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‘Implicit cosmopolitanism’ and the commercial role of ancient Lanka

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2250 years of Sri Lanka’s history is dominated by a complexity of religious, political and above all commercial relations that the island had maintained with the outside world throughout many centuries.

This comment on the history of the island and the continuity of its ancient and modern engagement with the wider world reflects a perception of ancient Lanka that is deeply invested in what may be termed ‘implicit cosmopolitanism’. While the term ‘cosmopolitan’ is rarely applied directly to the island’s history from c. 600 BCE to c. 650 CE, a collection of themes – of connectedness, transregional significance, and religious and social pluralism – are repeatedly invoked. At their heart lies the contention that due to its pre-eminent role in Indian Ocean trade networks, ancient Lanka played a leading role in long-term, largely cooperative contact with all of the major cultures surrounding it, from Rome (later Byzantium) in the west to China in the east and India in the north.

In this respect, the cosmopolitanism of ancient Lanka may be perceived (and, indeed, on occasion has explicitly been evoked) in contrast to the early modern cosmopolitanism enforced on the island by the expansion of European imperialism. Just as the 1977 Bandaranayake government of Sri Lanka inaugurated a continuation of the chronicle of the island as an assertion of continuity of community and purpose and thus absorbed the period of European domination into a longer narrative, which itself contained periods of foreign rule and military conflict, so has modern scholarship on the commercial relations of ancient Lanka provided fertile ground for constructing a cultural and economic identity for modern Sri Lanka, which situates the present in the past and claims continuity and peace rather than disjuncture and conflict as the nation’s core values.

Such a vision of the island’s past connects closely with a common historiographical representation of ancient Lankan history, when Anurâdhapura functioned as the island’s capital, as a ‘golden age’. This golden age is characterized,
however, by a cosmopolitanism that emphasizes Lanka’s relationship to the wider – and, above all, Western – world rather than the internal relationships that constituted the island. Such an outward-looking cosmopolitanism on the one hand reinforces a perception of the ancient period as one of grandeur and influence that implicitly accepts modern associations of commercial success, power and positivity, and on the other does not challenge homogeneous nationalist visions of the island as Buddhist and Sinhala. It is a cosmopolitanism situated in numerous imagined encounters between a prosperous, peaceful, powerful and culturally unitary Buddhist Lanka and a dazzling, diverse and delighted array of foreigners, whose visits to the island were too brief and too limited to coastal regions to impact on Lankan culture but that nevertheless demonstrated the island’s significance far beyond its shores.

The purpose of this chapter is not completely to disavow ancient Lanka’s commercial role in the Indian Ocean. It is, however, to demonstrate that assertions about the nature of its ancient commercial role have in places outstripped or distorted the available evidence. Numismatic evidence has been central to many of the claims made about ancient ‘cosmopolitan’ Lanka, making it first necessary to unpick a narrative constructed from evidence that is often represented as ‘objective’ because it is tangible. Following a rereading of published coin evidence from the island, this chapter presents five previously unpublished, or only partially published, Byzantine coins of the fifth to sixth centuries CE, which purport to have a Sri Lankan provenance, demonstrating the difficulty of imposing a simple, linear narrative onto ancient evidence. Coin evidence, moreover, has consistently been interpreted in light of, inserted into and used to strengthen and modify conclusions derived from textual and archaeological sources, where a similar impulse towards a preordained conclusion can be identified. Finally, this chapter offers a new synthesis of ancient Lanka’s commercial and cultural connections, pointing to developing areas of research and suggesting new ways of understanding the island’s growth as an interface between the western and eastern Indian Ocean regions from the late fifth and early sixth centuries.

Unpicking ‘implicit cosmopolitanism’: the case of the coins

Coins datable to the ancient period and found in Sri Lanka often appear to provide external corroboration of textual sources that refer to foreign connections, discussed later in this chapter, and thus form the backbone of a narrative of cosmopolitanism. A sampling of publications discussing ancient Lanka and particularly its connections with other regions, its pluralism and its implicit cosmopolitanism yields multiple cases, among which the following 2005 publication by Boulnois is a typical example of a widespread strategy of using numismatic evidence to support wider arguments about Lanka’s extensive trade relations.
In the first centuries of the Christian era, Ceylon seems to have been a sort of huge cash-register, a treasury of coinage and money from various countries which indicates the multiplicity and importance of its trade. Tens of thousands of coins – Indian, Roman, Kushan, Sassanian Persian and Chinese – have been unearthed there. In the first three centuries AD, the island had active commercial relations with northern India and with Western states, either directly or through the intermediary of Indian sailors. Silver *denarii* of nine Roman emperors have been found, as well as a few copper coins from Alexandria, and silver coins from northern India and from the Kushan Empire. From the 4th century on, with growing economic crises in the Roman Empire and in Egyptian commerce, Sri Lanka became the largest maritime trade centre of the Indian Ocean. Tens of thousands of bronze and copper Roman coins (no longer silver ones) have been discovered there dating to the 4th and 5th centuries, issued in the mints of Rome, Alexandria, Carthage, Antioch, Constantinople and other Mediterranean cities. The numerous Sassanian and Byzantine coins date from the 6th and 7th centuries, while Arab coinage marks the period when sailors from the caliphates visited Serendib, as Ceylon was also known.\(^\text{12}\)

The picture presented here is powerful but quickly begins to fray under close analysis. The first problem concerns chronology. ‘In the first centuries of the Christian era’ provides only a broad anchor, but it also encompasses and therefore implies the contemporaneity of everything that follows, i.e., Indian, Roman, Kushan, Sassanian Persian and Chinese coin finds. While the first four categories are broadly contemporaneous, the same cannot be said of the Chinese coins, which only seem to have arrived on the island later, from the tenth century onwards.\(^\text{13}\) Subsequently, the citation purports to chart a series of shifts in trade relations. The first to third centuries are characterized by trade with India and ‘Western states’ (Rome). The fourth and fifth centuries represent, on the basis of ‘tens of thousands’ of coins from the mints of the eastern Mediterranean, the high point of Lanka’s trade with the Roman Empire; the sixth and seventh centuries are epitomized by Byzantine and Sassanian coin finds (with the continued and implicit connection between coin finds and commercial contact). Finally, Arab coinage, although not dated specifically, appears to mark a move, presumably in the late seventh or eighth century, towards Muslim trade with the island. It is a narrative of continuous, evolving and exotic interconnections between ancient Lanka and the eastern, but above all, western edges of the Indian Ocean.

