

## Elephants in *Sandēśa Kāvya*s

by

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### Introduction

The elephant of Sri Lanka belongs to Asian elephant species, namely *Elephas maximus* and is one of the two living species belonging to the taxonomic family Elephantidae, the sole living family of the order Proboscidea. The Asian elephant is found in thirteen countries in South and South East Asia. The Sri Lankan population is often considered as a separate subspecies (*Elephas maximus maximus*), but recent genetic research has pointed out that there is no evidence to support the subspecies status of the Sri Lankan population.<sup>1</sup>

The elephant is the largest land-living mammal, with its large body size and heavy weight. This majestic size as well as the admirable behaviour attracted human attention to the animal since ancient times. This interest evolved into a long lasting relationship between humans and elephants which changed from time to time, and is evident from historical and archaeological evidence.<sup>2</sup>

The human-elephant relationship during the prehistoric period was basic and restricted probably to admiration as depicted in rock art and other murals, usage such as tools made out of elephant bones and ivory, and possible use as a source of food, probably scavenging elephant carcasses and by hunting.<sup>3</sup> This relationship evolved largely during historical times, and an important milestone was the taming of the animal, thus paving the way for multiple uses. For the taming of the Asian elephant, Sukumar suggests a date of 4,000 years ago, mainly based on Indus Valley Civilization data.<sup>4</sup> The multiple uses of tamed elephants in Sri Lanka included: as state or royal elephants that were in the service of the royalty and war elephants that were a part of the army; and as a beast of burden which could be used for a variety of purposes including hard labour and transport. It should be noted that the elephant together with the tusker was considered as an auspicious symbol, and is

still being used for religious purposes such as *perahāra* pageants, and the animal is represented often in art and architecture as in numerous paintings, murals, carvings, crafts etc. These uses made elephants an important trade item in many Asian countries, and animals from Sri Lanka were considered as the best or among the best of Asian elephants. Further, the conflict between elephants and humans seems to have occurred over a considerable period in history, and this has resulted in a sharp decline of the number of elephants with the expansion of human population, settlements and cultivation, especially during the last two centuries.

*Sandēśa kāvya*s, or the messenger poem, is a unique literary tradition found in Sri Lanka as well as in India. The four essential features of a *sandēśa kāvya* poem were: a sender, a messenger, a recipient and a message. It used a messenger to convey a message from the sender in one location to the recipient in another location that could be hundreds of kilometres away. The various places and localities the messenger passes en route to his destination are described in these poems.

*Sandēśa kāvya*s originated in India and Kalidasa's *Meghadūta* written in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century CE is considered the first of this type. This poetry tradition commenced in Sri Lanka much later, and there are two Pali language poems written before the commencement of the tradition of Sinhala language *sandēśa kāvya*s in the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE. (It has been pointed out that there were other Sinhala *sandēśa* poems before this period, which are not extant, and known only from quotations available in other sources.<sup>5</sup>) However, there are obvious differences in Sinhala *sandēśa kāvya*s from the Indian works in the type of messenger, nature of the objective etc. *sandēśa kāvya*s became an important field in Sinhala literature due to several reasons including the change of the literary context, difference of theme and closeness of such themes to reality and worldly matters.<sup>6</sup> This type of poetical composition provided ample opportunity to the poets to display their skills of description<sup>7</sup> and had the opportunity to use and describe what they saw and heard in the real world.

These *sandēśa kāvya*s could be considered as a source of information on a variety of subjects, and particularly in a geographical context. For instance, human habitations such as

cities, villages and religious shrines, people, society, infrastructure such as roads, *ambalamas* (rest-halls) and natural environmental features like forests, animals and plants are described in these poems. Hence, there is a possibility to use such details to reconstruct the state of the society and country during the period of composing of the poems. This makes *sandēśa kāvya*s important as a historical source. Vitharana mentions that the descriptions of *sandēśa kāvya*s as, “however scanty they may be, are all the more significant because they are contemporary and to a considerable degree, first hand”.<sup>8</sup> The high level of accuracy of location of cities, villages and components of cities and roads could be mentioned as evidence for descriptions of the real situation.

