

SENARAT PARANAVITANA

SENARAT PARANAVITANA was born on 26 December 1896 at Mātaraṃba, Galle, in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka. He had his early English education at Buona Vista High School, Galle, and at the same time gained proficiency in oriental languages at Ranvalagoḍa Vidyāvardhana Pirivena, Galle.

From his younger days he showed a keen interest in the history and antiquities of Sri Lanka. His devotion to this study brought him the prize for the highest position in “Ceylon History and Antiquities” in the Preliminary Examination conducted by the Sinhalese Young Men’s Association in the year 1915. It is interesting to note that the prize he received on this occasion was the first part of the *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, vol. I, the journal which he was to edit after its first editor Mr D. M. de Z. Wickremasinghe.

After a brief spell of three years (1920-1922) as a teacher in the Government School, Udugampola (W. P.), Paronavitana was selected for the post of Epigraphical Assistant in 1922 by the then Archaeological Commissioner, A. M. Hocart. This event was the turning point in the life of the man who was to become one of the pioneers of Ceylonese archaeology and ancient history.

In 1923, Paronavitana was sent for training in epigraphy to the Office of the Government Epigraphist of India, Ootacamund, South India. He was trained in this branch of archaeology under the guidance of K. V. Subrahmanya Ayyar. While acquiring a thorough knowledge of the methods and techniques of epigraphy, Paronavitana gained proficiency in Tamil and Prākṛit, numismatics, art and even museology. It is noteworthy that the first inscription to be edited by him was in Tamil: “Polonnaruva Inscription of Vijayabāhu I” (*Epigraphia Indica*, vol. XVIII, nos. 7-8, 1926).

On his return to Sri Lanka in 1926 Paronavitana received a permanent appointment. From the very beginning of his career as Epigraphist in the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, his prodigious writings, both in Sinhalese and in English, dealt not only with epigraphy, but also with various other branches such as history, art, religion, languages and literature. As H. A. I. Goonetilleke, the author of the Bibliography of Paronavitana’s publications in our Commemoration Volume comments, “his contributions over the entire range of his interests up to his death in 1972 were, in the first instance, exclusively written and published in English, to which this bibliography bears monumental witness.”

In 1929, Paronavitana was appointed Editor of *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, and it is notable that, even after his retirement in 1956, he was commissioned to edit this journal, in spite of the presence of an Epigraphist in the Archaeological Survey. Thus, he remained, until his death in 1972, the unparalleled master in the field of epigraphy.

In 1932, Paranavitana was appointed Acting Archaeological Commissioner, and in 1936 he obtained the Doctorate of Philosophy from the University of Leyden, the Netherlands, on the first four chapters of his monograph on *The Stūpa in Ceylon*, which was published as a Memoir in 1939 (Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, vol. V, 1939). His supervisor for this thesis was J. Ph. Vogel, a leading authority on Indian archaeology. Succeeding A. H. Longhurst in 1940, he was made permanent in the post of Commissioner and thus became the first Ceylonese Archaeological Commissioner, a post which he held for sixteen years until he retired from State service in 1956.

Almost immediately after his retirement he was appointed Research Professor in Archaeology in the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, in recognition of his services to archaeology in Sri Lanka. In 1958, he became the first Professor of Archaeology in the Department of Archaeology of this University, the first chair of its kind to be established in the island. Paranavitana retired from University service in December 1964 and from then onwards confined himself to research at his private residence in Nugegoda near Colombo, where he died on 4th October 1972 at the age of seventy-six.

A self-taught prodigy in the field of archaeology, Paranavitana combined his talent with other aspects of culture such as history and linguistics, in which he excelled equally. His untiring work on aspects of Ceylonese culture brought him many distinctions. He was awarded the Silver Medal by the Royal Society of Arts, London in 1950 and the Gold Medal by the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1955. He was the honoured possessor of three D. Litt.s from the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, the Vidyodaya University of Ceylon and the Vidyāṅkārā University of Ceylon. The British Government honoured him by making him an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (1951) and Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (1952). Paranavitana held the post of President, Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society for three consecutive years 1956—57, 1957—58, 1958—59). He served as Member of the Editorial Board of the Annual Bibliography of the Kern Institute, Leyden (from 1935), Corresponding Member of l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, Member of the Consultative Committee of *Artibus Asiae*, Associate Editor of the *Ceylon Journal of Science (Section G)* (from 1933), Editor of the *University History of Ceylon*, vol. I, pt. I (1959) and vol. I, pt. II (1960) and Joint-Editor of *A Concise History of Ceylon* (1961).

As a first-rate archaeologist, Paranavitana rendered yeoman service to the preservation of historic monuments in Sri Lanka. He followed the trails of his predecessors, H. C. P. Bell, E. R. Ayrton, A. M. Hocart, A. H. Longhurst and others. Possessing indigenous vision and intuition, Paranavitana comprehended with exactitude the nature and design of the edifices concerned and conserved them accordingly, preserving their pristine character. Such monuments as the Kaṇṭaka Cetiya at Mihintale, the Vaṭadāge at Mādirigiriya and the rock-citadel at Sīgiriya remain the greatest contributions of Paranavitana to the archaeology of Sri Lanka. In field activities his energy never failed him. In spite of heavy commitments in literary pursuits, he travelled widely and supervised all archaeological projects which were undertaken in various parts of the island during his tenure of office.

His scholarship was of a very high calibre. Possessing a most imaginative mind and relentless energy, he put forward new theories on diverse topics relating to the ancient history of the island. His various monographs on *Saman, the God of Adam's Peak* and *Sigiriya, the Abode of a God King* and his innumerable contributions to foreign and local journals unfolded a mass of information which could not have been revealed by any other scholar during the span of only a few decades. Paranavitana also made an attempt to decipher the Indus script on the basis of symbols appearing in early Sinhalese inscriptions. His theory proposing the script to be of Aryan origin was presented to the International Congress of Archaeology held in New Delhi in 1961. Thus, Paranavitana joined the group of distinguished scholars who contributed to the attempts made on the decipherment of this script which remains a baffling problem to this day. Paranavitana's *magnum opus* is his work on the *Sigiri Graffiti*, published in two monumental volumes by the Oxford University Press in 1956. In this publication he deciphered and studied 635 verses of the graffiti scribbled on the Mirror Wall at Sigiriya by ancient visitors to the spot between the 5th and 12th centuries A.D.

During his last years, Paranavitana attempted to reinterpret the history of Sri Lanka on the basis of interlinear inscriptions which he believed to have been inscribed in minute characters on many ancient stone epigraphs. According to these sources, he claimed that Sri Lanka had maintained very close relations with Malaysia on the one hand and classical Greece and Rome on the other (see *Ceylon and Malaysia*, 1961, and *The Greeks and the Mauryas*, 1971). Paranavitana's posthumous publication, *The Story of Sigiri* (1972), provides a wealth of new material on the history of Sigiriya in particular and Sri Lanka in general, again based on the so-called interlinear inscriptions. Here, Paranavitana propounds a theory in contrast to traditional history damning Kāśyapa as a patricide. The book also contains interesting material on the early coinage of Sri Lanka, for the sources reveal the existence of the minting of gold coins in the 5th century A.D. The wealth of material supposed to be contained in these so-called interlinear inscriptions has yet to be tested and verified. Yet these revelations demonstrate the highly imaginative mind and scholarship which this savant possessed until his death.

Senarat Paranavitana is unquestionably the greatest historian, epigraphist, archaeologist and scholar that Sri Lanka has produced in the present century.