Such a narrative cannot withstand close scrutiny. Taking only the coin varieties mentioned, not a single seventh-century Sassanian coin from the island has been identified. Moreover, the transition in trading relationships with the island from either Roman/Byzantine or Sassanian to Arab/Muslim is marked not by the gradually shifting identity of coin finds implied by Boulnois’ account but rather by a gap of around five centuries in the coin record; the earliest documented Arabic coins in the island date from the twelfth century.\(^\text{14}\) Furthermore, few indications
of the quantity or significance of coin finds are provided. This is important since coins may offer evidence for communication, contact and economic and social systems but they are also small, mobile, durable objects that historically might travel great distances without carrying any significant meaning for the reconstruction of economic networks or historic ‘cosmopolitanism’. The famous case of a coin of Kanishka I discovered in Wales, for example, is remarkable but as an isolated find does not indicate ancient connections between northern India and northern Wales.\(^{15}\)

In the case of ancient Lanka, quantity is highly relevant to the conclusions drawn from coin finds and Boulnois’ language is misleadingly ambiguous. ‘Silver *denarii* of nine emperors’, for example, implies chronological and numerical breadth. Equally true, but perhaps more relevant, is that fewer than twenty imperial *denarii* in total have ever been found on the island, and some of these may have reached the island as curios in the modern period.\(^{16}\) As the coins from the de Saram collection (below) demonstrate, modern collecting habits are disregarded at the peril of any reconstruction of ancient patterns. The same numerical paucity is true of the disputed total numbers of Kushan coins (either one or around twenty-four specimens).\(^{17}\)

Boulnois then refers to Byzantine and Sasanian coins. The copper-alloy examples, treated separately by Boulnois, are also given separate consideration in this chapter. Beyond them, the record is thin indeed. Codrington recorded a handful of finds of Byzantine precious metal coins (six in total, including one imitation probably produced on the island).\(^{18}\) Walburg’s work to catalogue new material and re-evaluate older notices of coin finds reduces this list to three Byzantine gold examples with a certain island provenance.\(^{19}\) In addition, a total of twenty Byzantine coins (eighteen gold, one copper-alloy and one silver) are listed from private collections but were probably not found on the island.\(^{20}\) Additionally cited as evidence of Byzantine coins on the island is a hoard described thus by Codrington:\(^{21}\)

> Early in the nineteenth century a pot of gold coins inscribed in ‘ancient Greek characters, *konob-obryza*’ was found in the north of Ceylon, apparently in the Jaffna peninsula (J. Roberts, *Oriental Illustrations of the Sacred Scriptures*, 1844, p. 531): these in all probability were *solidi*, possibly of the Byzantine period.\(^{22}\)

This description recalls Byzantine *solidi* but no specimen from the hoard was recorded in detail or preserved. Moreover, the description provided by Roberts *evokes* a Byzantine *solidus* but could not have been a description of one. The account refers to the mint mark (*konob-obryza*) as being in ‘ancient Greek characters’. This refers to and is instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with Byzantine coinage as the mint or quality mark, CONOB. This, however, was always abbreviated to CONOB, not *konob-obryza*, and given in Latin rather than Greek characters (hence, C rather than K). This is significant because it indicates that Roberts
either did not describe the coins exactly as he saw them or he did not see them but heard a description from a third party, determined their likely identity and filled in the blanks from his general numismatic knowledge, in either case expanding and translating the mint mark. There is, furthermore, no indication of the size of the pot or the number of coins. While interesting, therefore, as the foundation of weighty historical conclusions, this account is open to serious question.

Application of the term ‘numerous’ to Sasanian coins is even more dubious. Codrington recorded three Sasanian silver drachms and to these O. Bopearachchi added five more (recorded with images, but no weights or details of find location or provenance), all eight dating from the fourth to sixth centuries. Bopearachchi has subsequently noted four additional fourth- to sixth-century finds. Walburg, by contrast, lists seven Sasanian coins, all described as of doubtful Lankan origin, and one Lankan imitation of a Sasanian copper-alloy type. In other words, numismatic evidence for Sasanian contact, direct or indirect, with ancient Lanka consists, generously, of ten partially documented examples. Conservatively, the evidence dwindles to three genuine coins found in fairly securely documented hoards and one local copper-alloy imitation. Given the quite large-scale manufacture of imitation Roman copper-alloy coins, one Sasanian imitation does not mean that large numbers of prototypes reached the island. It only proves that metalworkers, already accustomed to cutting die imitations of small, foreign copper-alloy coins, came across an example.

The description of early Arab coins also elides small numbers of total finds into a language that implies significance. As already noted, the start date of Arab coins on the island is not as early as Boulois’ description implies, but the quantities of those that remain are also extremely small and spread over a very long time span. For almost all categories of coin mentioned by Boulois the evidence falls catastrophically short of ‘tens of thousands’ of examples. Boulois’ book, like many other works where similar claims can be found, is not primarily numismatic nor focused on Lanka and thus relies on specialist publications to enable the creation of new perspectives and approaches. This is not inherently a problem, and underpins all transregional and multidisciplinary work. Nonetheless, given the widespread perception of numismatics as esoteric or obscure, it demonstrates the ease with which erroneous or misleading data and ideas may proliferate rapidly through secondary scholarship if scholars too easily accept and combine synthetic conclusions without at least surveying the underlying evidence and methodologies being used.

This presentation of far-reaching conclusions from quite limited evidence also demonstrates a tendency to present numismatic data in a way that strongly supports a more general impression of ancient cosmopolitanism. This is undoubtedly partly a consequence of the easily exportable summaries with which some coin publications conclude, often constructing dramatic soundbites from very small amounts of data. At times, however, it is possible to see a more insistent interpretative bias towards a narrative of connectivity. One study devoted to the question of the circulation of Roman/Byzantine and Sasanian precious-metal
Coinage on the island concludes that, since Sri Lanka lacks natural gold sources, incoming Roman gold coins must have been melted down to create the Lankan gold types that are known from the eighth century, and that bear some resemblance in their weights to the Byzantine solidus or fractions thereof. Thus, ‘[t]here can be no doubt that Persian silver coins and Byzantine solidi reached the island in quantities during the fifth and sixth centuries and perhaps even later’. This is an argument based primarily on the lack of surviving material. It fails to explain why gold coins entering the island up to, at the latest, the first half of the seventh century should not have inspired a local gold coinage until the eighth and it does not address in any way the possible fate of the Sasanian coins whose presence on the island is, by the logic of the argument, indicated by an equally striking scarcity. There was no silver Lankan coinage into which they could have been transformed and no alternative explanation is offered for why a lack of finds must indicate a circulating presence.