The importance of *sandēśa kāvya*s as a historical authority should be, however, treated cautiously if we take the influence of literary traditions and poetic inspiration into consideration. For instance, Sannasgala provides examples where two verses in the *Parevi* and the *Sāḷalihīni* received direct influence of the *Jānakātharana*<sup>9</sup>, and another Sanskrit work *Gāthasaptasathi*<sup>10</sup>, where the author of both was Thotagamuwe Rahula. There are also certain similarities between verses of two Sinhala *sandēśa kāvya*s and Sannasgala mentions about such incidents.<sup>11</sup> There could be descriptions of actual scenery as well as hearsay in the poems. Some descriptions were included as a part of the literary tradition and as figures of speech, and may have not been taken from real life. Hence, the accuracy of certain descriptions, especially of the natural environment could be a matter of debate. Influenced by Sanskrit and other literary conventions, mostly based in India, some plants and animals not found and never recorded naturally in Sri Lanka have been described as found in forests, lakes etc in the *sandēśa* poetry. For instance, if we take *haṃsa* mentioned in certain *sandēśa kāvya*s as swans, they are not found naturally in Sri Lanka as evident from recorded ornithological observations of at least the last two centuries. Furthermore, the few migrant swan species recorded in India are mostly found in the northern parts of that country.<sup>12</sup> Also, the objective or objectives of these poems may not necessarily be to provide accurate descriptions of the route taken by the messenger and its environment. To solve this, other sources of history and archaeological evidence could be used, and such an effort is undertaken in the present study by comparing descriptions of elephants in *sandēśa kāvya*s with other available sources.

## Materials and Methodology

Eight Sinhala language *sandēśa kāvyas* which are considered as classical *sandēśa* poems in Sinhala literature are used in this study. These poems were written between 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the approximate time period covered by these is about two hundred years, based on the accepted dates. The following table provides information about the eight *sandēśa kāvyas*, their dates of composition and the historical period and the route taken by the messenger.

<i>Sandēśa</i>	Date <sup>13</sup>	Period of history	Route
1. <i>Mayūra</i> <sup>14</sup>	CE 1385-1391 <sup>15</sup>	Gampola period	Gampola to Devundara
2. <i>Tisara</i> <sup>16</sup>	CE 1409-1415	Gampola period	Devundara to Dedigama
3. <i>Parevi</i> <sup>17</sup>	CE 1430-1440	Kotte period	Jayawardenapura Kotte to Devundara
4. <i>Kōkila</i> <sup>18</sup>	CE 1440-1446	Kotte period	Devinuwara to Jaffna
5. <i>Sālahihini</i> <sup>19</sup>	CE 1450	Kotte period	Kotte to Kelaniya
6. <i>Girā</i> <sup>20</sup>	CE 1457-1465	Kotte period	Jayawardenapura Kotte to Totagamuwa
7. <i>Haṃsa</i> <sup>21</sup>	CE 1457-1465	Kotte period	Jayawardenapura Kotte to Keragala
8. <i>Sāvul</i> <sup>22</sup>	CE 1581-1585	Sitavaka period	Sitavaka to Sabaragamuwa Saman devala

These *sandēśa kāvyas* cover a considerable geographical area of the country. This area lies mainly in the conventional wet zone, except for the *Kōkila Sandēśa* where a part of the route lies along the western coastal dry zone. This area covered by all the above poems came under the dominion of the main kingdoms of the country in that period, Gampola and Kotte, and was amongst the major areas of human settlement in the island.

The objective of the present study is to figure out the descriptions of elephants available in the selected *sandēśa kāvyas* and to analyse details of live elephants with a suitable categorisation. Based on this information, an effort is made to authenticate those descriptions in the *sandēśa kāvyas* by using other contemporary and near contemporary historical sources and available archaeological sources.

## Results and Discussion

Descriptions of elephants available in the selected eight *sandēśa* poems could be divided into two broad categories and a few sub categories listed and described below:

1. Tame elephants
  - a. Royal or state elephants;
  - b. War elephants;
  - c. Other tamed elephants and their usage;
  - d. Elephant capture and training; and
  - e. Knowledge and traditions of elephants (including similes).
2. Wild elephants

After the material available is presented below, an effort is made to validate this material, by answering two key questions. Firstly, whether the description is a poetic inspiration or produced just as a literary instrument. Secondly, the possibility of it being a real description, based on historical sources with special reference to contemporary and near contemporary sources.

### 1. Tame elephants

#### a) Royal or State elephants

Royal or state elephants are the elephants used by kings and ridden by them during state functions and even during war, as evident in the history of Sri Lanka. These are often mentioned by the term *Maṅgala hatthi*, meaning auspicious elephant. *Sandēśa kāvyas* descriptions include elephants described as *Maṅgala hatthi* which is the terminology used for royal or state elephants.

The term, *Maṅgala hatthi* is mentioned in the commentary of Dediḡama (*Tisara*, 154) which describes the qualities of noble elephants, including the fact that seven of their body parts touched the earth, availability of twenty nails, longer or upwardly directed right tusk and the taller frontal bump. There is a description of King Rajasinghe I, stating that he was a genius in riding elephants (*Sāvul*, 64). Further to that, enemy kings were able to flee after being defeated by King Rajasinghe as they were particularly able to mount on horses and elephants (*Sāvul*, 55). All these descriptions are expressions of the use of royal or state elephants by the rulers of the day.

