

Professions in ancient Sri Lanka as depicted from epigraphy

3rd B.C.E. to 1st C.E.

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The early Brāhmī inscriptions shed light on the various kinds of professions who have donated caves to the saṅgha. There were families which represented the trade castes who accompanied therī Sangamitta, who visited the Island in the 3rd century B.C.E. from India. On the other hand, early Buddhist literature emphasized on the occupational divisions among the people and the distinction between the higher and lower occupations. Listed among the higher occupations were agriculture, trade and cattle keeping.

There are evidences of mariners in the early Brāhmī inscriptions at Paramākaṇḍa in Pēravili Hatpattu of the Puttalam district, where we can find two Brāhmī inscriptions, mentioning mariners. The inscription, found in the Nuvarakaṇḍa in the Kurnāgala district mentions a cave, donated by a weaver. The elephant trainers were mentioned as the “Ati acariya” in the Nāvalārkuḷam inscription in the Ampāra district mentioning a cave, donated by a chief of the elephant trainer. The Sīgiriya inscription in Ināmaluwa Kōrakē in the Māthalē district mentions of a dealer in tamarind. The Haṅdagala inscription in the Anurādhapura district mentions a maker of bows.

In this research I have identified nearly 51 professionals during this period. Having evaluated the contents of these inscriptions, it is possible to come to the conclusion that there was a well-established economy in ancient Sri Lanka.

Key words: inscriptions, professionals, Brāhmī