While finds of precious metal coins feature prominently in numismatic literature, however, the numismatic narrative of ‘cosmopolitan’ Lanka stems above all from publication of the ‘tens of thousands’ of Roman copper-alloy coins found on the island. It is these coins and their startling number that underpin hypotheses about ancient Lankan commercial ties to the Mediterranean. These are also the coins that have the most problematic history of modern publication. The figure of ‘tens of thousands’ (and even hundreds of thousands) of late Roman copper-alloy coins derives from a tendency to publish notices of discoveries that are variable in their enumeration but consistent in the deployment of large numbers (or simply invocations of quantity) and few details, for example, ‘[a]ccording to my estimation, the number of published and unpublished Roman “third brass” and their so-called “Indo-Roman” imitations found in the island comes to more than 200,000’.

In addition to a vagueness about quantity, the mention of ‘Indo-Roman imitations’ – also referred to as Roman ‘third brass’ or ‘Naimana’ for one of the locations at which they were first discovered in large quantities – is significant. These terms all refer to locally made imitations of Roman copper-alloy coins, which are found, as well as original Roman copper-alloy coins, on the island. They display designs clearly based on Roman models and are frequently found, like original Roman examples, in hoards. They are unique to Lanka. Although Roman copper-alloy coins are found in South India in significant quantities, there is no evidence that they were routinely imitated there. Given that references to huge hoards of copper-alloy coins on the island frequently present the volume of finds as in some capacity correlative with the volume or commercial significance of Roman contact with ancient Lanka, it is problematic that such imitations are often included under the umbrella of ‘Roman’ coinage, and that secondary literature concerning ancient Lanka so often depends on precisely these publications.

Walburg’s Coins and Tokens from Ancient Ceylon has offered some important correctives to this numismatic picture. Walburg estimates the number of Roman and imitation Roman coins found in Sri Lanka at 30,000 to 40,000. This figure is
derived from the coins Walburg was able to see and a conservative estimate of the quantity of other finds that might reside in private collections. His presentation also makes it possible to assess roughly the relative quantities of genuine Roman and imitation Roman coins from Lanka. He cites the only documented hoards of Naimana, listed as containing roughly 4,350 specimens. This should be compared in particular to the 5,000 Roman coins Walburg regards as very certainly attested from the island. Since Walburg's catalogue includes reference to hoards now lost for which exact numbers are not recorded or for which descriptions are suspect, these figures (suggesting similar orders of magnitude for original and imitation coins) remain approximate, but are based in analysis of identified sources.

Walburg's examination of the Naimana has also revealed various features of their production and deposition that suggest that they should not be regarded primarily as indicators of long-distance maritime trade. For example, the lead content in these coins is as high as 30 per cent, making the metal very brittle. Striking Naimana was, therefore, a complex and delicate procedure and the coins that resulted were not very robust. The gentle handling required to prevent these coins from cracking during the minting process also invalidates earlier interpretations of them as being worn by long use, further suggesting that they did not circulate as regular coinage.

Imitations were also probably struck over a fairly short period in the southern region of the island and those found in hoards were deposited at around the same time. They do not appear to have been hoarded with, and therefore to have circulated alongside, Roman coins as a functioning currency. Instead, in the case of both original and imitation Roman coins Walburg proposes that they were used as 'special purpose money', mainly serving the needs of ritual depositions and limited transactions among elites, with the imitations made when the Roman pieces ran out as a consequence of this hoarding practice. Walburg's analysis of the chronology of the original Roman copper-alloy finds, moreover, causes him to reject completely the hypothesis that Roman coins on ancient Lanka necessarily indicate direct contact with Romans. Walburg argues that the coins were shipped as a single hoard or small number of cargoes in the second quarter of the fifth century to South India, whence some filtered to Lanka, with the production of imitations beginning around the middle of the fifth century.

Although Walburg's treatment of this evidence is well-documented and most thorough, it has not succeeded in displacing the traditional narrative. One reason is that the myth of an ancient cosmopolitan Lanka appeals to a particular vision of the island's past, which combines global significance, ancient glory and an uncomplicated view of maritime interconnections. It is also likely, however, that the account of 'tens of thousands' of Roman coins and 'numerous' Sasanian, Byzantine and Arab coins from ancient Lanka has permeated the secondary literature of the island because it is easy. The alternative is less straightforward, with no easily exportable icon to project into larger accounts. Its presentation demands a degree of engagement with the raw data even by scholars who are interested
mainly in the end product. Above all, using numismatic data requires reflection on its limitations. Coin finds (along with excavations) are the most common source of new data for ancient Lankan history, but new data cannot be expected to provide a new linear narrative, especially one constructed in terms of continuities with later evidence and modern prerogatives, as demonstrated by coin finds recently rediscovered in the UK.

**Coins from the Leslie de Saram collection**

On 1 October 1955, a Saturday, British coin collector, Philip D. Whitting purchased five gold *solidi*. A high purity gold coin usually weighing around 4.5 grams, the *solidus* served as the core denomination of the Byzantine monetary system from the fourth century until the eleventh. Whitting bought the coins at a total cost of around £19 from A. H. Baldwin, one of Britain’s leading coin dealers and now auction houses. The coins had come from the collection of Leslie William Frederick de Saram, a solicitor, heir to one of Colombo’s oldest and most respected law firms, and for most of his life a resident of Colombo. De Saram was also a collector of antiquities, including coins, and travelled widely. He was born in 1877 and died in 1961, leaving most of his collection to the University of Peradeniya. De Saram’s choice prior to this bequest to sell some of his coins to a London-based dealer demonstrates the international networks within which he participated.

While de Saram’s reasons for selling are unknown, Whitting’s taste for buying Eastern coinage is eloquently illustrated by the Barber Institute collection. Whether knowing Whitting’s interests or as a matter of standard practice, it seems clear that Baldwin conveyed some of the provenance of de Saram’s coins to Whitting. Closer examination of Whitting’s records in the Barber Institute cannot, however, add precision to the cryptic note ‘found in Ceylon’. It is unclear who was responsible for the label, whether de Saram himself from his own or his dealer’s information, Baldwin, assuming island provenance from the seller, or Whitting, assuming it from Baldwin’s information about the seller. It is possible, however, to link these coins partially to earlier notifications about the de Saram collection, and so situate them within larger debates about the meaning of ancient coins in modern Sri Lanka, and to offer some tentative suggestions as to their likely (or unlikely) island provenance.