Ethubunwala is a place north of Mabole (north-west of Kelaniya) where King Kelanitissa, the story goes, was swallowed up by the earth along with his royal elephant due to the well-known offence, the King had committed (burning a Buddhist monk in an oil vessel), and this is mentioned as a place name in the *Kōkila Sandēsa* (171). It is of interest to note that this particular incident which is said to have taken place in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, not recorded in major historical sources, but appears in this poem compiled about seventeen centuries later. It provides an idea of the prevalence of historical memory, and this incident was also recorded later in the *Rājāvaliya*.<sup>23</sup>

The royal or regal or state elephant was the main stately vehicle on which the king rode since ancient times. Such elephants are found throughout history of the country. Some of these animals were used in war as in famous cases of, King Dutugemunu's Kandula, Elara's Parwata, Parakramabahu's Eirawana. Adithiya's account of the fauna of the *Mahāvamsa* describes a number of such instances of kings riding elephants.<sup>24</sup> This tradition was common among the Kotte and Sitavaka kings too.

## b) War elephants

The elephant army was one of the four traditional armies of the ancient South Asia known as *caturangani sena*, where the other armies included chariots, cavalry and infantry. *Sandēsa kāvya*s has such descriptions of the elephant army as well as references to the four armies.

Four armies are mentioned in reference to the Gampola city (*Mayura*, 6). The elephant army is named among the four armies in Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte in *Mayūra* (46), while *Kōkila* (120) and *Girā* (13) *Sandēsa kāvya*s name elephant and horse armies in the same city. It is mentioned that the number of elephants and horses in respective armies was large in the city of Sitavaka (*Sāvul*, 29, 30). A supplication to God Upulwan at Devundara was made to protect all four named armies that included the elephant army (*Parevi*, 204).

Elephants in armies are common in literary sources. The *Kavsilumina*, written before the period of our concern, mentions the four armies<sup>25</sup> and in some verses, the elephant army is mentioned in fighting<sup>26</sup>.

The use of war elephants is amply supported by other historical sources. There is sufficient evidence from the Anuradhapura period (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE to early 11<sup>th</sup> century CE) to the Kotte period (15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) in historical sources such as the *Mahāvamsa*. Some of the royal elephants were used for war by certain kings such as King Dutugemunu (Kandula) and Elara (Parwata) while Adithiya's list includes a number of other kings who fought riding on elephants in the article mentioned earlier.<sup>27</sup>

Contemporary evidence of the use of war elephants by King Rajasinghe I in the battle of Mulleriyawa in circa 1562 CE could be found in Portuguese<sup>28</sup> and Sinhala sources like the *Rājāvaliya*<sup>29</sup>. The Portuguese historian, Queyroz<sup>30</sup> also mentioned that Rajasinghe had 120 war elephants and 2080 pack elephants, while de Silva mentioned that Rajasinghe I had a corps of 200 war elephants.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, elephants were used during the sieges of Colombo by Rajasinghe I<sup>32</sup>, and Queyroz mentions that the Sinhalese “make use of elephants trained to war, with steel points in their tusks and swords in their trunks, which is a horrible and frightful war ware.”<sup>33</sup> Rebeiro, another Portuguese historian, also mentions the use of elephants in war by the King of Kandy.<sup>34</sup> There is evidence to suggest that the number of elephants annually captured increased during the reign of Rajasinghe I from the areas where these animals were traditionally captured. The Portuguese Revenue Register of 1599, cites that 20 elephants were collected from Dolosdas Korale during the time of the King of Kotte and that the number increased to 30 during the reign of Rajasinghe

I.<sup>35</sup> In the Magul Korale, 18 or 20 elephants were collected for the King of Kotte, and 30 during the time of Rajasinghe I.<sup>36</sup>

### c) Other tamed elephants and their usage

*Sandēśa* poems describe tame elephants found in cities, apart from royal or war elephants. They could be tame elephants kept in these cities for various purposes such as transport, work, trade, and there is also a possibility of them belonging to the elephant army or the palace.

Tame elephants, found in Sri Jayewardenapura included ferocious and great elephants with musth (*Mayūra*, 48), who wandered in the streets of the city (*Kōkila*, 125). Large elephants were found in compounds or terraces in the same city by *Parevi* messenger (17). The *Girā Sandēśa* (18) mentions that winds were generated from the flapping of ears while the *Sālahiṇi Sandēśa* (10) describes the noise created by flapping of ears of elephants among the sounds of the city of Sri Jayewardenapura. Elephants decorated with armours embedded with gems wandering in streets of Rayigama, made people happy, thus affirming that people admired these animals (*Mayūra*, 54). It is evident that some of these descriptions indicate that there was a large number of elephants in the city.

Similarly tame tuskers were found in streets of the city of Sitavaka, which was the capital of the kingdom under the same name (*Sāvul*, 23). Other than in these capitals, elephants were found in some other cities too. They were found in Weligama (*Tisara*, 46) and large, tusked, elephants with golden ropes and in musth were described as wandering in groups in Devinuwara (*Kōkila*, 17). The mention of groups of elephants illustrates the extent of the city while these cities were among the important port cities where international trade took place. Elephants were important trade items as described below.

