

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<sup>6</sup> This article has been written during a Post-Doctoral Fellowship of the Labex Hastec, in the laboratory Anhima (CNRS).

<sup>7</sup> Cosmas, *Christian Topography*, XI, 13-15, translated by Weerakkody, 1997, p. 245.

the political context of this area during these four centuries and understand in which way this particular period is a crucial moment of change for the cultural and conceptual exchanges.

From the middle of the sixth century, and during around 300 years, South India is the theatre of recurrent wars among the three major kingdoms: the Chalukyas of Badami, the Pallavas of Kanchipuram and the Pāṇḍyas of Madurai<sup>8</sup>. Their rivalry for the fertile tracts lead in particular the famous rulers of the Chalukyas – Pulakēsin II – and of the Pallavas – Mahendra-varman I (600-630) – into a series of conflicts in Karnataka and Andhra, at the northern border of the Pallavas and the southern frontier of the Chalukyas. Frequently, the victor would take some masons and artisans to work for him, so that “artistic styles tended to merge on occasion”<sup>9</sup>. The Pāṇḍyas, who had established their position in southern Tamil Nadu by the sixth century, were harassing their northern neighbors every now and then<sup>10</sup>. By the ninth century, the decline of the Pallavas and the Chalukyas, against the raising Cōḷas and Rashtrakutas respectively, introduce a new order in the area, giving birth to a new political and social organization.

This situation is not without incidence on Sri Lanka, with whom the regular interactions established as early as the megalithic period appeared to develop intensively during that time. The main event consisted in the alliance between the Pallavas and the dynasty of King Mānavamma and his successors: “Ceylon’s awareness of her neighbors was never more important than during the nearly four hundred years following the flight of the Sinhalese prince Mānavamma, from Ceylon to political asylum in Kāñchī, at the court of Pallava Narasimhavarman I”<sup>11</sup> (630-668). This prince<sup>12</sup>, son of Kassapa II, after being overthrown by Dāthōpatissa II, found refuge with the Pallava king and was even present on the defeat of Pulakēsin II in 642. After a first attempt under Dāthōpatissa II (657-666), he finally recovers the throne in 684 with the military support of the Pallava king<sup>13</sup>. His sons, who were born in India and had lived there in exile, succeeded him on the throne. Thus, this period is considered by Dohanian as a new era in the history of Ceylon, during which he even defines a “Pallava style” in Sri Lankan sculptural art.

Politically, the links between the island and the continent continue to be intertwined through the game of alliances between kingdoms: the war between Pāṇḍyas and Pallavas extends in Sri Lanka with an invasion of the island by the Pāṇḍyas under king Sēna I (ninth century), including the sack of Anuradhapura, and a counter attack by his successor and nephew Sēna II, who took and sacked

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<sup>8</sup> Thapar, 2003, p. 328.

<sup>9</sup> Thapar, 2003, p. 331.

<sup>10</sup> Thapar, 2003, p. 331.

<sup>11</sup> Dohanian, 1977, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Codrington and Hocart, 1939, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Dohanian, 1977, p. 13.

Madurai<sup>14</sup>. Despite an alliance later on between the Pāṇḍyas and the Sinhalese against their common enemy, the Cōḷas, the regular invasions of the latter inaugurate a new moment in the history of the region, until the destruction of Anuradhapura by Rājārāja I in 992-993 and their definite control over the island in 1017 under Rājendra I, with a definitive shift of the capital city to Polonnaruwa.

On the western side of the Indian Ocean, the situation is equally complex and showing deep reorganization of political, religious and commercial forces. At the beginning of the sixth century, the nexus of the opposition of powers concentrates in the realm of Himyar in Yemen. The struggles between Jews and Christians in this country involved not only the close by kingdom of Axum but also the great Empires of Byzantium and Persia. After a first intervention of the Ethiopian king in the Jewish kingdom of Himyar in 518 to strengthen a start of Christian power, the Jewish ruler Yūsuf boasted himself of persecuting Christians, particularly in the massacre of Nājran in 523<sup>15</sup>. The response of the king of Axum Kālēb was not to be delayed as he invaded Yemen in 525 and reestablished a Christian power in Himyar, which turned in the 530' into an overseas territory within the orbit of Axum. The Byzantium emperor Justin encouraged this action by diplomacy and even sending troops, whereas the Persians had thrown their support behind the Jews of Arabia<sup>16</sup>. Thus, the two great powers of the region were involved in the conflict, both by a game of alliances and because of their own political and commercial rivalry. In 547, the next Christian king of Himyar, Abraha, can boast himself in a conference to exploit the ambitions of the main players in the Near-East: Byzantium, Persia and Ethiopia<sup>17</sup>.

The successor of Justin, Justinian, arrived on the throne in 527, played an active role in trying to intercept Persian trade interests in the Red Sea, by trying to subjugate the island of Iotabê in the gulf of Aqaba<sup>18</sup> and by requesting the Ethiopians to buy silk directly from Sri Lanka. We know by the testimony of Procopius, that he interceded with the Ethiopians in that purpose but that the latter could not fulfill his wish:

For he purposed that the Aethiopians, by purchasing silk from India and selling it among the Romans, might themselves gain much money, while causing the Romans to profit in only one way, namely, that they be no longer compelled to pay over their money to their enemy [the Persians]. [...] For it was impossible for the Aethiopians to buy silk from the Indians, for the Persian merchants always locate themselves at the very harbours where the Indian ships first put in, (since they inhabit the adjoining country), and are accustomed to buy the whole cargoes<sup>19</sup>.

On the other side, confronting the expeditions of Abraha in Arabia and to the request of the Jews, the Persians took the opportunity to invade southern Arabia in 575 and definitively expelled

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<sup>14</sup> Codrington and Hocart, 1939, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Bowersock, 2013, pp. 88–91.

<sup>16</sup> Bowersock, 2013, pp. 97, 90.

<sup>17</sup> Bowersock, 2013, p. 114.

<sup>18</sup> Bowersock, 2013, pp. 107–108.

<sup>19</sup> Procopius, *Persica*, I, 20, 13, translated by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, 1914.

the Ethiopians from Yemen. They went up to Palestine and took Jerusalem in 614<sup>20</sup>. This religious instability created a gap between the Byzantine Christian Empire, allied with Ethiopia, and the Zoroastrian Sasanians, constitutive of a fertile middle ground for the new faith of Muhammad and his Believers. In 622, when he migrated to Medina, the Persian forces had advanced into Egypt. No one at that moment could foresee that the Sasanian monarchy would collapse in 651, that Constantinople would not be able to prevent the Believers from moving into Syria and Palestine and that Adulis-Axum would lapse back into obscurity. By the seventh century, a new stability arises in the western Indian Ocean with the raise of the Arab Muslim power. The unity given by the conquests as well as the diffusion of a common coinage gives a particular impetus to commercial exchanges.

At the beginning of the Medieval period, around the eighth-ninth centuries, the major route seems to have corresponded to a trading system including the east coast of Africa – where Islamic and Chinese ware have been discovered in Kanbalu (Lamu archipelago) – the port of Athar on the Red Sea (facing the Farasan Islands), the Persian gulf with the main port of Siraf on the Iranian coast (together with Basra as well as Sohar on the Omani side), the Indus estuary in Banbhore (Daybul), Quilon in Kerala and Mantai in Sri Lanka<sup>21</sup>.

This trade network would have involved all kinds of beliefs and religious creeds, from Jews and Christians to Zoroastrians and Muslims. Their presence is attested on the Asian shore of the Arabian Sea with uneven accuracy depending on groups and periods. By the eighth and ninth centuries, some Arab settlements, including the acquisition of land, are to be seen on the Indian coast, in Gujarat, Konkan and Malabar. Their acculturation leads them to adopt differentiated customs depending on their geographical location, such as matriliney in Kerala for example<sup>22</sup>. During the eighth century, with the Arab occupation of Persia, some Zoroastrians establish large settlements to the north of Mumbai, giving birth to the Parsi community still lively in the area<sup>23</sup>. Jews and Christians are present as well and tradition gives them an important place on the coast, particularly in the South. We will pay attention to the archaeological remains that can attest of their settlement in South India and Sri Lanka, in particular to the artefacts showing an early presence of Christians in this region. Compared to a temporary stay for the sole purpose of trade, the installation of these traders on the Asian land may have opened the way for a more intense form of cultural exchanges and inter-religious contacts.

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<sup>20</sup> Bowersock, 2013, p. 118.

<sup>21</sup> Tampoe, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Thapar, 2003, p. 332.

<sup>23</sup> Thapar, 2003, p. 333.

At the other end of the journey, in South-East Asia and China, decisive changes occur as well between the sixth and the tenth century. In China, the dynasty of the Sui (581-617) allows a reunification of the country in 589 under Sui Wendi<sup>24</sup>. He introduces major innovations like competitive exams for government employees, construction of great walls and digging of rivers and canals, all measures that facilitate administration and circulation in the country and play a crucial role in the economic development. His successor Sui Yangdi leads a policy of maritime expansion with the building of a fleet. Commercial links increase and become particularly prosperous under the Tang dynasty (618-907), especially until the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup>. State administration and military organization are developed, as well as tax system and agricultural techniques, at the same time as the market benefits of a monetized economy, giving the period a great stability.

In South-East Asia, trade contacts rely on a different base, which consists on a multiplicity of chiefdoms<sup>26</sup> or city-states, notably in Burma, Cambodia and the Malay peninsula. The main one is Srīwijaya, that thrived between the seventh and the thirteenth century, “the first known large-scale state of world economic stature to have prospered in Insular Southeast Asia”<sup>27</sup>. Its political, religious and economic centre seems to have been located in Palembang (Sumatra) and a series of settlements on the river or on the coasts testify of a pattern of trade-oriented harbor polities. In Burma, the kingdom of Dvāravatī is known among other evidence by Chinese sources and coins between the seventh and the ninth century<sup>28</sup>. In the eighth century, a Khmer state arises around the city of Angkor and in Java<sup>29</sup>, at the same time, different cities are building new temples and dedicate a lot of their activity to long-distance trade, as well as the previous states or city-states.

The period extending from the seventh to the tenth century thus marks a development in exchanges and in the diffusion of knowledge between China, India and Arabia. Persian has become the *lingua franca* of the southern seas. By the ninth century, a series of economic difficulties, together with epidemics and social rebellions, induces a decline in the cosmopolitanism of the Chinese cities, to the extent that the Emperor forbids Buddhism and other foreign religions. In Canton, until then welcoming Persian and Arab ships, a massacre of Persians and Muslims in 879 inaugurates a decline in long-distance travels. On the Arabic side, the unity of the caliphate is threatened: Central Asia and a part of Persia fall out of the Abbassid control; Egypt, Palestine and Yemen become independent. These tendencies towards autonomy come together with economic hardships<sup>30</sup>. The wars and rebellions in the caliphate at the end of the ninth century correspond to the end of the

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<sup>24</sup> Beaujard, 2012a, p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Beaujard, 2012a, p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> Ray, 1994, p. 89.

<sup>27</sup> Manguin, 2000, p. 410.

<sup>28</sup> Beaujard, 2012a, p. 91.

<sup>29</sup> Beaujard, 2012a, pp. 92–93.

<sup>30</sup> Beaujard, 2012a, p. 23.



Tang dynasty in China in 906. The beginning of the tenth century witnesses a reorganization of the world trade dominated by these two great powers.