Two of the most influential writers on the subject of ancient foreign coin finds in Sri Lanka – Codrington in 1924 and Walburg in 2008 – have discussed the de Saram collection. It is also clear, from the notes of Walter Howard Biddell, an irrigation engineer and amateur numismatist collecting on the island in the first half of the twentieth century, whose notes have been extensively mined by Walburg and who knew de Saram personally, that de Saram purchased many of his coins (including *solidi*) in London. Either without knowing this or without acknowledging it, Codrington provided a list of the Roman and Byzantine
coins in de Saram’s collection, probably based on inspection prior to 1921 (when Codrington’s acknowledgements, thanking de Saram for access to his collection, are dated), implying – although not stating – that the coins had been found on the island. These were, in chronological order: an *aureus* of Tiberius (r. 14–37 ce), four *solidi* of Constantius II (r. 337–61), two of Valentinian I (r. 364–75), three of Valens (364–78), three of Honorius (r. 393–423), one of Theodosius II (r. 408–50), one of Anastasius I (r. 495–518) and one of Maurice (r. 582–602), plus a *semissis* and a *tremissis* (one half and one third of a *solidus*, respectively) of Justinian I (r. 527–65). The collection represented the mints of Constantinople, Antioch, Nicomedia, Rome, Treveri and Milan. The Barber Institute finds make it clear that de Saram continued collecting Byzantine material after the publication of *Ceylon Coins and Currency*, since not all of the items match this list, but do not make it easier to identify whether the coins were found on the island.

Walburg, in part relying on Biddell’s insights into de Saram’s purchasing habits, speculated that the majority of the coins listed by Codrington, and especially the earlier coins from Tiberius to Honorius, were unlikely to have been found on the island. In addition to Biddell’s information, Walburg’s reasons for doubting the island provenance of most of de Saram’s coins seem to be cautious but sensible: namely that three come from mints in the western Mediterranean or Northern Europe, rather than the east Mediterranean and that the earlier examples date to reigns from which few examples of coins are attested in either India or the island. This is not a watertight argument, especially for Sri Lanka where the total number of securely provenanced finds, discussed in this chapter, is so small as to make any argument from absence extremely fragile. Nevertheless, in conjunction with the textual and archaeological evidence also examined here for Lanka not having been a significant player in western Indian Ocean networks until at least the fifth century, it seems prudent to treat the earlier examples with great scepticism.

Of the five coins identified in the Barber Institute collection by Walburg as possibly genuine island finds (which all come from the later period), two examples apparently from Italian mints and an overall spread from Theodosius II to Maurice make the probability of this group having been a single hoard extremely low. The profile is suggestive of a collection constructed for chronological, iconographic and minting breadth. Three of the Barber coins are probably identical with examples recorded by Codrington: specifically, the *solidi* of Theodosius II from Constantinople (Figure 2.1), of Anastasius recorded by Codrington as Constantinopolitan (Figure 2.2), and of Maurice (Figure 2.3).

Coins of Theodosius II are attested both on the island and in South India. This example (LR489, Figure 2.1) parallels a type found in the Akki Alur hoard in South India, and may be an imitation rather than a genuine Byzantine issue, suggested by its light weight – 3.8 grams. Nevertheless, it seems far more likely to be an imitation produced in or near the Byzantine Empire and purchased by de Saram in London for his collection than one made in India or Lanka. The weights of the coins in the Akki Alur hoard are not known for comparison.
but most Indian imitations mirror the weight of official *solidi* suggesting that this was important for their acceptability in the East. Moreover, Ratto, a European collector with no known connection to the Indian Ocean, in the 1930 sale catalogue of his own collection, recorded an example of such a lightweight *solidus* of Theodosius II, noting that it was ‘de poids réduit... Très rare. Très beau.’ If this were an Indian Ocean imitation, it would be highly unlikely for a collector in Europe to have come across an identical specimen. It therefore seems likely that de Saram purchased this coin in Europe precisely because of its rarity and fine condition.
VV07 (Figure 2.2) may be the same solidus of Anastasius recorded by Codrington as having been part of the de Saram collection. It is indeed struck in the name of Anastasius, and in 1924 Codrington’s attribution of the coin to the mint of Constantinople on the basis of its mint mark, COMOB, may have accorded with his knowledge and observations. By 1955, when Whitting recorded the coin, however, he listed it, as current scholarly consensus holds, as a solidus of the Ostrogothic king of Italy, Theoderic I, minted in the name of Anastasius.

Sixth-century gold coins struck anywhere in the Byzantine Empire usually carried the CONOB mark, standing for Constantinopolis obvyziacus or ‘fine gold of Constantinople’, apparently as a guarantee of purity rather than location of minting. The COMOB variant has been linked to Italy. This coin should, therefore, be considered a probable Italian issue, but it could have travelled from Italy to the eastern Mediterranean and thence to India or Sri Lanka, and coins of Anastasius are also known in South India, although none have yet been identified there with the COMOB mint mark. It could, however, also have been bought by de Saram because of the interest value to a collector of its Italian connection. There is no way to determine the likelihood of this find having come from European purchase or South Asian discovery.

Finally, the solidus of Maurice (B1767, Figure 2.3) seems to be a genuine, Constantinopolitan issue. Coins of Maurice are not attested in India, but chronologically they would fit the extremely sparse but visible picture of later Byzantine coin finds from Sri Lanka. It is therefore plausibly an island find, but only plausibly, and could just as easily have been a fine example bought by de Saram to expand the range of his collection.

Apart from these three coins, possibly already identified by Codrington, two Barber Institute specimens testify to de Saram’s continued collecting beyond the
early 1920s. They are both atypical for Byzantine coins found in India, but cannot on that basis be excluded from a Sri Lankan provenance, since finds from the island are too few to make such generalizations. The first (Figure 2.4) is a solidus of Valentinian III (r. 425–55) from Ravenna. The Ravenna origin of this coin is indicated by the letters R and V in the reverse field. Legally, gold coins of good weight and issued in the name of the emperor could circulate anywhere in the Roman and Byzantine Empire, making it possible for this coin, like the Anastasian issue from Italy, to have reached Lanka in antiquity.67 In addition, Krishnamurthy records an Indian imitation of a Byzantine solidus, found in Tamil Nadu, which uses the reverse design of a type of Valentinian III, providing a chronological link.68 On the other hand, a fine specimen of a type that testifies eloquently to a tense political moment in the western Roman Empire, making it an attractive piece for a collector, may suggest a European purchase. Again, it is not possible to determine likely provenance.