Elephants wandering in cities are mentioned in other literary sources like the *Kavsiṇumīna*, written during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The city mentioned here was Sagala<sup>37</sup>, a city in ancient India, and another reference describes the winds generated by the flapping of ears by elephants.<sup>38</sup>

Elites riding on elephant or horseback on the street, in or near the village of Pamunuwa, near Kelaniya are mentioned (*Haṃsa*, 125). The Sinhala word used here is ‘*nissō*’, which means the ‘appropriate’ persons. Riding elephants was a practice among the royal and nobles while elephants were used for transportation purposes. Trading and riding on elephants were included in the acts that the rebel leader and others promised not to engage in, when King Jayaweera Parakramabahu, offered mercy to a rebel leader of a noble family in the late 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>39</sup> The chief rider of an elephant in the carving of the ivory chest no. 1241, which dates back to mid 16<sup>th</sup> century and now at Munich Residenz treasury (Schatzkammer) is identified as the Sinhala ambassador of the Royal Embassy from Kotte to Lisbon sent by King Buwanekabahu VII.<sup>40</sup> A second ivory chest numbered 1242 which is also at the same institution contains a carving of an elephant with three Sinhalese sitting on the back of the animal.<sup>41</sup> Further, Queyroz, making reference to an elephant belonging to royalty and other leaders, remarks that riding on elephants was considered a mark of social strata.<sup>42</sup>

There are also references to gifting of elephants. Eighteen Vanni kings offered elephants and other offerings to King Rajasinghe I as tribute to pay their respect as the tradition demanded (*Sāvul*, 89). This was a custom practised in state friendship as well as a demonstration of obedience to a powerful ruler. The King of Kotte agreed to pay an annual tribute of ten elephants, four hundred *bahars* of cinnamon and twenty rings with gems to the Portuguese according to an agreement signed in 1518.<sup>43</sup> By the end of the same century, Portuguese were receiving 7 elephants as tribute from the Vanniyar of Puttalam, the same they previously paid to the King of Kotte.<sup>44</sup> The Portuguese received an annual gain of 37 elephants including 7 mentioned above, and another 30 animals provided as *rājakāriya* (mandatory state service). Portuguese records mention that elephant hunting was an official duty of certain strata of people in Puttalam, and the *chandās* (a Tamil caste) who supplied fodder, were given the village Tettapalla in Kalpitiya peninsula as the *badavādilla* (lands granted for individuals for offices held or services rendered by them) of 10 *chandā* people who served as *paniās* (grass or leaf cutters) of the elephants.<sup>45</sup> These references indicate that elephants were in abundance in that particular area.

Elephant trade has been a valuable source of revenue since ancient times as amply evident in our chronicles as well as in foreign sources, especially by Megasthenes.<sup>46</sup> Megasthenes was also the first person to mention the superiority of the elephants of Sri Lanka over the Indian elephants, which had been accepted as a foregone conclusion for centuries, and was generally agreed by Portuguese authors such as Barros<sup>47</sup> and Queyroz.<sup>48</sup>

Since the shift of the Kingdom towards the south-western region of the Island in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, elephants had become a chief export item, and it was second only to cinnamon during the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>49</sup> These animals were exported mainly from Jaffna and Mannar during the Portuguese occupation of the Maritime Provinces, the end of the *sandēśa* period we cover. However, we could assume that prior to the advent of the Portuguese, Sinhalese kings could have used the ports such as Puttalam to export elephants. Ettala (present Etalai), a village in the Kalpitiya peninsula could be the location of the elephant stall (*äth hala*) where the animals were kept. The market for the Sri Lankan elephants was India, and according to Rebeiro, the Portuguese sold about 20 to 30 elephants to the Mughal emperor and the Nayak of Tanjore during Jeronimo de Azevedo's tenure, i.e. the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>50</sup> The export of elephants continued until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the demand declined mainly due to the increased use of fire arms, new mechanical equipment and the terrains.

#### d) Elephant capture and training

There was an elaborate system of capturing and training elephants in Sri Lanka since ancient times. The department which was in charge of capture and taming of elephants in the period of the focus of this paper is described in the *Mayūra Sandēśa*. The word 'nile' in *Mayūra* (93) refers to this specialised department. There is evidence on the establishment of this department, also known as *ätbandanē* during the Kotte period, and also the existence of a minister titled *Gajanāyake* (head of the elephant department - *gaja*=elephant and *nāyaka*=chief) who was in charge of royal elephants.<sup>51</sup> Abeysinghe refers to a Portuguese Royal decree and a letter of 1639 ordering the Portuguese rulers in maritime Sri Lanka to continue the monopoly in the capture and sale of elephants which existed from the time of Kotte kings. The decree also stipulates the continuation of the existing complex social

and land tenure system connected with the capture of elephants.<sup>52</sup> Abeysinghe also provides a description of the system of elephant hunting, based on the Portuguese foral (a register of lands, duties etc). In Dolosdas Korale, 108 inhabitants of 44 villages were to join the 'elephant hunt' and enjoyed lands in return for this *rājakāriya* (mandatory state service). They were to provide 30 elephants a year as mentioned above.<sup>53</sup> Although this lies outside the area of concern of this paper, the scale of organization in the hunt provides evidence for the presence of tamed elephants in the cities.