As far as trade routes are concerned, the period of early Medieval times coincided with long direct travels from Persia or Arabia up to China. The Persian and Arabian merchantmen would go to China whereas the Chinese were receiving traders from land and sea routes rather than taking the journey themselves<sup>31</sup>. During the next period, from the tenth century onwards, one rather sees the development of a more segmented trade and of regional networks that allowed trade to go faster by avoiding the complete long journey eastward and back<sup>32</sup>.

## b) Religious evolutions

These contacts take place in a context of expansion of Buddhism in some places, decline in others, as well as deep doctrinal changes. The diffusion of Buddhism from India and Sri Lanka towards Southeast Asia is now well-known and had started well before the period we are considering here, showing for example the influence of the art of Nagarjunakonda on some images in Thailand or Vietnam from the fourth century<sup>33</sup>. Similarly, some early Brahmanical images of Viṣṇu are reported from Thailand and Java, dated to the fourth-fifth centuries. By the sixth century, the interesting phenomenon is that, in the Malay peninsula, both Brahmanical and Buddhist images “are distinctive enough to be differentiated from Indian prototypes”<sup>34</sup>. It implies the development of specific skills by local craftsmen, architects, masons, etc., likely to result, not just from few travels of elite people but from the “sustained contact with a diverse group of traders, missionaries and other occupational groups who travelled with the expansion of the maritime network”<sup>35</sup>. Close links with Burma, with iconographies based on Pāli literature, appear as early as the fifth century and flourish until the eleventh-twelfth centuries<sup>36</sup>. In Java, Sinhalese monks from the Abhayaghiri vihara are identified in an inscription dated of 792, on structures showing their specific double-platform architecture<sup>37</sup>. Depending on the regions, the Hīnayāna or Mahāyāna tendencies are more emphasized, maybe revealing different – even though interconnected – networks of trade<sup>38</sup>. Buddhism reaches China as well and is favored in the Liang court at the beginning of the sixth century<sup>39</sup>.

At the same time, the influence of Buddhism in India itself is decreasing. Especially under the Guptas in the north, between the fourth and sixth centuries, the social organization focuses more

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<sup>31</sup> Beaujard, 2012a, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Tampoe, 2003, p. 79.

<sup>33</sup> Ray, 1994, p. 160 ; see also Beaujard, 2012b, p. 464, for signs of links between Sri Lanka and the Pyu art in Burma.

<sup>34</sup> Ray, 1994, p. 160.

<sup>35</sup> Ray, 1994, p. 161.

<sup>36</sup> Bopearachchi, 2016, p. 64.

<sup>37</sup> Sundberg, 2016, p. 349; for relations between Sri Lanka and Java, see also Sundberg, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Beaujard, 2012b, p. 465.

<sup>39</sup> Gernet, 1999, pp. 162–163, quoted in Beaujard, 2012b, p. 500.

and more on the temple as the center of social and economic activity, related to a system of land-grants and consolidation of agrarian settlements<sup>40</sup>. H. P. Ray argued that this may have been related to the lack of rituals offered by the Buddhist Sangha to the lay community, creating an increasing distance with them and contributing to the change of ideological affiliation<sup>41</sup>. In the South, this evolution appears during the seventh century and by the time the Pallava dynasty is flourishing, the main architectural activity of the time is dedicated to Brahmanical temples, even though Buddhist centers still exist, such as in Kanchipuram, Kaveripattinam and Madurai<sup>42</sup>.

On the contrary, Sri Lanka sees new developments in the history of Buddhism on the island, from its Theravāda origins to a dominant Mahāyāna ideology by the sixth century. During the third century, the monks of the Abhayagiri vihara, in permanent discord with the first Buddhist establishment of the Mahāvihāra, created the *Dhammaruci* sect and started putting forward the text of the *Vaitulyapiṭakas* as the true word of the Buddha, under the reigns of Voharikatissa (215-237) and Gothabhaya (254-267). The text was not accepted by the King and the Mahāvihāra and this incident is generally accepted as the earliest clear indication of Mahāyānism in Sri Lanka<sup>43</sup>. Later on, the king Mahasena, who comes to the throne in 334, following the teachings of his tutor Sanghamitra, a monk from South India, accepts the *Vaitulyapiṭakas* and takes side for the Abhayagiri against the Mahāvihāra<sup>44</sup>. But the deep ontological changes seem to take place in the fifth and sixth century, when these Mahāyānic tendencies become a majority in the country, gaining a decisive victory over the Theravāda<sup>45</sup>. Between the seventh and the tenth centuries, the cult of the Buddha evolves and the cult of the Boddhisattvas flourishes, among which Avalokiteśvara in the first place.

From East to West at the same time, a particular group of Christians – the so-called “Nestorians” – sends missionaries and travellers all over Asia. They originate mainly from Sasanian Persia, where they settled due to different political events. Three reasons may have encouraged the diffusion of Christianity towards the East. First, before 313, some Christians tended to flee away from the persecutions of the Roman Empire and find a refuge under the Parthians and the Sasanians after 224, who were tolerating them<sup>46</sup>. Second, the communities of Jewish merchants who were travelling from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf or even to China, were for some of them converted to the Christian faith<sup>47</sup>: the role of the merchants in the missionary process is particularly important<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Ray, 1994, p. 161.

<sup>41</sup> Ray, 1994, p. 198.

<sup>42</sup> Dohanian, 1977, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Dohanian, 1977, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Dohanian, 1977, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Bopearachchi, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Baum and Winkler, 2003, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Baum and Winkler, 2003, p. 8; Jullien and Jullien, 2002, p. 225:

<sup>48</sup> Jullien and Jullien, 2002, pp. 219–221 : analogies between Christians and merchants is particularly frequent in the texts.

and the conversions have to a certain extent followed the trade routes, notably from Antioche and Edessa to Persia. For example, after Diocletian and Narses conclude a treaty in 297, Nisibis becomes a great redistributing market between Ctesiphon and Antioche, thus favoring the expansion of Christianity towards Persia<sup>49</sup>. Third, the invasions of the borders of the Roman Empire by Shapur I (240-72), who went until Antioche in 260, lead to the capture of Christian prisoners, who were sent to Persia and settled there.

The Church of Persia then progressively took its independence from Antioche and the Roman decisions: the synods of 410 and 424 assert the autonomy of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon towards the bishop of Antioche<sup>50</sup>, even though they accept the creeds of the council of Nicaea (325). The dissension between monophysites and diphysites takes place in this context and cannot be reduced to the positions of Nestorius and the council of Ephesus in 431, but owe a lot to the theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia. The synods of the end of the fifth century<sup>51</sup> reaffirm the diphysite positions of the Church of Persia and consider the patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as the one of the East (as opposed to four patriarchs of the West in Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioche)<sup>52</sup>.

This 'Syriac (named after the aramean dialect of Edessa) Church of the East' sent missionaries to Central Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and even to China, where the stele of Xian – capital of the Tang dynasty – erected in 781, commemorates the arrival of missionaries sent by Ishoyahb II in 635<sup>53</sup>. In South India, even though the tradition supposes the arrival of the apostle Thomas in the first century, the first attested relation of Christian settlements can be found in Syriac sources of the third century, notably in the *Doctrine of the Apostles* written in Edessa in 250<sup>54</sup>. The *Acts of Thomas*, written as well in the third century, may give us a clue of the relations between North-West India and Edessa at that time: the itineraries given for Thomas correspond to the major trade routes and may allude to the travels of the missionaries sent from Osroene towards the East<sup>55</sup>. Later on, bishops were commonly sent from Persia to South India<sup>56</sup>. Lastly, the fourth and fifth centuries witness some Sasanian persecutions against Christians, which would have encouraged them to move towards other countries. The first ones occur under the reign of Shapur II (309-79) between 339 and 379 in

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<sup>49</sup> Jullien and Jullien, 2002, p. 217.

<sup>50</sup> Synod of Isaac, asserting the authority of the catholicos of Seleucia, and synod of Dadisho, deciding not to refer to the patriarchs of the West: Mundadan, 2008, p. 80.

<sup>51</sup> In particular the synod of Acacius in 486, adopting the diphysite christology, following the school of Edessa-Nisibis and Th. of Mopusestia, in rupture with the positions of Alexandria: Mundadan, 2008, pp. 80–81.

<sup>52</sup> Baum and Winkler, 2003, pp. 25–35.

<sup>53</sup> Baum and Winkler, 2003, p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> Mingana, 1926, p. 448.

<sup>55</sup> Jullien and Jullien, 2002, p. 216.

<sup>56</sup> The patriarch of the Eastern Church is first situated in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, then in Bagdad from the eighth to the thirteenth century: Mundadan, 2008, p. 81.

A so-called John of Persia is presented by Eusebius (*Vita Constantini*, III, 7) as having participated in the council of Nicaea in 325 but this assertion cannot be confirmed by the documents of the fourth century; the information is again given in the fifth century by Gelasius of Cyzicus but it rather seems extrapolated by the situation of his time: Jullien and Jullien, 2002, p. 110.

response to a letter of Constantine seeking for protection towards Christians; a second wave takes place under Yazdgird I (399-421), Bahram V (421-39) and Yazdgird II (439-57).

During the sixth century, the testimony of Cosmas is again fundamental, for the presence of Christians on the west coast of India and in Sri Lanka:

In Taprobanê, an island inner India, where the Indian Sea is, there is also a Christian church there, and clergy and faithful, but I do not know whether there are any further on. Similarly, in the place called Male, where pepper grows, and in the place called Kalliana, there is also a bishop, ordained in Persia<sup>57</sup>.

The same island has also a Church of Persian Christians resident there, and a presbyter ordained in Persia, and a deacon, and all the liturgy of the church. The natives and the kings are pagans<sup>58</sup>.

Male would have been located on the Malabar coast and Kalliana would match with the port of Kalyan close to Bombay (some authors have also suggested Quilon in Kerala). Cosmas not only mentions Christians but asserts their close relation to the clergy of Persia. The archaeological evidence for this fact is limited but reveals a very interesting iconography, showing indeed specific links with West-Asia, particularly Mesopotamia, as we will see.

## 2. Archaeological evidence of long-distance networks during this period

The links between Sri Lanka or South India and other distant lands during Late Antiquity and Early Medieval period appear through diverse archaeological evidence, including coins, ceramics, glass fragments, beads and inscriptions. This material originates from the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea/Mediterranean region and China.

In Sri Lanka, the places of discovery concentrate in the main ports or capital cities, whereas the smaller sites of the hinterland remain devoid of any long distance items of this type. Thus West Asian and East Asian ceramics were absent from the 2013 survey around Anuradhapura and were confined to the Citadel: “this is interesting in terms of access to what may be deemed ‘prestige’ artefact types and we may also record that such objects are also known from other sites within the core of the hinterland, the Sacred City, such as at Jetavana and Abhayagiri<sup>59</sup>.” The major part of the material belongs to the capital city of Anuradhapura and to its port of Mantai, which is linked with it via the Malwattu *oya*. “The presence of West Asian ceramics, especially the luxury types, and indeed of Chinese wares would seem to demonstrate that Anuradhapura, in its later heyday, had a significant role to play in the Indian Ocean economy<sup>60</sup>.” Mantai, as a pivotal entrepot and transshipment centre, plays a midway role between the Islamic and Chinese worlds, with material similar to the other maritime entrepots of the China trade between the eighth and the eleventh

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<sup>57</sup> *Christian Topography*, III, 65, translated by Weerakkody, 1997, p. 244.

<sup>58</sup> *Christian Topography*, XI, 14, translated by Weerakkody, 1997, p. 245.

<sup>59</sup> Coningham and Gunawardhana, 2013, p. 229.

