

The Silk Road

Posted on



What secret lies in the facial features of early Buddha statues?

How did the knowledge of smallpox vaccination, practised in this part of the world for centuries reach Europe? Why are similar surgical instruments unearthed in places as far apart as Alahana Pirivena in Sri Lanka and Granada in Spain?

Why is it that the facial features of the early statues of the Buddha found in this country, have a similarity to the physiognomy of early Greek sculptures? How did an age-old carving of a Nestorian Christian cross come to be unearthed in Anuradhapura, suggesting that Christianity existed here before the Portuguese and Anglican missionaries came?

These and a host of similar questions beg to be answered. They will be considered by scholars at a conference being held in Colombo this month, studying what took place along the so-called Silky Way, an age-old route of human dialogue. For over 2,000 years, a tremendous volume of commercial goods was carried from East to West, and vice versa, along the Silk Road of the sea. Ships carrying not only silk, but also spices, ceramics and a host of other exotic goods sailed westwards from China and the Indies. In the reverse direction vessels carried a variety of European exports to be exchanged in turn for the riches of the Orient. It was not trade alone that flourished along these age-old sea routes. At a time when information could not be faxed, telexed, telecast or broadcast from one country to another, when even books had to be laboriously transcribed by hand, trade routes were the only channels of communication between the world's civilizations. They were the means by which new ideas could travel between the numerous peoples through whose lands they passed. It was along these routes of commerce that technology and culture in those days flowed, resulting in the dissemination of information from country to country.

This year, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization) has embarked on a study of these routes of dialogue which have enriched so many

different societies. The Sultan of Oman has provided his personal ship to retrace the old Maritime Silk Route. Sailing from Venice to Osaka, it will call at all the major ports along the way, just as in ancient times the sailing ships used to do.

On board the vessel will be an international team of 32 scholars, consisting of specialists in various fields, together with media personnel and TV crews. At each port of call meetings and exhibitions will be held aimed at disseminating information about the old Silk Road and its contribution to human civilisation. Sri Lanka occupies a unique position because it is the virtual mid-point between the two ends of the old Maritime Silk Road. At the ancient port of Mantai (now known as Mannar) archaeologists have been digging up artefacts such as pottery and coins from both East and West. These indicate that traders from both ends of the Silk Route met here and bartered their goods. Sri Lanka was, in effect, the meeting point of ships from East and West.

Mantai in the old days must have been a fascinating port where Chinese junks, Arab dhows and (after the 15th century) Portuguese ships anchored in the harbour. The city itself could have been an international melting pot where Orientals and Occidentals rubbed shoulders and exchanged their wares. From around BC, Mantai would have been a unique centre of cultural intercourse. For Sri Lanka it was a window on the rest of the world. It was through windows such as these Silk Route ports that countries like Sri Lanka received (and transmitted) a flow of new ideas. The theme of the conference will be the two-way traffic in scientific knowledge, religious thought, art and literature that took place here. During the period that the UNESCO teams will be in Colombo, there will be special exhibitions and activities devoted to Sri Lanka's place on the Silk Route. In Colombo, the Department of National Museums has prepared an exhibition depicting this country's contribution to the flow of art, science, philosophy and culture which took place along the Silk Route. The International Seminar at which the Silky Way Galaxy of Scholars will meet and exchange ideas with local specialist will take place from December 12 to 14 at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall. It will be entitled "Sri Lanka : the mid-point of the East-West Silk Route and the centre of convergence of the cross currents of Buddhist Philosophy". Dr Sanjiva Wijesinha, FRCS, FACS, is Chief Surgeon at the Colombo Children's Hospital. •



Now a bustling port, once part of the Maritime Silk Road.



Artefacts from the cultural triangle, touched by the Silk Road.