Elephant stalls or *äth halas* were places where tame elephants and newly captured elephants were kept. *Sandēśa* poems mention such elephant stalls, as for example, the Matota *äth hala*, (present Matara) (*Mayūra* 93). Three of the four *Sandēśa kāvyas* which have the messenger passing through Matara mention tame elephants found in Matara. Elephants in musth were playing in the Nilwala River as mentioned in the *Parevi* (119) and elephants in musth, bound by ropes are found by the messenger of the *Kōkila Sandēśa* when crossing the Nilwala River (48). According to the *Mayūra Sandēśa*, this *äth hala* was situated on the right bank of the Nilwala river as the bird saw the elephants before he crossed the river. This locates the elephant stall in the area on the right bank of the river, i.e. in the present Polhena area. There was a renowned elephant stall at Matara which was continued by the Portuguese and the Dutch under the Gajanayaka Nilame.<sup>54</sup> The *sandēśa kāvyas* provide evidence for the existence of the stall before the advent of western colonial powers. The site of the Matara elephant stall has changed with time as the Dutch later had the stall within the fort, which was on the left bank of the river.

There were other elephant stalls in the country as well. For instance, there was an elephant stall at Sitavaka (*Sevul* 103), on the left side of the road from Sitavaka, between Wasuwalvita and Getahetta. As mentioned earlier, Rajasinghe I who ruled from Sitavaka had a large elephant army.

There are records of elephant stalls in other historical sources which support the descriptions of *sandēśa kāvyas*. According to Queyroz, there was an elephant stall at Malwana.<sup>55</sup>

Elephant stalls are mentioned occasionally in other Sinhala literary works. For instance, the *Kavsiḷumiṇa* mentions elephant

stalls found in legendary cities like Kusawati and Sagala. It seems that the elephant stall was an essential item in a city, if it was a capital.<sup>56</sup> As enumerated above, there is sufficient evidence to support the existence of elephant stalls where captured elephants were kept.

### e) Knowledge and traditions of Elephants (including similes)

Human association with elephants which lasted for thousands of years resulted in a well developed knowledge-base on elephants as evident in some *sandēśa* poems. This includes “elephantine science”, medicine, beliefs associated with them etc.

One such item is the classification of elephants into various castes. The Sinhalese elephant lore divides elephants into ten castes based mainly on the characteristics of the body.<sup>57</sup> *Chathdanta* is considered as the highest cast. They were the best and the noblest of the elephants who had seven parts of the body touching the ground (four legs, trunk, tail end and penis) as mentioned in two *sandēśa kāvyas* (*Tisara* 154, *Sāvul* 103).

Furthermore, a number of other features, also considered as characteristics of a noble elephant, are mentioned in *sandēśa* poems. These include having twenty nails (*Tisara*, 154), having large ear bases, the tall frontal bump (*Tisara*, 154) and a longer or upwardly directed right tusk (*Tisara*, 154, *Sāvul*, 23).

Elephants were considered auspicious symbols since ancient past. Playful elephants were included as an auspicious omen to be seen by the messenger of the *Sāḷalihīni Sandēśa* (16) during the commencement of the journey.

The *Mayūra Sandēśa* (93) mentions that musth secreted from three places of the elephants in the Matara elephant stall. The traditional belief was that these three places were the two cheeks and the testicles, which is partly accurate as two temporal glands that secrete the fluid are located between the eyes and the ears. The traditional practice is to keep the elephants in musth carefully roped as mentioned in *Kōkila* (48), because they were ferocious during that period, but in some poems, it is common to see such elephants roaming in the streets.

Similes and metaphors or rhetorical language use is another aspect which expresses the admiration of elephants. Elephants are compared to various items and the animal and its body parts are compared with other materials. Some examples are given below.