<sup>60</sup> Coningham, 2006, p. 116.

century: Siraf and Basra on the Persian Gulf, Sohar on the Omani coast, Banbhore in Sind, Manda and Kilwa on the East African coast<sup>61</sup>.

The other sites where some western or eastern material have been put to light, in smaller quantity though, are port cities like Godavaya<sup>62</sup> and Kucchaveli<sup>63</sup>, and the capital of the southern realm of Ruhuna, Tissamaharama<sup>64</sup>. This observation would tend to suggest that these items of trade or gift were of limited extension and perhaps intended for an elite.

In South India, foreign material, and Chinese ceramics in particular, have been discovered in the coastal sites of the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, such as Arikamedu, Korkai, Alagankulam or Pattanam-Muziris. Similarly, the finds belong to a network of important coastal cities and commercial centers, likely to be trading and/or redistributing goods from East to West and reverse.

On the Western side, the items of trade belonging to the Mediterranean world during this time consist mainly in Byzantine coins of the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of them are struck in Constantinople and would have travelled via Adulis with other coins of the Diocesis Oriens<sup>65</sup>. They include *solidi*, *semmissis* and *nummi*<sup>66</sup>, as well as one Arab-Byzantine *solidus/dinar*<sup>67</sup> of the late 7<sup>th</sup> c. One Aksumite coin<sup>68</sup> have also been discovered in Tissamaharama. In India, Byzantine coins have been noticed as well, even though not studied as much as the Roman ones: they include mainly 5<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Carswell and Prickett, 1984, p. 60.

<sup>62</sup> Weisshaar et al., 2001, pp. 305, 317.

<sup>63</sup> Excavations conducted in 2011 under the direction of O. Boparachchi and N. Perera.

<sup>64</sup> Weisshaar et al., 2001, p. 74.

<sup>65</sup> Walburg notes that the composition of the hoards from Sri Lanka and from the Diocesis Oriens are very similar: Walburg, 2008, p. 55.

<sup>66</sup> Walburg, 2008, pp. 156–221, lists the following items for Sri Lanka:

Hendala, at the mouth of the Kelani Ganga: 1 late Roman or early Byzantine *solidus* (Arcadius or Theodosius II, or Basisliscus (475-476) or Anastasius I (491-518)

Galle: 1 *tremissis* of Heraclius, struck in Constantinople (610-613)

Matara: 1 Byzantine AV *semmissis*, prob. 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c.

Tissamaharama/Akurugoda: 1 cross within wreath, uncertain (Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire or Vandals), from 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 5<sup>th</sup> c. to 700

Biddell's collection, unknown provenance, post-5<sup>th</sup> c.:

\_1 *solidus* of Anastasius I, 491-518

\_1 *solidus* of Justinus I, struck at Constantinople, 522-527

\_1 *semmissis* and 1 *tremissis* of Justinianus I, struck in Constantinople, 527-565

\_1 ten *nummi* piece of Tiberius II, 578-582

\_1 ten *nummi* piece of Mauricius, struck in Constantinople, 582-583

\_1 *solidus* of Heraclius and Heraclius Constantinus, struck in Constantinople, 613-625

\_1 twelve *nummi* piece of Heraclius and his sons, struck in Alexandria, 632-641

\_1 Byzantine *hexagrammon* of Constans II, struck in Constantinople, 659-668

\_1 *solidus* of Theophilus, 829-842

Leslie de Saram collection, uncertain provenance:

\_1 *solidus* of Anastasius I, 491-518, from Constantinople

\_1 *semmissis* and 1 *tremissis* of Justinianus I, 527-565, from Constantinople

\_1 *solidus* of Mauricius Tiberius, 582-602, from Constantinople

<sup>67</sup> Walburg, 2008, p. 163: Paragoda (in Weligam Korale): 1 Arab-Byzantine *solidus/dinar*, late 7<sup>th</sup> c., Arab imitation of a Byzantine coin.

<sup>68</sup> Walburg, 2008, p. 190: Tissamaharama/Akurugoda: 1 crowned bust r./large cross, Kingdom of Aksum, 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century.

century denominations, of Theodosius II, Constantius II, Leo I, Zeno and Basiliscus<sup>69</sup>, but coins of Anastasius I (491-518), Justinus I (518-527) and Justinianus I (527-565) have also been found<sup>70</sup>. Contemporary to these finds are Late Roman amphorae and glass fragments. Late Roman amphorae are most common in the northern and western coast of India but have been discovered in a few places in the south, namely Arikamedu, Karur and Tissamaharama<sup>71</sup>. They extend chronologically until the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Some glass fragments of Late Roman period have been found at the Abhayagiri vihara in Anuradhapura<sup>72</sup> but most of the glass vessels that could be identified were related to the Early Islamic period. Thus, in accordance with Cosmas' statement, from a 6<sup>th</sup> century Alexandrian perspective, exchanges with the Byzantine world must have kept a certain intensity, whether it be directly or via the kingdom of Axum.

However, after the 7<sup>th</sup> century and until the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it seems that the shift that was evoked by Procopius toward the Persian gulf is reinforced, as the Western material discovered in South India and Sri Lanka comes mainly from this area. Gold coins of the Omayyad and Abbasid dynasties have been recovered in India<sup>73</sup>, following the arrival of few Parthian and Sasanian coins<sup>74</sup>. In Sri Lanka, discoveries of Sasanian coins cover a period from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>75</sup>. More

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<sup>69</sup> Berghaus, 1991, p. 111.

<sup>70</sup> Mitchiner, 1995, p. 235, quotes few early Byzantine coins; Aravamuthan, 2002; Berghaus, 1991, p. 111; Walburg, 2008, pp. 273–277, lists the following ones (for late finds): Junagadh : Valerianus I (1 coin), Constantinus I (2 coins), Theophilus (1) ; Akki Alur : *solidi* of Theodosius II (10), Marcianus (4), Leo (8), Zeno (4), Anastasius (13 originals and 3 (Indian ?) imitations), Justinus (1); Gadag : 1 *solidus* of Anastasius I, struck at Constantinopolis, 491-518; Sirsi: 1 *solidus* of Justinus I, struck at Constantinopolis, 522-527; Tirumangalam Taluk: 1 *solidus* of Anastasius I, struck from 492 (?); Unknown origin: 2 Byzantine *solidi* of Justinus I and Justinianus I; 1 Byzantine *solidus* of Justinianus I.

<sup>71</sup> Tomber, 2008, pp. 126–127.

<sup>72</sup> Bouzek, 1993, pp. 97–98.

<sup>73</sup> Mitchiner, 1995, p. 229: late gold coin finds:

- \_2 Omayyad, 683 and 702, Madurai
- \_6 Caliphate, mainly Omayyad-Abbasid, Madurai,
- \_7 Caliphate, mainly Omayyad-Abbasid, Udumalpet
- \_70 Caliphate, mainly Omayyad-Abbasid, Madurai
- \_many Caliphate to Mamluke, Tirunelveli
- \_4+ Ottoman, Kothamangalam

p. 14\_ South Arcot district: 29 AV Caliphate, mostly Omayyad-Abbasid

p. 18\_ Korkai and Kayal: many AV coins and ingots, including Caliphate, Ayyubid, Atabeg, Bahri, Mamluke

<sup>74</sup> Mitchiner, 1995, p. 225.

<sup>75</sup> Bopearachchi, 1998, pp. 161–162, mentions three coins of Yazdigerd I (397-417), published by Codrington, and adds three later coins, of Xusrō I (531-579), Hormizd IV (579-590) and Xusrō II (591-628); in Bopearachchi and Wickremesinhe, 1999, pp. 75–76, he mentions as well one coin of Šāpūr II (309-379) and one of Kavād I (484-531).

Walburg, 2008, p. 37, thus recapitulates the finds:

- \_two small aes coins of Šāpūr II, 309-379, one in each of the large hoards of Roman coins from Rekawa and Kuliyaṭṭiya. A third one is said to have been unearthed at Jetavanarama, Anuradhapura
- \_one Sasanian or Indo-Sasanian aes coin from Kapuhena
- \_two small aes coins allegedly of Yazgard I, 399-420, of unknown provenance
- \_one gold coin, allegedly from Anuradhapura
- \_a few silver coins are in private collections:

- an anonymous collection contains five coins, bought from a jeweller in Colombo. One coin each of Xusrō I, Hormizd IV and Xusrō II.

importantly, glass and ceramics constitute major finds in the excavations of the cities of Mantai and Anuradhapura. In Mantai, 97% of the glass finds could be dated of the Early Islamic period, from 700 to 1100 (period 4, 1240 fragments)<sup>76</sup>, when 26 fragments of the remaining 3% (from period 3) were maybe Sasanian, of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>77</sup>. It suggests a continuity from Sasanian merchants to Islamic ones, coming from the same areas in Mesopotamia. Indeed, most of the identifiable forms can be related to places in Mesopotamia, particularly sites like Samarra, Raqqa or Qasr al-Hyar. They can be dated around the 9<sup>th</sup> century and testify of some Sasanian influence in the designs. Only little of this material would come from Syria or Persia, and the complete chronological range would be from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>78</sup>. In Anuradhapura Salgaha Watta, among 31 diagnostic glass fragments, 25 are of Early Islamic time<sup>79</sup> and can be dated of the same period (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century). Most of them, though, seem to be of Egyptian origin, with a few only from Persia and Syria. In the Abhayagiri vihara, nearly all the finds were either Late Roman or post-Roman Arabic<sup>80</sup>. Considering the type of fragments – common glass, undecorated, no of a specific high quality – and the low quantity of complete vessels, it is probably that this glass would have been traded as cullet, so that it could be easily remelted at destination, in China, to manufacture a glass less brittle than the one made locally<sup>81</sup>. Some contemporary Mediterranean shipwrecks testify as well of the trade of Islamic glass in cullet<sup>82</sup>.

The dates of these glass imports match well with the glazed ceramics found on the same sites, and the unglazed ceramics testify of contacts for the beginning of the period. The torpedo jars, identified by Roberta Tomber, are present mainly in the same region as the Late Roman amphorae, that is the north-western coast of India, but they are noticed as well on some southern sites<sup>83</sup>: Mylapore, Pattanam<sup>84</sup>, Alagankulam, Mantai, Anuradhapura<sup>85</sup>, Tissamaharama, maybe Sigiriya<sup>86</sup>. They extend from the Sasanian to the Early Islamic period<sup>87</sup> and testify of links with Mesopotamia. As for the glazed ceramics, they appear in good numbers on the main Sri Lankan sites and on coastal South Indian sites. Parthian blue-green glazed ware was already present in Sri Lanka and India

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four pieces from the Wickremesinha collection, one each of Šāpūr II, Kavād I, Hormizd IV, and Xusrō II, allegedly from Tissamaharama.

in the Biddell documents, one coin of unknown provenance.

<sup>76</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, p. 315.

<sup>77</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, p. 316.

<sup>78</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, p. 345.

<sup>79</sup> Coningham, 2006, p. 334.

<sup>80</sup> Bouzek, 1993, p. 97.

<sup>81</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, p. 347.

<sup>82</sup> Coningham, 2006, p. 335.

<sup>83</sup> List given by Tomber, 2008, pp. 126–127, on the basis of her personal observations.

<sup>84</sup> Cherian et al., 2013, p. 46: 3684 sherds between 2007 and 2013.

<sup>85</sup> Momose and Abe, 1996, pp. 38, 46, 47: four sherds of “buff ware” at the Abhayagiri; Ratnayake, 1984, p. 87: one sherd of “buff ware” at the Jetavana.