Finally, a solidus of Theodosius II from the mint of Thessaloniki presents the most challenging case to assess (Figure 2.5). If an Indian Ocean find, it would be the first Thessalonikan gold coin to appear so far east along maritime routes, although the same type but issued by the mint at Constantinople has a parallel in the Akki Alur hoard.69 Crucially, this coin appears to be an imitation, and quite a crude one in comparison with official issues. It is also quite damaged, with two deep gouges on the reverse and some evidence for bending, possibly as a result of ploughing. The damage makes it less likely that de Saram would have bought this specimen in Europe simply to enhance his collection. The accurate but distinctive style of imitation, which preserves even minor details of the type and legend, but which is nevertheless differentiated by its execution and, at times, legibility, from genuine issues also conforms well with imitations of Byzantine coins found in India, although this does not distinguish it with certainty from imitations produced

Fig. 2.4  Gold solidus of Valentinian III, struck in Ravenna, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, LR540 (Whitting No. G521), 4.36 grams, die axis 7 o’clock, RIC X, 202.66
further west. Of all of the coins found in the Barber collection, therefore, this one, despite the Thessalonikan mint signature, seems the most likely to have a historical Lankan provenance.

These coins offer a kaleidoscopic view of the interaction of ancient and modern ideas and realities of cosmopolitanism on Sri Lanka. Leslie de Saram was a man who lived his life in the conflicted but undoubtedly interconnected world of Sri Lanka’s transition from colony to independent nation-state. He travelled extensively and had numismatic contacts in London. He probably read, or at least had access to, books that celebrated, publicized and sometimes overstated the connections of the Roman world with the Indian Ocean, and he collected Roman and Byzantine coins. It is impossible to interpret newly identified survivals from his collection within these multiple contexts and reach any certain judgement as to their origin. Each of them could have represented to de Saram either finds from the island collected as evidence for ancient trade, purchases at foreign auctions chosen for fineness, breadth of coverage and rarity, or a combination of local and foreign acquisitions put together for entirely personal and ad hoc reasons. They all form part of a material and cultural tapestry of modern interactions, which directly shape visions of the past. Some, especially the Thessalonikan coin of Theodosius II, and the solidi of Valentinian III and Maurice, may speculatively contribute to the handful of Byzantine coin finds connected to ancient Lanka. None provides unequivocal evidence of ancient Lanka’s supposed connection with the west, but it seems that this possibility appealed to Whitting, as it had to Codrington and as the interpretation of coin finds from the island often does today. It is a possibility that has been constructed in careful combination with both textual and archaeological sources pertaining to ancient Lanka.
Pliny’s *Natural History* and the *Christian Topography*: text and intertextuality

If coins, already considered, and archaeological material, discussed later in this chapter, represent the expanding frontier in evidence for ancient Lanka, the framework they are fitted into continues to derive primarily from textual sources, at least with respect to long-distance contact, and here too a tendency to see cosmopolitanism is striking. Ancient Lanka is better served than any other region of South or Southeast Asia by textual sources, including two chronicles compiled probably in the fourth and sixth centuries CE (the *Dīpavamsa* and *Mahāvamsa*), the latter of which was maintained thereafter throughout and beyond the period under discussion. Thousands of inscriptions from the island have also been studied, transcribed, translated and published. The island was also the subject of numerous ancient notices by foreign writers, including pilgrims from China. Greek and Latin sources, however, have been most significant in creating a narrative of ancient commercial Lanka, of which the most commonly cited are the accounts of Pliny in the first century and the anonymous *Christian Topography*. The latter is examined here first because of its remarkable level of detail and consequent prominence in literature on ancient Lanka.

The *Christian Topography* is a multi-chaptered work in Greek, datable by internal references to the middle of the sixth century. Of the author nothing is known outside the clues within the text. The name usually given, ‘Kosmas Indikopleustes’ (Latinized, Cosmas Indicopleustes = ‘Kosmas, sailor to India’), is most likely a later addition and the text should be considered anonymous, although the attribution has become somewhat entrenched. The main purpose of the *Christian Topography*, as the author explains in detail, is to propose a Christian cosmology, in which the Earth, contrary to ‘pagan’ Greek notions of a spherical body, is flat and shaped like the biblical tabernacle. The earliest copies of the work are preserved in three manuscripts, dating from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. The ninth-century copy contains ten books of cosmological argumentation. The eleventh-century copies both contain an additional two books: Book Eleven on the plants and animals of India and the island of Taprobanē and Book Twelve, summarizing the conclusions of the preceding chapters. It seems, however, that multiple copies of the work, including the twelve-book version, were already extant by the ninth century.

Book Eleven is widely known and cited in almost all studies of pre-Muslim trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, but in a manner that shears it of all but a perfunctory mention of the whole work. It is rarely considered as a work of literature, with its own stylistic and rhetorical aims, but rather as a first-hand account of the island, to be mined for information. This is apparent from the use of a particular passage describing the visit of an acquaintance of the author, named Sopatros, to the island. This passage is sufficiently important and famous within studies of classical Lankan commerce and transregional connections to be worth quoting at length:
Anyway, one of the business people from here, named Sopatros, who has been dead for the past 35 years to my knowledge, once reached the island of Taprobane on a business venture, when a ship from Persia had just cast anchor... Then, as was the custom, the local magistrates and the tax collectors welcomed them and took them off to the king. The king welcomed them, received their salutations, and told them to sit down, and then he asked, ‘How are your countries, and how are things getting on there?’ ‘Nicely’, they replied. Then, in the general conversation, the king put the question, ‘Which of your kings is the greater and more powerful?’

The Persian got his word in first and said ‘Our king is the more powerful and greater and richer, and he is the king of kings. And whatever he wills he is able to put into effect.’ Sopatros kept quiet; and then the king said, ‘What about you, Roman? Haven’t you anything to say?’ And Sopatros replied, ‘What can I say, after these statements of his? If you want to know the truth, you have got both kings here. Have a look at each of them; and you can see which is the more glorious and powerful.’ In hearing this, he [the king] was astonished and said, ‘How have I got both kings here?’ He [Sopatros] replied, ‘You have the coins of both, the nomisma of the one, and the drachm (i.e. the miliareis) of the other. Look at the image on each of them; and you will see the truth.’