Elephants are often compared to hills or rocks (*Mayūra*, 48, 54); black or rainy clouds (*Parevi*, 17; *Kōkila*, 17; *Tisara*, 46) and the tusks of a group of tusked elephants compared to egrets (*Parevi*, 17; *Kōkila*, 17). Some of these are purely poetic expressions as similar examples are found in other literary sources. For instance, elephants are compared to rainy clouds in the *Kavsiḷumiṇa*<sup>58</sup> and the *Vuttamālā Sandēśa* too.<sup>59</sup>

Meanwhile the calf of god Upulwan is described as not comparable to the trunk of an elephant (*Mayūra*, 144). Kalu Ganga River is mentioned as the trunk of the elephant, *Samanta kuta* (Adam's Peak) (*Parevi*, 65). Enemy kings are compared to elephants while King Rajasinghe is compared to a lion that can defeat these elephants (*Sāvul*, 33), while the same king is compared to an elephant that destroyed a banana forest which was compared to enemies (*Sāvul*, 47). Alagakkonara is also compared to the lion that defeated elephants (*Mayūra*, 58) while enemies of god Vibheeshana are also mentioned as tuskers, who were defeated by the god, compared to a lion (*Tisara*, 106).

## 2. Wild elephants

Wild elephants are mentioned in at least five forests or woodlands passed by the messenger in the selected eight *sandēśa kāvyas*. Authentication of this - whether it was a means of poetic expression aimed at describing the forest or whether elephants were really there is a difficult task. Such an effort should be based on a variety of factors; whether the area of concern could naturally harbour elephants, the demographic and land use pattern etc.

All the five above mentioned forests inhabited by elephants as described in the *sandēśa* poems are situated in the wet zone of Sri Lanka. The wet zone can harbour elephants as the climatic conditions and the vegetation are suitable for these animals. The increase of human population and the alteration of land use pattern were the main causes for the drastic reduction of elephant numbers of the wet zone, mainly during the last two centuries. Deraniyagala

mentions that the “man has forced the elephant from the areas of heavy rainfall into the more arid tracts which are less congenial to this water-loving animal”.<sup>60</sup> Although the vast majority of the elephants are found today in the dry zone, small herds of elephants still survive in the Peak Wilderness and Rakwana mountains, while seasonal migrations to wet zone areas during droughts are also recorded.

The near contemporary author, Queyroz mentioned that elephants are found in herds of two hundreds and three hundreds<sup>61</sup>, and these animals were wandering in the forests. His statements provide additional evidence for the fact that there was a large number of elephants in the forests of the country, while one could argue of a possible exaggeration since he did not visit Sri Lanka and his account was based on official and religious records and personnel interviews. But, more reliable evidence can be found in the Portuguese revenue register of 1599 which mentions that the elephants “have not been caught [for long] and there are places where we are unable to travel, for we could come to harm for there are many of them now”.<sup>62</sup> This clearly indicates that elephant populations have increased when they were not hunted. This could also happen if an area was depopulated of humans and abandoned. The areas where elephants were hunted are also listed in this register, but they are situated outside the regions covered by the *sandēsa kāvyas*. Some references of Queyroz<sup>63</sup> point to a human-elephant conflict such as incidents of crop damage and elephants becoming rogue. According to him, although it was prohibited to kill elephants, people killed them because they damaged crops, and he points to a particular incident, near Panadura where an elephant destroyed more than 300 palm trees within a month, and eventually got killed. In return, people adapted to the situation and took stray action to get rid of rogue elephants. They built houses near a strong tree and another wooden house on the tree with a ladder to take refuge in case of elephant attacks. They threw fire brands from these tree-top houses. In one incident, a woman placed a bowl of boiling oil on the trunk of an elephant that put its trunk into a house! Although it is not clear when and where these events took place exactly, the human-elephant conflict was recurrent. Rebeiro also mentions that elephants “wander the forest in herds” and “they destroy crops of the natives” and the people when they come to know of such a herd, give the information, to be captured by the authorities, namely the Portuguese.<sup>64</sup>

Apart from the five forests where elephants were found, several other forests are mentioned in *sandēsa kāvyas*, some of which are enumerated below, with no mention of whether elephants were found in these forests. If elephants were considered as a necessity when describing a forest, the question arises as to why they are not described here, even when some of these are lengthy accounts. This supports the argument that the five forests where elephants were found wild (described further below) are closer to the reality than poetic expressions. Regarding the poetic narratives of forests, Tennekoon suggests that the shorter forest descriptions are more reliable and poetic.<sup>65</sup>

1. Forest in Tammennawa area between Ayyan Kovil and Malwila or Wellawela area (*Kōkila* 187-89)
2. Forest called Nanuga wana (*Kōkila* 206-218)
3. Kaikawala guard and Walambalama (*Sāḷalihini* 31-32) forest and its flora described
4. Sumutana forest (*Sāḷalihini* 34-35) is described with names of some forest trees and young men romping
5. Gurubewula forest (*Sāḷalihini* 36-37) with ponds and water plants
6. Between Kalutara and Panadura (*Tisara*, 86); Potupitiya-Kalutara (*Parevi*, 58-64; *Kōkila*, 101)
7. Between Pitawulgamuwa and Colombo (*Tisara*, 95)
8. Between Vebada and Uruwala (*Tisara*, 112 )
9. Madalu Mukalana forest (*Haṃsa*, 125-149)
10. Forest between Lanumodera and Manewiyapokuna (*Mayūra*, 83-84) with *wetake*, seems a coastal forest.
11. Between Polwatta and Panguralweleliya (*Kōkila*, 51)
12. Between Kamburugamuwa – Polwatta (*Tisara*, 40-41)
13. Between Mihiripenna and Galle (*Tisara*, 54)