<sup>86</sup> Prickett-Fernando, 2003, p. 74.

<sup>87</sup> Tomber, 2008, pp. 14–147.

(notably Pattanam) until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century; from Sasanian times onward, a continuity of exports can be observed, with the arrival of the turquoise glazed ware typical of this dynasty, until Early Islamic times in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It occurs on all the sites of Anuradhapura<sup>88</sup>: the Citadel<sup>89</sup>, the Abhayagiri<sup>90</sup> and the Jetavanarama<sup>91</sup>, as well as in Mantai<sup>92</sup>, Sigiriya<sup>93</sup> and Tissamaharama<sup>94</sup>. Parthian and Sasanian sherds are frequently counted together in the reports but the Abhayagiri 1981-1984 report gives interesting statistics about these finds: among Eastern wares, 5% are Parthian, 34% Sasanian/Early Islamic, 11% Islamic/Samarran and 42% Chinese<sup>95</sup>, showing a very big increase after Sasanian times, more precisely Late Sasanian and Islamic periods. Indeed, the identifiable shapes allow the excavators to attribute their import to the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, with an overlap with the Islamic/Samarran wares, dating between the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup>. Similarly, in Anuradhapura ASW2, most of the 306 West Asian sherds belong to the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, including lustre ware, imitation lustre ware, white tin-glazed ware, lead-glazed wares, blue-glazed ware, originating in Iraq and Iran under the Abbasids. They all have parallels in Siraf and Kilwa. The buff ware is also assigned a Sasanian or Early Islamic date, around 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century.

Most of the West Asian material is to be assigned a rather late dating, notably showing a very interesting chronological coincidence between the glass and the ceramics. The observation of Cosmas in the 6<sup>th</sup> century would then have been only the beginning of a process that kept developing so as to reach its peak around the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, at least as far as non-perishable items are concerned. Other items like wood, textiles or food are not, in the actual state of research, possible to evaluate.

One more argument, though, hints at an important flow of exchanges with Mesopotamia and Persia during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries: some Kufic tomb inscriptions of this period. It seems that merchants from the Gulf and the Arabian peninsula began to settle on the coasts of India, Sri Lanka and China from the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>96</sup>. But the first evidence comes from inscriptions and tombstones with their name and place of origin: some have been recovered in India at Cambay with Arab and Persian names, and in Sri Lanka, among the 27 known inscriptions, some bear early Kufic inscriptions<sup>97</sup>. One of these gravestone inscriptions have been discovered in Colombo and one in Trincomalee, dating of

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<sup>88</sup> Prickett-Fernando, 2003, p. 74.

<sup>89</sup> Momose and Abe, 1996, pp. 44, 74, 91, 117, addendum p. 38: two sherds of blue and green glazed ware, n<sup>o</sup> 257 and 258, and two sherds of white glazed Islamic ware.

<sup>90</sup> Bouzek, 1993, pp. 87–88.

<sup>91</sup> Ratnayake, 1984, p. 28: Sasanian glazed ceramic fragments are found in the stratum 2 and belong to the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>92</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, p. 513, from the upper sequence in trench G (5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>93</sup> Bandaranayake, 1984, p. 115: five sherds of turquoise glazed ware.

<sup>94</sup> Weisshaar et al., 2001, p. 74 : only a small number of glazed wares.

<sup>95</sup> Bouzek, 1993, p. 87.

<sup>96</sup> Porter, 1998, p. 227 : according to the tradition , the first Muslims would have come to Sri Lanka as refugees during the reign of the Umayyad caliph Abd-al-Malik (685-715); Carswell et al., 2013, p. 419.

<sup>97</sup> Porter, 1998, p. 226.



the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>98</sup>. In Mantai, a funerary inscription close in style to the Colombo one has been discovered during the excavations and dated of the same period<sup>99</sup>, with a style of Kufic similar to the one used in central areas of the Islamic world, Syria, Iraq and Iran. It would suggest that there was a community of Muslims, either Sri Lankans or Persian and Arab merchants, wealthy enough to finance calligraphers and stonemasons working in the mainstream Near Eastern tradition<sup>100</sup>.

Thus, the West Asian material indicates some continuous links of Sri Lanka and South India with the Persian gulf area between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> century, with a probable higher intensity during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The trade relationships seem to transcend political and religious boundaries, with a gradual shift from Christians and Pagans (and probably Zoroastrians but we don't have evidence) to Muslims.

These ancient and regular exchanges with the Gulf area facilitated Sri Lanka's role as an intermediary with China in the long-distance trade between the two great powers of the time. Even though some religious and diplomatic contacts are known between Sri Lanka and China since the first or fourth century of our era (depending on scholars' interpretation of Chinese sources)<sup>101</sup>, trade contacts are made obvious around the 8<sup>th</sup> century by the presence of numerous ceramics and a few coins. The period is also the most prosperous time for the Persian Gulf ports of Siraf and Basra, as well as Sohar on the Omani coast. It is noteworthy that the period of West Asian imports in Sri Lanka in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries matches well with the Chinese imports on the island as well as on the Arabic/Persian coasts. Indeed, the oldest Chinese imports attested in the Islamic world come from Siraf and date of the Tang dynasty (618-907), consisting mainly in olive green ware, together with Hunan stonewares and some white porcelain pieces, types which continue into the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries with porcelain and Yue celadon<sup>102</sup>. That is the time during which trading activities in Siraf are at their peak, leading to the extension of the city, with the building of private houses, public buildings, mosques, markets, factories and pottery kilns. Its role as redistribution centre to inland Iran is enlightened by the presence of contemporary celadon in the Shiraz/Istakhr area<sup>103</sup>. Many other smaller coastal sites on both shores of the gulf bear some Chinese ceramics between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. As far as Oman is concerned, it is also the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century levels which have yielded Chinese sherds similar to contemporary pieces from Siraf<sup>104</sup>.

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<sup>98</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, pp. 419–421.

<sup>99</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, p. 422.

<sup>100</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, p. 423.

<sup>101</sup> Werake, 2003, p. 213: according to this author's suggestion, one delegation may have been dispatched to Chinese officials at the beginning to the Christian era (1-6) and one more in the second century (131); others started in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>102</sup> Rougeulle, 1996, p. 162.

<sup>103</sup> Rougeulle, 1996, p. 163.

<sup>104</sup> Rougeulle, 1996, p. 164.

In Sri Lanka<sup>105</sup> and South India<sup>106</sup>, some Chinese coins have been discovered, the first ones dating of the 10<sup>th</sup> century under the Tang dynasty. It is a time when “Chinese coins, along with porcelain and silk, were used by Chinese authorities and Chinese merchants as a means of paying for their purchases from neighbouring countries”<sup>107</sup>. They belong to hoards which have been buried in the 13<sup>th</sup> century so that it is hard to know whether they would have come separately right after being issued or as a batch with later coins. Indeed, the composition of Chinese coin hoards shows that coins kept circulating for a very long time and were mixed with much later ones in hoards<sup>108</sup>. As for the quantity of coins, it closely depends on the number of coins issued by each dynasty, which varied greatly from one another, being the highest under the Song dynasty<sup>109</sup>. However, the Tang coins seem to have circulated in the area that we are considering at an early date, if we take into account a ninth century report of Chinese coins being used as currency in the port of Siraf<sup>110</sup>.

The main import consisted nevertheless in ceramics, discovered in high quantities in South India as well as in Sri Lanka. In India, most of the imports seem to be post-dating this period, though, and belong to the Song to Yuan dynasties (960-1368). Glazed ceramics from this time have been reported from Korkai, Kayal and Arikamedu<sup>111</sup>; in Pattanam, 375 sherds have been collected between 2007 and 2013<sup>112</sup>; in Alagankulam<sup>113</sup>, a “bulk quantity” of porcelain and 60 sherds of celadon of the Song and Yuan dynasties have been put to light. In the whole of Tamil Nadu, the survey conducted in 1985 by Karashima and Kanazawa lead to the discovery of many Chinese ceramics, all post-dating the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>114</sup>. This situation corresponds well to the political situation at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when the Colas in power in Sri Lanka after 1017 would have diverted some part of the trade to their port of Nagapattinam.

In Sri Lanka, as for West Asian ceramics and glass, the discoveries of Chinese ceramics occurred in the main ports and political centres<sup>115</sup>. Besides few sherds of celadon in Sigiriya<sup>116</sup>,

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<sup>105</sup> Thierry, 1998a, 1998b, p. 192: in the Yapahuwa hoard, coins of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) to 1264; Walburg, 2008, pp. 284–285: two hoards in Polonnaruwa, buried in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, including coins from Tang (618-907) to Southern Song (1127-1279); other finds date from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>106</sup> Mitchiner, 1995, p. 235: three hoards of AE coins in Thanjavur, buried in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (*termini* in 1241, 1268 and 1252), including Tang coins; 3 AE coins of the Song dynasty in Kaverippattinam with an inscribed bell.

<sup>107</sup> Thierry, 1998a, p. 202.

<sup>108</sup> Cribb and Potts, 1996, pp. 109–112: “the main problem for interpretation is the continuing circulation of Chinese coins for centuries after their first issue. [...] Any group of coins in circulation in China exported could therefore be expected to contain a wide age range of coins.”

<sup>109</sup> Thierry, 1998a, p. 203; see Cribb and Potts, 1996, p. 113, for the typical proportion of different coins in Chinese hoards: Tang (618-907), 9%, Northern Song (960-1127), 88%, Southern Song (1127-1279), 2%, Jin (1115-1234), less than 1%, Yuan (1206-1368), less than 1%.

<sup>110</sup> Cribb and Potts, 1996, p. 117.

<sup>111</sup> Mitchiner, 1995, p. 235; Karashima and Kanazawa, 2004, pp. 426–431.

<sup>112</sup> Cherian et al., 2013, p. 46.

<sup>113</sup> Sridhar, 2005, pp. 47, 58–60; similar sherds were also found in Gangaikondacholapuram.

<sup>114</sup> Karashima and Kanazawa, 2004, pp. 431–433.

<sup>115</sup> For a general overview, see Prematilleke, 2003.

<sup>116</sup> Bandaranayake, 1984, p. 115: one sherd of green glazed ware.

Tissamaharama<sup>117</sup>, Godavaya<sup>118</sup> and Kuchchaveli<sup>119</sup>, most of the pieces of this period originate from Anuradhapura and Mantai<sup>120</sup>. In the port city, the types include Yue stoneware, dating from the Tang to Song dynasties and exported as far as Egypt, Iraq, Iran; Dusun stoneware, from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, found in many places as well, including Siraf; green-splashed ware, similarly dated; and some Changsha pottery, produced during the Tang dynasty, including one decorated ewer of the ninth century<sup>121</sup>. It has to be noted that, like in Siraf, some major building construction occurs on the site in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, with a large defensive circuit, leading the excavators to assign the great development of the mound to that period<sup>122</sup>. Parallels can be drawn as well with Nishapur, which importance rose during the ninth century<sup>123</sup>. As far as Anuradhapura, excavations in ASW2 have yielded a very similar assemblage, consisting in Changsha stoneware of the late Tang period, Yue green ware (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c.) and coarse grey stoneware (8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c., maybe Dusun ware). Parallels are found in Siraf, Banbhore, Abhayagiri and Jetavanarama<sup>124</sup>. In the Abhayagiri, Chinese ware appears in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, with Hsing ware, Late Yueh ware and Late Changsha ware, “suppressing gradually Near Eastern competition in this type of commodity<sup>125</sup>.” Other places in the Citadel have yielded 9<sup>th</sup> century celadon<sup>126</sup> and the rampart area yielded some Chinese glazed ware as well<sup>127</sup>.