The king praised and commended the idea and ordered both coins to be produced. Well, the nomisma was of gold, brilliant and of fine shape, for the coins which are exported there are specially selected, whereas the miliareis, to put it in a nutshell, was of silver, and that is enough to rule out any comparison with the gold coin. The king turned both coins over and over, and inspected them, and full of praise for the nomisma, he said, ‘Truly, the Romans are glorious, powerful and wise.’ So he ordered Sopatros to be highly honoured, and mounted him on an elephant, and to the beating of drums paraded him round the town in great honour.

The narrative has been used to argue forcefully for the importance of Lanka in trade networks by the sixth century and for the circulation of Roman and Persian currency on the island. It is, however, intriguing to note, as Weerakkody does in his collation of such foreign notices, that the narrative shows similarities with the first-century Natural History of Pliny in which Roman coins also impress the king of the island: in this case, a shipwrecked Roman freedman is stranded on the island long enough to learn the language, which enables him to discourse with the king about the Roman Empire. The king listens to him but above all is struck by the equal weight and appearance of continuity he observes when handling denarii, declaring the Romans to be particularly honest. An initial suggestion of a literary connection between these two stories was made by Tennent in the 1860s but in subsequent analyses of ancient Lanka it has consistently been ignored or rejected without explanation in favour of interpretations that preserve both texts as objective sources for economic reality rather than reflections of a
shared literary culture, even suggesting that the stories are similar because they must have described a commonly occurring scenario.\textsuperscript{87}

It has been established that the author of the \textit{Topography} was widely read in the classical works of geography and natural science he sought to repudiate, and it is thus possible – indeed likely – that he had read Pliny. It is also possible that he was thereby inspired during his excursus on the island of Taprobanë to modify an existing tale to contemporary circumstances.\textsuperscript{88} While the details of the accounts show marked differences, including the shifting mores of ‘Romanness’, their central narrative (a Roman at the court of the king of Lanka using the contemporary standard precious-metal unit of account – the silver \textit{denarius} of the first century, the gold \textit{solidus} of the sixth – as material evidence for the effective governance of the Roman state) is strikingly similar.

The possibility of links between the \textit{Christian Topography} and Pliny (indeed, specifically Pliny’s account of Taprobanë) is further suggested by the description found in both authors’ works of ‘silent trade’.\textsuperscript{89} This practice, attributed by Pliny to Lanka, supposedly entailed traders and local indigenous groups bringing products of value to a known location. These local groups being unfamiliar or uncomfortable with direct commerce, the traders would leave their goods (in Pliny, beside a river, in the \textit{Topography} in the branches of thorn bushes) and withdraw. The locals would approach and inspect the goods and if they were satisfied take them and leave behind their own trade items. The author of the \textit{Topography} places his account of ‘silent trade’ in east Africa, and, as in the case of Sopatros at the court of the Lankan king, produces a longer and more detailed story than Pliny, but the central narratives remain identical.

It seems a distinct possibility, therefore, that the \textit{Topography} made use of elements of the \textit{Natural History} (or both authors drew on existing tropes concerning ‘other’ places) to furnish his exotic and faraway places (whether Africa or Lanka). Reflections on foreign places in both texts also share an emphasis on Roman values and political circumstances: Pliny’s claim that the king of Lanka recognized the honesty and stability of the Roman state echoes the values espoused (including numismatically) by the contemporary Flavian dynasty.\textsuperscript{90} Similarly, the emphasis in the \textit{Topography} on Roman superiority over Persia may reflect the increasing challenge posed by the Sasanian state by the sixth century, such that elsewhere in the text the author explicitly refers to the widespread acceptance of the Byzantine gold \textit{solidus} in contrast to the Persian \textit{drachm} as a mark of God’s preference.\textsuperscript{91} This hypothesis is supported by the dramatic device of the king of Lanka asking to see the coins of both empires. In a text suffused with biblical allusion, this seems to evoke the account, undoubtedly familiar to the Christian author and his intended audience, in the Gospel of Matthew (22:19–20), in which Christ asks for a coin of Caesar to be brought forth and examined, culminating in the injunction to ‘render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s’. This allusion, like the author’s correlation of monetary success with divine favour, associates the sixth-century empire with the continued unfolding of biblical destiny and, like his cosmology itself, asserts the ultimately
eschatological meaning of all aspects of reality, from the religious to the apparently mundane and secular.

These sources do not, therefore, any more than foreign coins found in Sri Lanka, support a simple reading, which takes them as 'eye-witness accounts' or 'windows' into history. They reveal far more about the rhetorical role of faraway places in the Roman and Byzantine mind than about volume of trade, and should be viewed extremely sceptically as sources for understanding the significance of commercial connections to the attitudes, policies and practices of Lankan actors. Lankan figures, when they play a part in these narratives, do so as canvases for the projection of Mediterranean ideas about power and influence, not as speakers on their own behalf. But that does not mean that investigation is futile. The use of literary motifs does not prevent them from suggesting something of the structures and changing shape of trade over time.92

Behind the stories lies a variety of details suggestive of possible changes in Lanka's engagement with the West. When Pliny wrote his account, contact with the island appears to have been situated in the realm of accident. Later references and accounts reinforce this impression, highlighting natural wonders or the strange habits of the islanders, but giving little impression of contact or of the island as being connected with wider worlds.93 By the late fifth or early sixth century, Sopatros' journey to the island, whether the named character was real or a narrative device, is portrayed as intentional and related to trading journeys by other merchants, Roman and foreign. This is perhaps most clearly arguable from another passage in the description of Taprobanē, which states explicitly that '[f]rom the whole of India, Persia and Ethiopia, the island acting as intermediary, welcomes many ships and likewise dispatches them' and describes in addition the links between Lanka, the Arabian kingdom of Himyar and various parts of the Indian subcontinent.94 It is the most explicit surviving description in support of the traditional narrative of ancient Lanka's commercial role and is unparalleled in earlier sources. Read in light of this description, Sopatros' royal audience may simply be a narrative vehicle but the peripheral details of revenue collectors at the port, and of a Persian Christian community, suggest a fairly regularized communication with the island, in which travellers from the west could be fitted into a (theoretically) managed commercial system, and contextualized in relation to residents on the island of the same religious identity, language or origin. It is a more structured vision of contact than that of Pliny's shipwrecked freedman. The lack in the Topography of any explanation of the way the various characters communicated with one another may also imply increased familiarity though it may simply reflect the preoccupation of the author with Roman affairs in which the foreign characters become simply exotic extras.