### Forests where elephants were found

#### 1. Forest between Hispathella and Algama

A verse mentioned in *Tisara* describes an area where groups of tuskers in musth were found (*Tisara*, 121). This forest is situated in



the area between Hispathella (probably Attanagalla) and Algama (F 1 in Map 1) on a mountainous terrain, and described in detail with certain animals and plants named (*Tisara*, 119-123). People too live nearby, as a temple is described (Hispathella). Vaddah women (123), *äl keth* (fields with land rice) and farmer women *el geviliyan* are also described (124, 125).

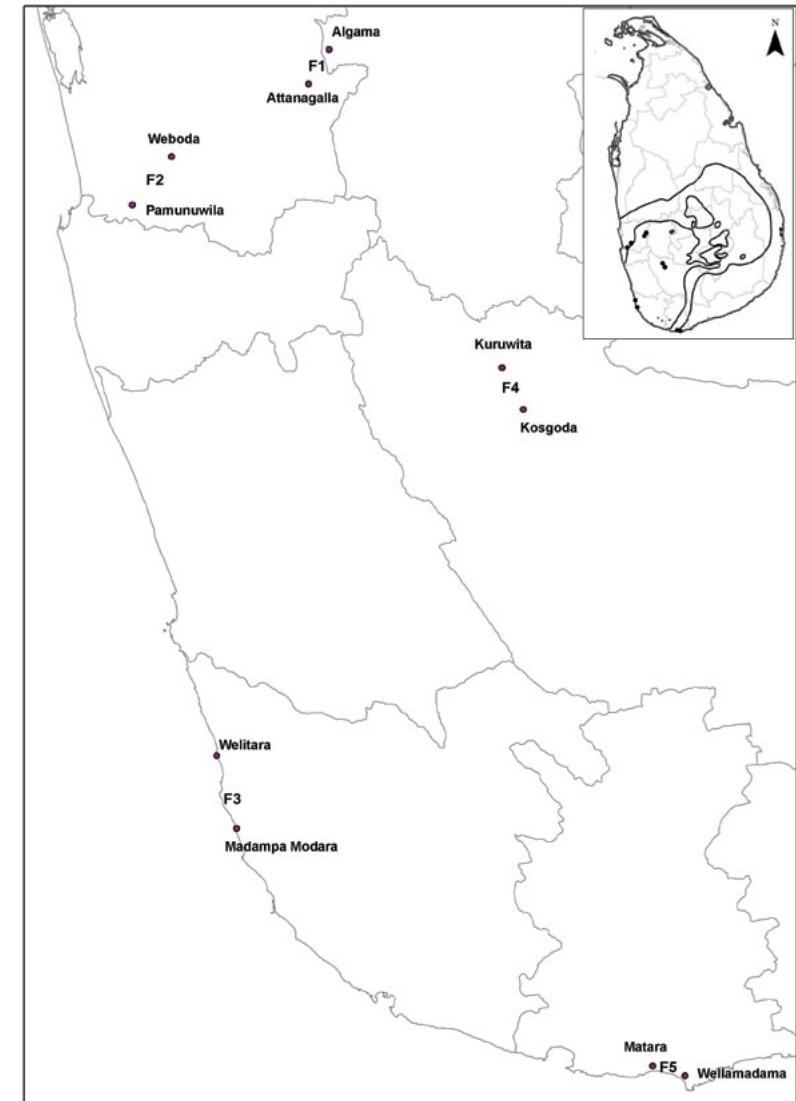
According to the near contemporary records, this area was populated at the end of the period of our focus, as the Portuguese Revenue Register of 1599 mentions villages like Uduganella and Attanagalla<sup>66</sup> as villages belonging to Kotte and Algam, Dorawaka and Madurupitiya villages<sup>67</sup> which were part of the Sitavaka kingdom. All these villages yielded paddy and arecanut. However this record is almost two centuries since the *Tisara Sandēsa* was compiled, a period where large demographic changes took place with the shift of the capital to Kotte and the Portuguese attacks. Moreover, elephants could live within the large tracts of forests and uncultivated areas between villages as evident even in present day Sri Lanka. The area referred to is still not much populated and has large plantations and forest patches.