Other than coins and ceramics, some lead glass beads originating from China are to be noted as well in South India and in Sri Lanka<sup>128</sup>.

Thus, the archaeological material such as coins, ceramics, glass vessels, glass beads and inscriptions, discovered on the ports and political centers of Sri Lanka and South India, enlightens an intensification of trade and/or gift exchanges from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in a continuity with previous exchanges with Persia and inaugurating new commercial links with China. We would therefore like to investigate how these connections could have been related to the travels of pilgrims

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<sup>117</sup> Weisshaar et al., 2001, p. 74.

<sup>118</sup> Roth et al., 2001, pp. 305, 317: layer 5 contained a piece of ‘proto-celadon’ ware, as early as the Shang dynasty (16<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c. BC).

<sup>119</sup> The excavations of 2011 have put to light one piece of green Longquan ware (14<sup>th</sup> century) and one sherd of blue-and-white 18<sup>th</sup> century porcelain.

<sup>120</sup> Later types have been found in Polonnaruwa, Allaipiddy, Vankalai and Yapahuwa: Prematilleke, 2003; Prickett-Fernando, 2003, pp. 74–75.

<sup>121</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, pp. 239–267; the report mentions also some *sancai* sherds (8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> c.) and some Tang white and cream-coloured porcelain (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>), with specifying the details; see also Prickett-Fernando, 2003, pp. 74–75.

<sup>122</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, p. 513.

<sup>123</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, p. 235.

<sup>124</sup> Coningham, 2006, pp. 111–113.

<sup>125</sup> Bouzek, 1993, pp. 88–89; also Hettiaratchi, 1987, p. 44: one sherd of Chinese ware for that season; and Wikramagama, 1984, p. 37: one piece of white chinaware.

<sup>126</sup> Deraniyagala, 1972, p. 108.

<sup>127</sup> Momose and Abe, 1996, Addendum p. 46.

<sup>128</sup> Chemical analyses of B. Gratuze, L. Dussubieux and J. Lankton.

or other religious travellers and traders, together with the cultural and artistic interactions that could have been brought by them.

### 3. Christians from Persia and beyond

The testimonies of a Christian presence in Sri Lanka and South India are scant but meaningful: they consist in crosses of similar patterns in both regions, connected with the Christians of the East.

#### a) Crosses in Sri Lanka

Let us consider Sri Lanka first, where two so-called ‘Nestorian’ crosses<sup>129</sup> have been discovered: the first one in Anuradhapura, the second in Mantai. The role of the merchants in the missionary process, already mentioned concerning the Christian expansion from Syria towards the East, is to be equally underlined here, as we find these vestiges in the main port of the island and in its capital and most important commercial center<sup>130</sup>.

These two objects are very diverse in their type and function, probably implying different social groups at the origin of their use. The most famous one – and the most ancient discovery<sup>131</sup> – is a cross carved in bas-relief on a rectangular granite column found in the citadel of Anuradhapura. The function of the building was not identified, and Hocart suggested that it could have been brought from another building in the vicinity, which would have been a church<sup>132</sup>. Carved in the middle of a pillar, the cross itself presents the following attributes: it is of a Latin shape, with splayed ends terminating in two dots; a larger globe or circle is set between each pair of dots, so that the result is a trilobed shape; it rests upon a three stepped pedestal, from which two leaves spring up, one damaged, the other one indented three times. Its general iconography have lead to relate it to the crosses in use among the Christians of the East but detailed parallels and origins have yet to be emphasized.

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<sup>129</sup> Parry, 1996, p. 145: “the plain cross with flared arms, with two large leaves rising either side of the base, is often associated with East Syrian Christianity. It has even been called the ‘Nestorian’ or ‘Persian’ cross, but this is a misnomer. It occurs in fact in most of the Christian cultures of the Near East and the Caucasus and is not unknown in the Byzantine tradition.”

<sup>130</sup> It is interesting to note here that the hinterland around the citadel of Anuradhapura didn’t yield any imported glazed ware, thus testifying of the preeminence of the capital city in the foreign and luxury trade; see Coningham and Gunawardhana, 2013, p. 229: West asian and East asian glazed ceramics “were all confined exclusively to the Citadel. [...] This is interesting in terms of access to what may be deemed ‘prestige’ artefact types and we may also record that such objects are also known from other sites within the core of the hinterland, the Sacred City, such as at Jetavana and Abhayagiri.”

<sup>131</sup> Hocart, 1924, p. 51.

<sup>132</sup> Hocart, 1924, p. 51.

*Cross from Anuradhapura Museum:*



This type of cross is indeed typical of the East Syrian Church and takes place into two categories of crosses in the Byzantine and Middle-Eastern world: leaved crosses and pearl crosses. The first group consists in crosses decorated with two vegetal ornaments springing from their base. In the classical world, these are acanthus leaves but it can also be vine leaves or be very stylized (palmette-like) or even look like the Persian motif of winged figures<sup>133</sup>. It probably derives from the poetic theme of the tree of life in Syrian and Palestinian literature, developed in particular by Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306-373), with comparisons between the cross and the tree of Heaven<sup>134</sup>. In iconography, this design of two ornamental plants springing up from the base of the cross is also reminding of the tree of life, a pattern present in Mesopotamia before Christian times<sup>135</sup>.

As far as dates are concerned, in the West, the motif makes its first appearance in the fifth century in Italy and in the sixth century in the Byzantine world, but it becomes numerous by the eighth century, and even more in the ninth and tenth centuries. In the easterly regions, the leaved cross is even more common than in the Byzantine world or in Italy<sup>136</sup>: it is particularly famous in Armenia, from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and extremely important in Mesopotamia, “probably the most usual form of decoration in Nestorian churches”<sup>137</sup>. We find it notably in Failaka and Kharg island during the sixth century<sup>138</sup>, on small stucco plaques<sup>139</sup> in the churches of Hira (southern Mesopotamia) in the seventh and eighth centuries<sup>140</sup>, and in the monasteries of Ain Sha’ia (south-west Iraq) some time between the sixth and the eighth century<sup>141</sup>. Examples flourish between the seventh and the twelfth century<sup>142</sup>. “Further to the East variants of these flowered crosses are to be

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<sup>133</sup> Talbot Rice, 1950, p. 77.

<sup>134</sup> Stern, 1936, p. 147.

<sup>135</sup> Talbot Rice, 1950, p. 77: “the cross framed in this way is no less than a variant of the old holm or tree of life, a motive which was evolved in Mesopotamia long before the Christian era and which passed from there to the later arts of the East and to the Western world alike. Indeed, the way in which the leaves spring up from the base of the cross is closely similar to the way they often spring from the old tree of life.”

<sup>136</sup> Talbot Rice, 1950, p. 75.

<sup>137</sup> Talbot Rice, 1950, p. 76.

<sup>138</sup> Parry, 1996, p. 146.

<sup>139</sup> These plaques should be identified with portable personal icons or amulets: Okada, 1990, p. 109 ; Talbot Rice, 1932, p. 282 : they must have served as small ‘icons’, [...] their [rounded off edges] show that they were of a portable nature.”

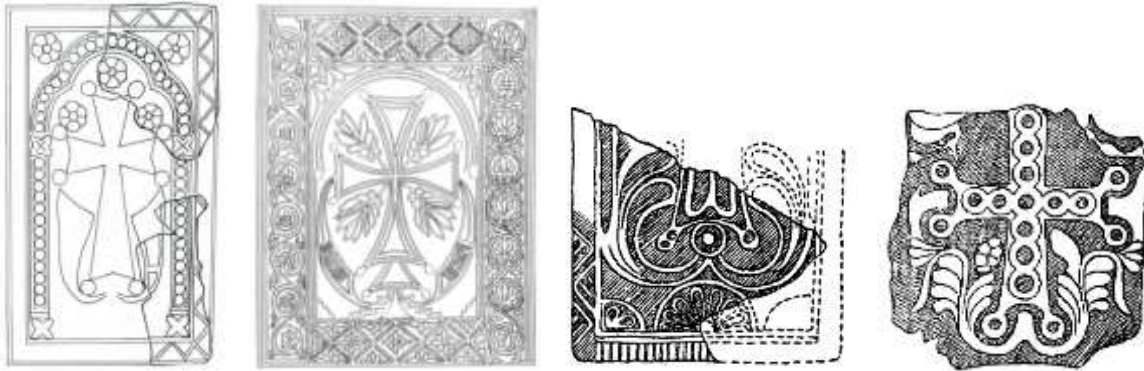
<sup>140</sup> Talbot Rice, 1932, 1934.

<sup>141</sup> Okada, 1990.

<sup>142</sup> Stern, 1936, p. 149: the author describes this motif as “croix vivifiantes”, with vegetal ornaments, splayed arms and trilobed ends.

found wherever the Nestorian faith penetrated<sup>143</sup>, until India, Sri Lanka and even China, where the leaves are replaced by lotus flowers (or coulds), on the monument of Xian dated of 781.

Examples of leaved crosses:



Ain Sha'ia, Iraq <sup>144</sup> . 6 <sup>th</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> c. Stucco plaque.	Al-Qusur, island of Failaka, Kuwait <sup>145</sup> . 5 <sup>th</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup> c. (date uncertain)	Hira, Iraq <sup>146</sup> . 8 <sup>th</sup> c. Stucco plaque, from the filling of the churches.	Armenian church at Aghtamar on Lake Van, Eastern Turkey <sup>147</sup> . 10 <sup>th</sup> c.
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Xian monument in China, 781<sup>148</sup>.

This last monument is also part of the second group of crosses to which the Anuradhapura pillar is related: the pearl cross, “in some respects [...] more representative of the Church of the East than the leaved-cross”<sup>149</sup>. Its design presents bifurcated ends with two dots, with another circle in between, usually bigger than the previous two, sometimes of the same size, in a trilobed manner. Some of them, as the Anuradhapura one, stand on a pedestal, a feature which has been considered as a figured representation of the Golgotha and is already to be seen on the Byzantine crosses<sup>150</sup>. The circles have been interpreted in different ways, from apples or pomegranates linked to the invigorating symbol of the tree of life<sup>151</sup>, to pearls as recurrent symbols in Syrian devotional literature<sup>152</sup>.

<sup>143</sup> Talbot Rice, 1950, p. 76.

<sup>144</sup> Okada, 1990, p. 106, fig. 2; Parry, 1996, pp. 146, 154, fig. 1b.

<sup>145</sup> Bernard and Salles, 1991, p. 10, fig. 2 and p. 12. The authors presume an early date for the stucco crosses but without firm elements; the archaeological material gives evidence for the late occupation of the building, between the mid-7<sup>th</sup> and the mid-9<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>146</sup> Talbot Rice, 1932, p. 282 and p. 283, fig. 4a.

<sup>147</sup> Talbot Rice, 1932, p. 283, fig. 4b.

<sup>148</sup> Okada, 1990, p. 111, fig. 7.