The Greek-speaking identity of Sopatros and the anonymous author of the Topography suggest a Near Eastern emphasis in trade that emanated from the Roman Empire as a legal entity, but which was dominated by personnel from its eastern regions, passing through Alexandria to the Red Sea.95 The text cannot, however, provide a basis for judging the volume of trade or contact with the
island, or the relative roles of groups from the Roman or Sasanian Empires. In particular, its reference to a Persian Christian group on the island has been used to argue for a significant Sasanian mercantile diaspora in the Indian Ocean.\textsuperscript{96} It is entirely unclear, however, that the spread of Christianity can be used in the ancient period as a proxy for the make-up of Indian Ocean trade.\textsuperscript{97} Furthermore, the emphasis of the \textit{Christian Topography} on Christian geography makes reference to churches at the far reaches of the world a difficult foundation for arguments about scale or significance. For the author of the text, there was benefit to be gained simply from demonstrating the expansion of Christianity as far as possible into the known world. Like the indications provided by numismatic evidence, re-examination of these two sources complicates a simple narrative of cosmopolitanism, but likewise suggests a change, however imprecisely reflected in our sources, between the first century and the late fifth or sixth. It is a picture that finds tentative support in archaeological finds from the island, but only once the superstructures of the traditional narrative have been dismantled from around it.

\textbf{Godavaya, Mantai and the archaeology of port sites}

In recent decades, an explosion of archaeological excavations and publications has contributed enormously to available evidence concerning ancient Lanka.\textsuperscript{98} Among these is a shipwreck discovered in 2003 off the Sri Lankan coast near the site of Godavaya. By 2012, initial Carbon-14 dates had demonstrated that, with a first- or second-century BCE date, at least for some of the timbers, it is the oldest known wreck in the Indian Ocean and the only wreck datable to the ancient period of Lankan history. Excavation and publication of the site by an international team, including the Institute of Nautical Archaeology (US), the Sri Lankan Department of Archaeology and the Maritime Archaeology Unit of the Central Cultural Fund, will hopefully prove extremely significant for the study of ancient Lankan commerce and maritime history. Meanwhile, preliminary notifications, including on scholarly and scientific blog sites, demonstrate the potential advantages of modern technology for the speedy integration of archaeological discoveries into historical research but also demonstrate the tenacity of traditional explanatory paradigms.\textsuperscript{99}

The Godavaya wreck certainly suggests strongly that Sri Lanka was in regular commercial contact with India in the ancient period. Beads from Mantai appear similar to types produced at Arikamedu in Tamil Nadu, and the shipwreck has yielded finds of large glass ingots,\textsuperscript{100} which may have been part of an Indian Ocean bead trade.\textsuperscript{101} Ceramics from the wreck include some apparently Indian wares, suggesting that ‘the origin of the ship may be traced regionally (in broader sense [to] the Indian subcontinent)’.\textsuperscript{102} Godavaya is, therefore, an exciting site for local maritime commercial history, the history of ancient boat-building technologies and the development of marine archaeology in the Indian Ocean.\textsuperscript{103} It is unclear, however, why a wreck that has not revealed a single published artefact with any link to Rome or the Mediterranean should have been heralded as
'giving] us a look at a ship and its cargo from the era of the Roman Republic'. The most recent official publications on the wreck have not continued to invoke a Roman connection, but as recently as 2014 the interpretative shadow of ancient Lanka’s implicit cosmopolitanism was still visible in the following interview with one of the lead excavators:

Carlson said they likely won’t find a “smoking gun” that definitively proves the doomed ship was headed for Rome... But discoveries at the sunken ship might at least help illustrate that Sri Lanka was a ‘linchpin’ in this trade, as so many of the goods that passed through the island reached the Mediterranean.

The long-awaited publication of the excavation report of the site of Mantai, often described as the port of Anurādhapura, also highlights the ways in which archaeological data has been forced into a narrative it cannot sustain. Despite a series of excavations between 1886 and 1984, the last interrupted by the outbreak of civil war and consequent hasty evacuation, the publication in 2013 of Mantai: City by the Sea represents the first compilation of results from previous excavations and the publication of full catalogues from the 1980s excavations.

The evidence from Mantai is thus inextricably bound up with the difficulties of analysing a site that has been disturbed on numerous occasions and has sometimes been inadequately documented.

The ‘Historical Sources’ chapters of the publication give an account of the ancient port city of Mantai in Indian Ocean trade typical of many of the themes already highlighted in this chapter. These include an invocation of the island’s position as a basis for its commercial history, and the assertion that ‘archaeologically... it seems to have been the most frequented and the most important port of the Anuradhapura Kingdom’. It also asserts that ‘[t]he rise of Mahatittha [Mantai] was a direct response to the growth of Western trade in the Indian Ocean’ and comments that ‘[t]he increasing tempo of the trade with the west is indicated in the large quantities of Roman coins of the fourth and fifth centuries CE found in various parts of the country’.

A further chapter explores Western sources dealing with the island, concluding that:

We are now in a position to suggest that Mantai housed a colony of Roman traders recognized as an emporium by the time Ptolemy wrote Geographia [i.e. second century CE] ... Roman finds at Mantai include ceramics which can be dated from the late first or early second century.

Individual reports on various ceramic types and artefacts and a series of appendices provided on disc with the publication, including more than 2,700 photographs of finds from the site, however, provide a crucial counterbalance to this synthetic historical narrative that at times directly contradicts the testimony of the artefact catalogues. Roman ceramics from the site are referred to three times...
in the introductory material, but always pointing to earlier publications. These publications do record a handful of sherds of probably Mediterranean origin, but not in quantities that could support the contention that the site housed a colony of Romans, nor even that it traded substantially in goods from the Mediterranean (whether directly or via, for example, Indian intermediaries). Mantai: City by the Sea itself significantly does not have a chapter for Roman or Western ceramics. Nor, indeed, does it mention Roman/Mediterranean ceramics excavated either from a stratified context, or even from disturbed fill levels anywhere on the site. The sum of diagnostically Roman finds in the catalogue is two beads and three copper-alloy coins, plus two additional coins confusingly described as probably being ‘Indo-Roman imitations’ (presumably Lankan imitations). Even the assumption, made forcefully in the introductory chapters, that Mantai was a (major) port in the ancient period cannot be maintained from close analysis of the evidence. Only two trenches datable to the ancient period were excavated and these produced no evidence plausibly representing port structures or other evidence of maritime activity. These trenches revealed some Indian wares, suggesting contact with the subcontinent, further supported by the testimony of the Godavaya wreck, but overwhelmingly the ceramics were local. Neither structures nor objects suggest the site to be distinctively a ‘port’ rather than any other type of settlement.