## 2. Forest between Pamunuwa and Weboda

'Ferocious elephants' and elephants in 'musth' are mentioned (*Haṃsa*, 126, 141) among the other animals such as wild boar, deer and fighting oxen, monkeys and birds living in a massive forest described in detail (*Haṃsa*, 126-150). This forest is situated between Pamunuwa (present Pamunuwila close to Kelaniya) and Weboda village (close to Weliweriya) (F 2 in Map 1). The name of this forest could be the Madalumukalana mentioned briefly in the *Tisara* as between Maskeliya and Weboda (110-11), the description of which does not include elephants.

The description of the forest includes exotic animals such as swans (*Haṃsa*, 131, 137) and peacocks which are generally dry zone animals (*Haṃsa*, 128, 134).

The villages around this area are described in the Portuguese revenue register of 1599 such as Mahara, Biyagama, Yagoda, Kossinna, Dalugama.<sup>68</sup> Queyroz mentions of an elephant killed in nearby Kelaniya who had more than ten pounds of bullets in her



Map1  
Forests or woodlands where wild elephants are mentioned

body.<sup>69</sup> This hints at the conflict between humans and elephants and also the widespread use of the guns by the Sinhalese in this period, which is supported by a number of local and foreign sources as summarised in Goonatilake.<sup>70</sup> In a reference to Malwana, the Portuguese Revenue Register mentions that “it has seven or eight villages hidden in it and is forested ...”, and this provides evidence to the fact that the population has been reduced.<sup>71</sup> Such fluctuations may have also taken place previous to that period.

### 3. Forest between Welitota and Madampe modera

One of the verses which describes a forest (*Girā*, 170-191) between Welitota and Madampe modera (estuary) mentions herds of elephants in musth (*Girā* 171). The forest is described as comprising forested ponds (may be the swamps including mangroves of the area) and certain plants and animals are named. (F 3 in Map 1). It is important to note that this forest is not mentioned in any of the other four poems where the messenger passed through this region. Tennekoon identifies this area as present Randoombe.<sup>72</sup>

Swampy forests could be an ideal habitat for elephants. However, the area is close to the sea and the country could have been more populated than inland due to the then location of sea ports in the Kingdom of Kotte.

### 4. ‘Kuruwita mukalana’ forest

Elephants that uproot trees and eat them are mentioned in a forest named Kuruwita mukalana (*Sāvul*, 132). This forest is situated between Kuruwita River and Kosgoda, and the description mentions the flora and fauna in the forest (*Sāvul*, 132-139). The area (F 4 in Map 1) may not have been densely populated during the period of concern. Even today, there is a small herd of elephants in the Peak Wilderness Sanctuary in the vicinity of Sri Pada (Adam's Peak), which is more mountainous than this area. Hence there is a possibility of this being true. The behaviour mentioned in this description is somewhat abnormal, as elephants usually uproot trees when there are no leaves to eat at heights they can easily reach. The act could have been mentioned to indicate the ferocious nature of the animals.

### 5. Uggalbewula Forest

A forest is described in Uggalbewula area (*Mayūra*, 106-111) where elephants in musth are mentioned (108). Although Parevi also describes a forest here (132), no elephants are mentioned. This forest was not seen by the *Kōkila* messenger, or this may be the forest he mentions briefly between Wellemadama and Nagakowila (*Kōkila*, 42).

Uggalbewula is identified as an area situated between Matara and Wellamadama (F 5 in Map 1). As mentioned above, there are records of the elephant hunt establishment under the administration of the Portuguese and the Dutch in Matara region. Elephants were found, as mentioned earlier in the adjoining area of Dolosdas korale in the present Hambantota district.

### Conclusion

The descriptions of elephants in *sandēśa kāvyas* are quite accurate in those of live tame elephants, as there is ample historical evidence to support the capture, taming and use of tame elephants. Tamed elephants included royal or state elephants, war elephants and other elephants which could have been used for a variety of purposes. However, descriptions of *sandēśa* poems do not provide details of all aspects of tamed elephants, such as their use in hard labour, e.g haulage. However, the large numbers of tame elephants found in cities may be exaggerated poetic expressions.

The descriptions of wild elephants found in certain areas mentioned in *sandēśa kāvyas* are also close to reality as environment conditions are suitable to harbour wild elephants. There is other evidence for the existence of wild elephants in the surrounding areas, which could support such a view. However, this depends on certain other factors like the human population density, extent of cultivation and the extent of trade which are not adequately mentioned even in qualitative terms.

The environmental perspective which is the theme of this article was obviously not an objectives pursued by *sandēśa kāvyas* poets. Therefore, their descriptions did not include detailed and accurate accounts of the biodiversity or the environmental

conditions, which the messengers passed through. There was a dominant tendency among the poets to use the contemporary poetic expressions that were in vogue during the period. Yet, it is a matter of significance that *sandēsa kāvyas* provide an invaluable resource for the study of the environment and biodiversity of the country's past.

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