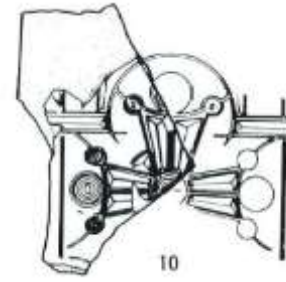
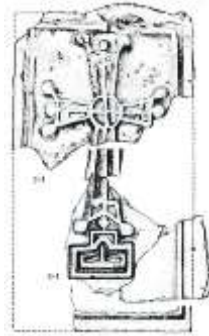
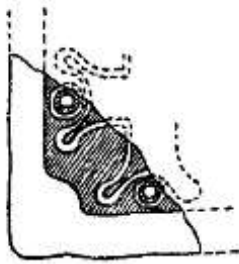
<sup>149</sup> Parry, 1996, p. 146.

<sup>150</sup> Lerner, 1977, p. 4.

<sup>151</sup> Stern, 1936, pp. 148–151.

<sup>152</sup> Mihindukulasuriya, 2011.

Examples of pearl crosses:



Hira, Iraq. 8 <sup>th</sup> c. <sup>153</sup> Stucco plaque, from the filling of the churches.	Ain Sha'ia, Iraq, 6 <sup>th</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> c. <sup>154</sup> Stucco plaque.	Ain Sha'ia, Iraq, 6 <sup>th</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> c. <sup>155</sup> Stucco plaque.
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The cross from Anuradhapura finds its closest parallels with Hira and Xian, as well as Ain Sha'ia, and would then probably date from the eighth century (or sixth to eighth but Ain Sha'ia is not dated in itself but only by parallels with ampullae or other sites like Hira). Indeed, even though the testimony of Cosmas is earlier, there is no archaeological or iconographical evidence indicating that this cross should be contemporaneous with the Alexandrian writer. On the contrary, the development of this specific iconography and its expansion towards the East makes it possible that it would have reached the capital city of Sri Lanka by the eighth century or even later, when the motif was already widespread in Mesopotamia. Some portable stucco plaques such as the ones discovered in Hira and Ain Sha'ia, used as personal icons, could have travelled with merchants or pilgrims and constituted some models for the Anuradhapura cross<sup>156</sup>.

This dating corresponds all the more to the peak of West Asian material reaching the island for trade. Geographically, both archaeological and iconographical evidence tend to point towards Mesopotamia/Iraq, even more than Persia/Iran, for an origin, if we consider for example the glass material from Mantai<sup>157</sup> or the parallels with Hira and Ain Sha'ia<sup>158</sup>.

It is interesting to note that this period coincides with the full development of the Mahāyānic tradition in Sri Lanka, so that we could wonder whether a certain opening from the orthodox tendencies of the Theravada could have as well benefited to other types of cults.

<sup>153</sup> Talbot Rice, 1932, p. 282 and p. 283, fig. 3d.

<sup>154</sup> Okada, 1990, p. 104, fig. 1, 2-1 and 3-1.

<sup>155</sup> Okada, 1990, p. 104, fig.1, 10.

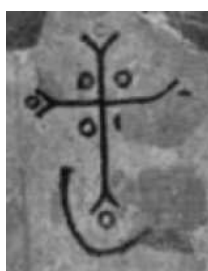
<sup>156</sup> No petrographical analyses have been done on the granite used for the pillar but its morphological appearance makes it very likely that it is local, and could thus have been engraved locally by foreign craftsmen or with foreign patterns.

<sup>157</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, p. 345.

<sup>158</sup> Okada, 1990, p. 111: "thus, as the Christian doctrine was widely spread Christian symbols or iconographic images traveled as far as the Chinese world. One of the starting points of such a travel certainly existed in the Iraqi south-western desert area where the ruins of Ain Sha'ia are located."

At Mantai, a seal has been discovered during the 1984 excavations, but is unfortunately out of context<sup>159</sup>. It is a clay *bullā* with three impressions, representing a pearl-cross, a mythological animal<sup>160</sup> and a Palhavi inscription mentioning “May the fortune/joy/happiness increase!”<sup>161</sup>. The cross is very stylized, as expected on that kind of medium, and corresponds to the type with bifurcated ends and circles in between them.

Striking parallels can be drawn from Hira<sup>162</sup> – with a cross painted in red on a wall of church XI – and from several Christian seals of the Sasanian period<sup>163</sup>. They have been dated by Lerner of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, on the basis of their strong similarity with the painted cross from Hira, belonging to a 7<sup>th</sup> c. phase of the church XI<sup>164</sup>. The Pahlavi inscription on the chalcedony seal indicates a late Sasanian date. The rock crystal seals, by their inscriptions as well as their traditional Mesopotamian shape – roughly conical with flattened sides and a convex base – points at a Syro-Mesopotamian origin<sup>165</sup>.



Clay <i>bullā</i> from Mantai <sup>166</sup> .	Hira, Iraq, 7 <sup>th</sup> c. <sup>167</sup> Red painting in the southern chapel of church XI.	Nishapur, 9 <sup>th</sup> c. <sup>168</sup>
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Rock crystal seal. Post-Sasanian. Syriac inscription <sup>169</sup> .	Rock crystal seal. Post-Sasanian. Kufic inscription <sup>170</sup> .	Chalcedony seal. Late Sasanian. Pahlavi inscription <sup>171</sup> .
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<sup>159</sup> Carswell et al., 2013, pp. 411–412 and pl. 13.10.1.

<sup>160</sup> A Gōpatšāh, fabulous creature from Iranian mythology, half-bull, half-human, winged and wearing a headdress: Walburg, 2008, p. 36.

<sup>161</sup> Interpretation of Ph. Gignoux and R. Gyselen, quoted in Walburg, 2008, p. 37; see also Mihindukulasuriya, 2011.

<sup>162</sup> Talbot Rice, 1932, p. 280 and pl. II.

<sup>163</sup> Lerner, 1977, pp. 5–7.

<sup>164</sup> Lerner, 1977, p. 6.

<sup>165</sup> Lerner, 1977, pp. 6–7.

<sup>166</sup> Mihindukulasuriya, 2011, fig. 2.

<sup>167</sup> Talbot Rice, 1932, p. 280 and pl. II.

<sup>168</sup> Wilkinson, 1969, p. 80, fig. 1 and 2.

<sup>169</sup> Lerner, 1977, pp. 5–7, n° 6, pl. I, fig. 4.

<sup>170</sup> Lerner, 1977, pp. 5–7, n° 9, pl. I, fig. 5.

<sup>171</sup> Lerner, 1977, pp. 5–7, n° 11, pl. I, fig. 6.



The iconographical links between the Mantai *bullā* and these examples thus reinforces the hypothesis of particular links with Mesopotamia during a period postponing Cosmas, from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Moreover, such as stucco plaques, seals can easily travel and contribute to spread a particular motif. In the case of a *bullā*, this object hints at a community of Christian merchants, who would have sealed their merchandise with a personal symbol. The seal could be earlier than the Anuradhapura cross and testify of the dissemination of the design first in the trading port, before reaching the capital where a community would have settled. The location of the Anuradhapura cross at the center of a pillar suggests indeed its location in a religious building and matches well with the map of some Christian churches known in the Arabian peninsula, such as in Jubail, Saudi Arabia<sup>172</sup>. There, crosses without pearls but with splayed arms and on a pedestal have been impressed in plaster on either side of the doorway leading to the sanctuary and on the jamb of doors in the courtyard<sup>173</sup>. A similar function is very probable for the Anuradhapura pillar cross.

These two objects thus have very different implications in terms of social usage: the first one hinting at merchants and frequent travellers around the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>174</sup>, whereas the second implies the settlement of foreign Christians or the conversion of local pagans<sup>175</sup>, belonging to a community such as the one referred to by Cosmas, still alive around the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

## b) Crosses in India

In India, a few crosses of the same type have been discovered. The most ancient one is most probably the less well-known. It is a granite cross discovered in Parur, Kerala<sup>176</sup>, of a Greek shape. Inserted into a circle, it shows some splayed ends joining each other so as to form a kind of rosace; in between each of them is located a dot or pearl; a circle is incised in its center. This specific motif, not to be seen on the other crosses of our corpus, recalls a medallion, frequently occurring on Roman or Byzantine art<sup>177</sup>. This type of cross is not as frequent as the Latin one but is yet to be seen in the monasteries of Ain Sha'ia, on a unique disc-shaped plaque (n°12) and on a rectangular one (n°8), unusually turned by 45°. The latest might have been an appendant for a bigger cross, for which parallels occur in the Armenian region, in Jerusalem (maybe 6<sup>th</sup> c.) and in Hira (8<sup>th</sup> c., placed diagonally as well)<sup>178</sup>.

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<sup>172</sup> Langfeldt, 1994.

<sup>173</sup> Langfeldt, 1994, pp. 35–37, fig. 4-6. The date of the church is not clear and the date of the plasters is not possible to assert because they are of a secondary nature and have been added at a later stage.

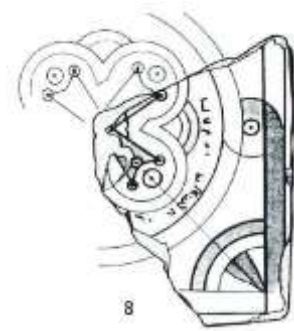
<sup>174</sup> This date for the seal is also of the opinion of Walburg, 2008, pp. 36–37, on the basis of comparisons between the mythical animal of the *bullā* and its representation on Arab-Sasanian coins, leading to a date in the second half of the seventh century.

<sup>175</sup> The first hypothesis would be more probable, though: this point will be discussed later.

<sup>176</sup> Menachery, 1973, p. 137.

<sup>177</sup> Okada, 1990, p. 106, commenting on the plaque fragments n° 1-2-3, which present such a central medallion-type circular element.

<sup>178</sup> Okada, 1990, pp. 108, 111.



Parur cross.	Ain Sha'ia, Iraq, 6 <sup>th</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> c. <sup>179</sup> Stucco plaque. N° 12.	Ain Sha'ia, Iraq, 6 <sup>th</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> c. <sup>180</sup> Stucco plaque. N° 8.
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The second type of cross found in South India includes a series of eight panels, six of them bearing the same Pahlavi inscription<sup>181</sup>. These are located in St Thomas Mount, Mylapore (Chennai, Tamil Nadu), as well as in Valiapally church, Kottayam (two crosses), Alengadu, Muttuchira and Kadamattom (Kerala); the other two are in Kothanallur (Kerala) and Agassim (Goa). The inscription in Chennai is the best preserved and probably the most ancient. The Kerala inscriptions seem to be very faithful copies of the Chennai original, unless they are all copies of an original now lost. The North Kottayam cross is very similar to the Chennai one<sup>182</sup>; the South Kottayam seems an imitation or a bad copy of it<sup>183</sup>; Muttuchira is hardly legible but seems an early Persian cross; Alengadu recalls the South Kottayam one and Kadamattom is undoubtedly a fake<sup>184</sup>. The most recent translation of the inscription suggests the following meaning: “Our lord Christ, have pity on Sabrišō, (son) of Čahārbōxt., (son) of Sūray, who bore (brought) this (cross)”<sup>185</sup>. Sabrišō is a very common name in Nestorian or Syriac milieu, from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and Čahārbōxt has many parallels in Sasanian onomastics<sup>186</sup>. The inscription thus refers to the making of a decorated cross by a pious Christian of Persian origin or background. On epigraphic grounds, the Chennai cross has been assigned to the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century by Gignoux<sup>187</sup>, to the 9<sup>th</sup> century by Cereti<sup>188</sup>, and the north Valiapally one to the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century by Parry<sup>189</sup>, on behalf of the style of the letters.

<sup>179</sup> Okada, 1990, p. 104, fig. 1, 12.

<sup>180</sup> Okada, 1990, p. 104, fig. 1, 8.