Identifying Mantai as a port is, in any case, complicated by the lack of clearly articulated criteria for recognizing a port site archaeologically. Port remains may be extremely ephemeral owing to major changes in water courses, industrial land use and the lack of built port structures to begin with. Even in the case of a documented commercial site near to the coast, such as that of Godavaya, evidence of port infrastructure remains elusive and difficult to understand in the absence of comparative models. Certainly, there were sites on ancient Lanka that served as marketplaces and at which revenue was collected in some official capacity. For example, in the oft-cited inscription at Godavaya, most likely of the second century CE, the king awards the revenue of the emporium to a third party, although it is not clear that this refers to external rather than internal trade. The account of the Christian Topography also refers to revenue collectors.

Beyond the correlation of textual and archaeological material, coin finds have also been used as a basis for arguing for extensive networks of ports, vital to long-distance maritime trade and extant much earlier than the first historical records of them (which are mostly medieval), along rivers and the coasts of southern and western Sri Lanka. With some exceptions, the use of these ports (and indeed their existence) in the ancient period remains a speculation based on the convenience of their position for routes documented in later periods, extrapolation from later sources and the evidence of coin finds nearby. Such an approach to site identification (local surface finds, topography and later documentary references) is not invalid but here poses two distinct problems. First, identifying sites with coin finds as ports assumes too simple a connection between coins and long-distance maritime commerce, ignoring other possible uses for coins. Second, while correlations of multiple, tentative clues may suggest locations of
certain types of site, such a hypothesis ought to be supported by the discovery, at least at one such location, of such a site type. In the absence of an excavated ancient port site anywhere on the island (identified by whatever means), it is problematic to navigate a literature that argues that port sites can be identified because of the high incidence of coin finds at them and that coin finds can be interpreted as evidence for commercial activity because of their high incidence at port sites.\textsuperscript{127} This is a circularity that exemplifies the quest for a particular vision of the Lankan past, in which data is decorative rather than structural, and which produces summaries such as: “The major ports were cosmopolitan in character with resident communities of various nationalities, so that, in addition to the collection of duties, the officers may have been entrusted with the welfare of foreign merchants at the port.”\textsuperscript{126} Although it is a vision of the past that remains attractive to scholars working with a range of evidence types an alternative can be dimly discerned in the material examined here.

**Conclusion: Lanka at the sixth-century interface**

If read within a context that does not privilege commercial cosmopolitanism or Western connections as the dominating structure of a narrative of ancient Lanka, the numismatic, textual and archaeological sources potentially come into clearer focus. None of the available evidence suggests that in the first to third centuries Sri Lanka was significantly connected to either the eastern or the western Indian Ocean regions. There is no physical or textual evidence for regular contact with China or Southeast Asia, and while Roman trade with India appears to have been comparatively buoyant on the basis of ceramic and numismatic evidence there is no sign of any direct contact with Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{129} Occasional finds of Roman coins, probably from India, supplement the discovery of Indian finds on coastal sites to suggest that external commercial relations extended no further on a regular basis than South India, as also supported by the evidence of the Godavaya shipwreck.

By the fourth century, as increasing focus in Southeast Asian studies on the maritime routes of Buddhist pilgrimage and movement of ideas is highlighting, it was not primarily Western or commercial connections that began to link the island into wider networks. Rather, the increased interest by Buddhists further east in the teachings as preserved and practised on Lanka seems to have linked the island to China and the coasts and archipelagos of Indo-China.\textsuperscript{130} Pilgrim accounts and inscriptions discovered elsewhere in the eastern Indian Ocean testify to the movement of these Buddhist travellers around the Indian Ocean and to Lanka specifically, even if physical remains on the island, such as Chinese coins or ceramics, are extremely uncommon prior to the tenth century.\textsuperscript{131} Studies of this Buddhist network have emphasized, as on the northern land routes between China and India, the close although not always uncomplicated relationship between traders and religious travellers in the Buddhist world in this period; there is no argument here against increasing commercial interactions between Lanka and areas further east, but the close connection between

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travel, trade and Buddhist and Hindu activity is subtler than the commercial cosmopolitanism of the classic narrative of ancient Lanka. These are not necessarily new narratives in the context of Indian activity in the first millennium CE, but their implications for ancient Lanka are still to be fully explored. 132

Finally, between the middle of the fifth and the middle of the sixth centuries, Lanka’s role in networks of connectivity seems to have shifted. The finds of Roman copper-alloy coins, probably arriving from India, and their imitation on the island, may suggest either growing monetization or growing interest in Western aspects of commercial or material culture (or both), and in the sixth century, at around the time that finds of Byzantine coins in South India cease, the Christian Topography gives a graphic but unique account of an island poised between two networks: the eastern and western Indian Ocean regions. The few finds of Byzantine and Sasanian coins documented from the island give some support to this picture, although also serve as a reminder of how ephemeral these networks probably still were in comparison to local exchange within the island and with the nearby coast of India. It is difficult to assess what may have caused this change, and the tendency where it has been identified to attribute it to political changes in the Mediterranean world or to changes in Byzantine and Sasanian demand seems to derive more from the persistent narrative structures highlighted throughout this chapter than from the surviving historical evidence. 133

Walburg points to the period of Pandyan dominance over Lanka as a turning point, highlighting the regular communication between Lanka and China up to the early fifth century, and citing the end of Pandyan rule as cause for the resurgence of trade in the sixth century. 134 This focus on events internal to Lanka seems appropriate to the evidence as it stands, which does not suggest that ancient Lanka was ever dependent on trade to the extent that inter-regional connections would be determined by commercial dynamics, rather than commercial networks responding to social and political forces. Nevertheless, this thesis does not fully explain why a break in Lanka’s engagement with long-distance networks should cause not just a revival at a later date, but simultaneously an increased, although never exclusive, focusing of that revival westwards. Agency remains crucial and it is a feature not fully recognized in accounts of Western textual sources that from the fifth century Mediterranean commentators speak of trade with India and Lanka as being driven primarily by actors from India and Lanka. 135

Only by turning away from arguments of geographical inevitability or explanations focused on Western connections and demand and examining far more closely Lanka’s own internal resource management strategies, and its more immediate communications with India, will ancient Lanka’s commercial role in the Indian Ocean become clearer. Arguments built on a vision of ‘implicit cosmopolitanism’, by rendering connectivity an inevitable fundament of the island’s character, are structurally unable to explain Lanka’s transition from predominantly self-reliant networks, and short- to medium-distance links with India, to an island that by the late sixth century stood at a largely new interface between eastern and western Indian Ocean regions.