<sup>181</sup> A very rich literature has been written on these inscriptions. For the main interpretations, see Burnell, 1874; Winckworth, 1929; Gropp, 1970; Gignoux, 1995; Briquel-Chatonnet et al., 1996; Cereti et al., 2002; Briquel-Chatonnet et al., 2004; Parry, 2005.

<sup>182</sup> Winckworth, 1929, p. 239, even thought it could be an original, copied in Chennai.

<sup>183</sup> Winckworth, 1929, p. 239; Cereti et al., 2002, p. 297.

<sup>184</sup> Cereti et al., 2002, pp. 297–298.

<sup>185</sup> Cereti et al., 2002, p. 297.

<sup>186</sup> Gignoux, 1995, p. 415.

<sup>187</sup> Gignoux, 1995, p. 416.

<sup>188</sup> Cereti et al., 2002, p. 301; also personal communication of Samra Azar Nouche, whom we thank here for her information on this topic.

<sup>189</sup> Parry, 2005, p. 10.



Mylapore	Valiapally south	Goa	Kadamattom
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Valiapally north	Alengadu	Muttuchira	Kothanallur
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As far as the iconography is concerned, this group can be divided into two groups (group 1: Mylapore, Valiapally south, Goa, Kadamattom; group 2: Valiapally north, Alengadu, Muttuchira, Kothanallur). If we exclude Kadamattom, which appears like a recent copy, it would suggest the appearance of a first motif, very close to the Sri Lankan one, with added local elements, followed one or two centuries later by an evolution towards stylization, with copies of the same inscription.

The first motif uses a pearl cross, very similar to the Anuradhapura one, standing on a stepped pedestal, with leaves springing up from the base of the cross. Three new elements have been added: some leaves going down, a dove on the top, and an arch on columns with capitals and *makaras*. The pattern of the cross under an arch is widely known, from the Roman to the Persian world, but it is transformed here, notably by the adjunction of the *makaras*, thus showing an Indian appropriation of a foreign pattern. In the Arabo-Persian context, for example, one pearl cross with ribbon, under an arch without supporting columns, is part of the *Ain Sha'ia* corpus<sup>190</sup>. In Nishapur, the leaved cross, with splayed arms and pearls, under a semi-circular arch, shows the permanence of the original motif at the beginning of the ninth century<sup>191</sup>. Another cross, with columns, appears on a Sasanian seal, where the leaf motif is replaced with a ribbon in the manner of Sasanian representations of fire-altars, creating a “typically Persian interpretation of this Christian symbol”<sup>192</sup>.

<sup>190</sup> Okada, 1990, p. 107.

<sup>191</sup> Wilkinson, 1969, pp. 85–86: this unglazed earthenware plaque was found in a site of private houses occupied from the early ninth to the eleventh century, but the style of the decoration would suggest the earlier rather than the later period.

<sup>192</sup> Lerner, 1977, p. 7.



Ain Sha'ia, Iraq, 6 <sup>th</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> c. <sup>193</sup> Stucco plaque. N° 5.	Nishapur, 9th c. to 11 <sup>th</sup> c. <sup>194</sup> Earthenware plaque.	Sasanian seal <sup>195</sup> .
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Similarly, the cross from Mylapore appears as a typically Indian interpretation of the same: the *makaras* located on each capital are a specific motif of South India and Sri Lanka, from the Amaravati period until the end of the Anuradhapura period for Buddhist art, and even later for Hindu iconography, such as in Hoysala art in the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>196</sup>. In Amaravati, around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, they give birth to garlands or friezes, whereas in Sri Lanka, they are located in the same way, on pillar capitals, on the guardstones, particularly at the end of the Anuradhapura period (9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c.). Besides, in Kottayam, in the west end of the Valiapally church, on the side of a carved archway, one representation shows a cross flanked by two elephants<sup>197</sup>, in the exact type of the *gaja-lakṣmī*, indicating another type of re-appropriation.

We would then suggest that the cross from South India, contrary to what has been generally suggested, could derive from the one found in Sri Lanka, around the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century: the Anuradhapura motif is indeed very close to the Persian examples, sober and without any added element, unlike the Chennai one, which reuses typical Christian elements such as the cross, the leaf and the dove, but inserts them into a very local scheme. This interpretation could match the commercial and social situation in this area: as we have seen, Persian merchants are particularly present in the Sri Lankan market from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Besides, it is noteworthy that no local converted Christian community is known in Sri Lanka at that time: Arab 11<sup>th</sup> c. travellers or even Marco Polo do not mention any on the island<sup>198</sup>. On the contrary, Christians in India are known by their relations with Persia<sup>199</sup> as a local community. We would then have a borrowing from a community of foreign traders in Sri Lanka to a settlement of local converted Christians in South India.

The second series of crosses completely changes the original motif, by the reverse position of the leaves, the stylized arms of the cross and the pointed instead of semi-circular arch. As far as we

<sup>193</sup> Okada, 1990, p. 107, fig. 3.

<sup>194</sup> Wilkinson, 1969, p. 85, fig. 8.

<sup>195</sup> Lerner, 1977, p. 7, n°12, pl. I, fig. 7.

<sup>196</sup> See the *makara-torana* at the entrance of the *garbha-griha* of the Chennakesava temple in Belur.

<sup>197</sup> Parry, 2005, p. 11.

<sup>198</sup> Weerakkody, 1997, p. 135.

<sup>199</sup> Aprem, 2010, p. 322: bishops were sent regularly to India; relations between Kerala and the Persian church are evoked in letters of the Patriarch Mar Isho Cyahb III (647-650) and Mar Timothy I (780-823).

know, there are no counterparts in other regions, which would suggest that this is a new local creation, on the basis of the evolved previous pattern. Its developments may start with the north Valiapally cross around the 9<sup>th</sup> century and be prolonged much later, but this series of crosses is very difficult to date, in the absence of any strong epigraphic<sup>200</sup> or archaeological evidence.

The contrast between the Sri Lankan and the Indian tradition leads us to a more generic question, about Christian travellers and missionaries: Christianity did not create a community in Sri Lanka, at a time when Mahāyānic Buddhism developed strongly, whereas the situation is reverse in India, where Christians remained and the Buddhist faith declined in favour of the Brahmanical tradition. This question doesn't have a clear answer at this stage but we may consider the fundamental involvement of Buddhist traders and pilgrims in the interactions with other countries that contributes to make the island as a hub of very diverse communities and influences.

#### 4. Buddhist travellers and cultural interactions

Contrary to commercial exchanges, Buddhist religious and diplomatic contacts between Sri Lanka and China started at an early date. The ships used for both trade or embassies seem to have been mainly Sri Lankan ones going to China rather than reverse.

The first political relations between Sri Lanka and China are attested in Chinese sources with an embassy leaving the island around 395 and reaching China in 405<sup>201</sup>. Between the Jin and the end of the Tang, eleven embassies can be counted, with a particular emphasis by the time of Fa Xian, the famous monk who spent two years in the Abhayagiri vihara from the 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE and returned home on a merchant vessel<sup>202</sup>, and during the seventh and eighth centuries. The last three embassies reach the Tang court in 746, 750 and 762<sup>203</sup>, sent by the grandson of Mānavamma, Aggabodhi VI (733-772). Close religious ties would thus have been established before the regular trade contacts between the two countries. The development of Mahāyānism in Sri Lanka could have given a stimulus to the increase of these relations.

Two more pilgrims give us information on the means of travel in the China sea: I-Ching and Vajrabodhi<sup>204</sup>. The first one is a Chinese pilgrim who travelled in 671 on a Persian ship from Canton to Sumatra<sup>205</sup> and the second one – an Indian Buddhist – goes from Sri Lanka to Palembang in 717

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<sup>200</sup> Some indications are given by the graffiti in Middle-Persian discovered in India, dated from the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century: the cursive script used on epitaphs and on the crosses are characteristic of these late periods. Personal communication Samra Azar Nouche.

<sup>201</sup> Thierry, 2016, chap. III, C: other embassies have been suggested (Werake, 2003, p. 213) as early as 97 and 121 but cannot be attributed to Sri Lanka.

<sup>202</sup> Werake, 2003, p. 214.

<sup>203</sup> Thierry, 2016, chap. III, C.

<sup>204</sup> On this monk, see Sundberg, 2016, p. 352 sqq.

<sup>205</sup> Hourani, 1995, pp. 46–47, 62.

with 35 Persian ships<sup>206</sup>. Persians are indeed most likely to have sailed until China, as well as Sri Lankans. The Chinese literary source *T'ang Kuo Shih Pu'* describes the annual arrival of ships from the Lion Kingdom, loaded with valuable goods, during the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>207</sup>. Other documents attest that *Possū* ships were visiting China and that *Possū* traders were residing in China during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>208</sup>. This term is generally understood as referring to Persian (ships, merchandise or merchants). Sasanians and their successors, even though they would have probably done most of their business in Sri Lanka, would thus have certainly ventured into the China sea and up to China itself<sup>209</sup>.

In this context, we are interested in focusing our attention on the portable objects that would have travelled with these pilgrims and brought with them some iconographic patterns or other artistic features. In particular, small effigies of Avalokiteśvara, at the peak time of Mahāyānism, give us a key approach to the diffusion or transfers of models. As the spread of the cult of Avalokiteśvara was huge in East Asia, we will examine a few examples of transfers of concepts and iconography, between Sri Lanka and India, and between Sri Lanka and China, showing how Sri Lanka stands at the crossroads of cultural paths as well as it stands as a trade intermediary.

#### a) From India to Sri Lanka, Śiva to Avalokiteśvara

The recent explorations in Sri Lanka, carried out by the University of California, Berkeley, under the lead of O. Bopearachchi and S. Mehendale, established a survey of the representations of Avalokiteśvara on the island. It revealed a very strong and widespread Mahāyānic cult during the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when statues of Avalokiteśvara even outnumber those of the Buddha himself<sup>210</sup>. This is in keeping with the major importance of this Bodhisattva, the one of compassion, who is even credited in the texts of being more powerful than the Buddha when being evoked in a prayer<sup>211</sup>. Therefore, during the blossom of Mahāyānism, it is not a surprise to find his cult developing all over South, Southeast and East Asia, together with the spread of Buddhism along the trade routes. Sri Lankan sculptures or Sri Lankan sculptural style are exported overseas: we may mention for example a bronze of Avalokiteśvara found in Thailand and imported from Sri Lanka or South India<sup>212</sup>; or the

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<sup>206</sup> Hasan, 1928, p. 118; Schafer, 1963, p. 12.

<sup>207</sup> Gunawardena and Sakurai, 2003, pp. 269–270.

<sup>208</sup> Whitehouse and Williamson, 1973, p. 46.

<sup>209</sup> As the Nestorian presence there also attests, notably through the monument of Xian.

<sup>210</sup> This information is based on the first results of the ongoing GIS project on Avalokiteśvara (UC Berkeley & CNRS). See also Bopearachchi, “The Avalokiteśvara Survey Project: Buddhism and Maritime Trade in Ancient Sri Lanka”, 23rd International Conference of the European Association of South Asian Archaeologists, 4-8 July 2016, Cardiff University, Cardiff.

<sup>211</sup> Mallmann, 1948, p. 103.

<sup>212</sup> Schroeder, 1990, p. 250, n° 60E.

Bodhisattva Maitreya, one of the rare Mahāyānic bronze sculptures found in India<sup>213</sup>, which corresponds to Sri Lankan style and could have been imported from the island, knowing the tight links of the Coromandel coast with Sri Lanka.

As mentioned earlier (part 1, paragraph a), it is indeed the time when political and artistic links between South India and Sri Lanka are particularly strong, under the Pallava rule in Tamil Nadu. This connection appears in the representation of Avalokiteśvara, iconographically and conceptually linked with the imagery of Śiva. This ‘iconographic transference’ between Hindu and Buddhist deities is not restricted to this area – it is visible for example in the temple of Dong Duong (Vietnam), precisely for the interferences between Śiva and Lokeśvara<sup>214</sup> – but its appearance in the South Asian context is particularly interesting. Dohanian and Mallmann show how the concepts associated with Śiva impregnate the representations of Avalokiteśvara.

It is not our purpose here to trace the origins of the cult of Avalokiteśvara in India – matter on which specialists have diverging opinions<sup>215</sup> – but to underline a few features that can be connected to its representations in Sri Lankan art. For the period we consider, it is sufficient to have in mind that by the time of Fa-Hsien, at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, this Bodhisattva was already worshipped in Mathurā by the Mahāyāna monks and when the other Chinese pilgrim Hsüan-Tsang travelled to India during the 7<sup>th</sup> century, its cult was firmly established<sup>216</sup>. Some authors have drawn parallels with the conceptual background of Brahmā<sup>217</sup>, or some points of the mythology of Indra<sup>218</sup>. However, parallels with Śiva have been pointed out more specifically, particularly – and this is of interest for us here – about the links between Pallava art and Sri Lankan iconography. Not only the etymology of the name<sup>219</sup> and some fundamental concepts – like the archetype of the ascetic yogi, the theme of the light, the strength of psychic power<sup>220</sup> – but also the sculptural features show some strong parallels with Pallava statues, especially for the ascetic type of Avalokiteśvara. Dohanian thus refers to the Śiva of the Trimurti cave in Mahabalipuram, or the effigy of Mahendravarman II in the Ādi-Varāha cave, in parallel with the Situpavuva sculpture or a bronze from Boston, for example<sup>221</sup>, showing the similarity of the elongated figure and cylindrical forms, the smooth movement and the general balance of the representation. These observations allow Dohanian to suggest that the

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<sup>213</sup> Schroeder, 1990, p. 250, n° 60A: “if this image had been found in Sri Lanka or Peninsular Thailand, it would be considered to be of Sinhalese origin.”

<sup>214</sup> Pandya Dhar, 2014, p. 129.

<sup>215</sup> Specialists have attributed different dates to the beginning of his cult, generally ranging from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century; for a short summary of the historiography, see Yü, 2001, pp. 7–11.

<sup>216</sup> Yü, 2001, p. 9.

<sup>217</sup> Mallmann, 1948, p. 105.

<sup>218</sup> See Stein, 1986, p. 39, about the Chinese version of Avalokiteśvara, Kuan-Yin.

<sup>219</sup> Dohanian, 1977, p. 44 : “the familiar appellation, Avalokiteśvara, came into usage only around the seventh century, when the earlier form “Avalokita” was merged with the “Iśvara” title of Śiva”.

<sup>220</sup> Dohanian, 1977, pp. 44–45: “during the fifth to the seventh centuries, the theology of Avalokiteśvara was increasingly specified in terms which were partly borrowed from the Śiva cult”.

<sup>221</sup> Dohanian, 1977, pp. 32–36.

mythology and iconography of the ascetic type of Avalokiteśvara in Sri Lanka would develop between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> century in close relationship with the cult of Śiva in the Pallava tradition<sup>222</sup>. The Sri Lankan style, however, presents some unique features, combining the image of an ascetic with princely attributes, such as the representation of this Bodhisattva seated in a combination of *lalitāsana* and *rājalīlāsana* (attitude of royal ease).

Concerning the princely-jewelled type of Avalokiteśvara, a very significant bronze from the end of this period marks the transition between middle Pallava and early Chola style in Sri Lanka, still showing some lithe, fleshy and flexible forms, as well as evolving towards the more stylized and sharp face features typical of the Chola style<sup>223</sup>. It belongs to the Late Anuradhapura period and presents a figure standing in a *tribhaṅga* posture, the right hand in *kaṭaka mudrā*, the left in *varada mudrā*. Attributed to different periods (from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century) and different Bodhisattvas (Avalokiteśvara, Maitreya, Nātheśvara or Padmapāṇi), it probably belongs to the cult of Avalokiteśvara around the turn of the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>224</sup> and is particularly interesting for its possible formal connections with the Tang dynasty China, as we will see now.

#### b) From Sri Lankan Avalokiteśvara to Chinese Kuan-Yin

The cult of Avalokiteśvara spreads into Southeast and East Asia, from India and Sri Lanka, in a very wide and differentiated manner at the beginning of the Medieval period. The archaeological links of Sri Lanka with China, as pointed out earlier, from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, invite us to look further into the artistic connections likely to have followed merchants or pilgrims.

The Chinese case of reappropriation is particularly interesting, as it is the only place where the gender of the Bodhisattva has been changed to a female one. This transformation occurs only during the 11<sup>th</sup> century, after the period we are considering, but points out a very unique way of selecting and readapting religious features, “the selective choices made by the host cultural traditions result[ing] in the bodhisattva’s domestication”<sup>225</sup>. This “domestication” can be seen earlier in the various representations of Avalokiteśvara, borrowing specific features to different artistic traditions. Thus, even though Avalokiteśvara has been claimed in many cultures as a royal or princely emblem, in China the Confucian context didn’t lead to such an appropriation and only the feature of the compassionate saviour prevailed<sup>226</sup>. Similarly, the selection operated in the iconographic features.

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<sup>222</sup> Dohanian, 1977, pp. 44, 48.

<sup>223</sup> Dohanian, 1977, p. 53.

<sup>224</sup> Schroeder, 1992, p. 80.

<sup>225</sup> Yü, 2001, p. 6; see also p. 5: “the Chinese transformation of Kuan-Yin can be regarded as a case study for the Chinese transformation of Buddhism”.

<sup>226</sup> Yü, 2001, p. 4.



One of the first bronzes representing Avalokiteśvara in China probably dates from the 4<sup>th</sup> century and owes a lot to the Gandhāran style of representation: the moustache, the position of the legs, the type of the drapery, etc.<sup>227</sup>. Links with central Asia obviously followed the trade path of the silk road. During the Sui dynasty of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, more bronzes are known, that show plastic and geometric forms typical of that period, with a frontal position and minimal movement<sup>228</sup>. At the beginning of the Tang dynasty (618-907), the softening of the contours and a more sensuous portrayal of the body have been related to a “renewed Indian influence derived from Gupta art which reached China under the T’ang rulers”<sup>229</sup>. In the iconography of Kuan-Yin/Avalokiteśvara<sup>230</sup>, contacts with India have generally been put forward to emphasize the different conceptual or iconographic features of the local representation of this Bodhisattva.

Nevertheless, during the 8<sup>th</sup> century, that corresponds to the increase in the trade exchanges with Sri Lanka, some artistic links can also be put to light with Sri Lanka, particularly for the bronzes. It is also under this dynasty that the quantity of the representation of Kuan-Yin reaches a great popularity in China. For example, it is reflected in the rock sculptures of the Lung-men caves, where Maitreya and Śākyamuni are dominating the first period, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, whereas the situation is reversed in the early Tang dynasty (7<sup>th</sup> century), with a majority of representations of Amitābha and Kuan-Yin<sup>231</sup>.

By the late Tang dynasty and early Sung, some features can be related to Sri Lankan bronzes of the late Anuradhapura period, such as the one we were referring to earlier<sup>232</sup>.

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<sup>227</sup> Münsterberg, 1956, p. 102, pl. 2.

<sup>228</sup> Münsterberg, 1948, p. 30, and fig. 2.

<sup>229</sup> Münsterberg, 1956, p. 109; see also Münsterberg, 1948, p. 30.

<sup>230</sup> Kuan-Yin, the contracted form of Kuan-shih-yin, is the transliteration in Chinese of the name Avalokiteśvara, “Perceiver of the World’s Sounds”: Yü, 2001, p. 1. His major attributes, as a protector of mariners and healer of the sick, have been kept as well.

<sup>231</sup> Yü, 2001, p. 19.

<sup>232</sup> Dohanian, 1977, p. 53.



Avalokiteśvara, Late Anuradhapura period<sup>233</sup>.



Kuan-Yin, Tang Dynasty<sup>234</sup>. Kuan-Yin, Tang Dynasty<sup>235</sup>.

The movement given to the *tribhaṅga* posture, the *kaṭaka mudrā*, the soft but strong contour of the shoulders, the necklaces, the rounded folds of the drapery, can be found in late Tang bronzes from China<sup>236</sup>. Similarly, the typical pose of royal ease, so frequent on Sri Lankan bronzes, appears on Chinese bronzes of the late Sung dynasty (13<sup>th</sup> century), with the same softness of the posture, combining *lalitāsana* and *rājalilāsana*, a more elaborated drapery but similar serene and round forms of the face.



Avalokiteśvara, Late Anuradhapura period<sup>237</sup>.

Kuan-Yin, Sung Dynasty<sup>238</sup>.

Sri Lanka therefore appears as a very likely point of passage of some iconographic features from India to China: whereas links with India are mostly emphasized in the development of Kuan-Yin

<sup>233</sup> Schroeder, 1992, cat. 25; Dohanian, 1977, fig. 14.

<sup>234</sup> Lee, 2000, cat. 4.

<sup>235</sup> Münsterberg, 1948, fig. 9.

<sup>236</sup> Lee, 2000, cat. 4; Münsterberg, 1948, p. 38 and fig. 9.

<sup>237</sup> Schroeder, 1990, n° 79A; Schroeder, 1992, cat. 26 and 27.

<sup>238</sup> Münsterberg, 1948, fig. 13.

cult in China, the typical Sri Lankan style, particularly for the bronzes, which are very scant in India but plentiful in Sri Lanka, ought to be considered. Together with important commercial, diplomatic and religious contacts from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, some artistic connections would have developed and are particularly visible in the representation of Avalokiteśvara/Kuan-Yin. The major repression of Buddhism in China after 845<sup>239</sup> and the political shifts in Sri Lanka during the 11<sup>th</sup> century would have decreased such links by the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara can thus be seen as a protean deity, in a synchronic perspective (throughout many countries which have adopted and adapted its cult and iconography in various ways) and in a diachronic perspective: its cult remained extremely popular in China as the female Kuan-Yin<sup>240</sup>, when in Sri Lanka, favouring Theravada Buddhism again, it has become Natha deviyo. These features make him a particularly fruitful topic to understand the processes of transfers and cultural interactions in South, Southeast and East Asia.

## Conclusion

This panorama of Sri Lanka's position in the Indian Ocean during late Antiquity and early Middle Age, in terms of commercial, religious and artistic contacts, has pointed out the key role of the island as an intermediary in the trade exchanges between the Middle East and the Far East. The archaeological evidence leads in particular to emphasize the commercial links of the island with Mesopotamia around the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century and with China from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This place as a transshipment point facilitated religious encounters, as the presence of Christians and Muslims on the island can testify, as well as Buddhist pilgrims. Moreover, these religious exchanges have brought in their wake important artistic interactions, that made of Sri Lanka a major point of contacts and artistic crossroads during this time.

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<sup>239</sup> Van Alphen et al., 2001, pp. 49–51.

<sup>240</sup> Different hypotheses have been put forward to explain this unique phenomenon, among which the proximity between Avalokiteśvara and Tara: Stein, 1986; see Yü, 2001 for a full study of the transformation process.

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