

# **THE CONTINENT OF ILAMURIDESAM (LEMURIA) THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE DRAVIDIAN CIVILIZATION AND SOME REFLECTIONS ON EVENTS, FOLLOWING ITS DISAPPEARANCE**

By Charles Somasundrum

Prior to 5,000 B.C. - 6,000 B.C., a time before the Indus Valley civilization or the Sumerian civilization, there was a continent in what is today known as the Indian Ocean. This continent connected much of what is today's India, with Madagascar, to the west and Australia, to the east and bore the name **Ilamuridesam**. Some historians and writers, refer to this continent as **Lemuria**. This is a name they found easier to pronounce, in the same way as in later years, the Greek and Arab traders to Thirukethiswaram (Mantai) came to call it Tarshish and it found its way into the Christian Bible.

This continent existed as a vibrant Dravidian civilization, with an active development in literature and the arts. Early Tamil literature has references to this continent and, within it, the capital of Pandyan land – Ten Madurai. This was an age, it must be remembered, when much of Europe and North America were in the grip of the ice age.

The end of the ice age saw the eventual disappearance of the continent of **Ilamuridesam** under the hugely increased waters of the seas, caused by the melting ice in the northern hemisphere. Apart from the waters of the seas being increased, the melting ice also led to a change in the weights hitherto borne by the tectonic plates. These changes saw earthquakes attack the land and deluges and tsunamis affect the sea. Noah's flood was said to have been effectively, a tsunami started by an earthquake that saw the build up of the Caucasus mountain range. During the Ice Age, the only habitable land was in the warmer tropical regions of the earth, where was to be found, among other lands, the continent of **Ilamuridesam**. The melting ice and the consequently increased waters of the seas caused, as already mentioned, a movement of the tectonic plates and whole land masses. This also caused the erosion or submergence of land that had already existed in the warmer waters of the earth.

**Ilamuridesam** saw the effect of these repeated deluges/submergence and erosion of land over a few thousand years. The inhabitants of **Ilamuridesam** saw it prudent, to move to more hospitable land. Most moved the short distance north, to what is India today. Dr. R. Vigneswaran in his excellent and well researched book titled 'Rock Cave Temple of Thirukoneswaram and Sequelae' mentions that the *Ilavar* migrations into the Madurai, Travancore districts would have involved millions. He believes that there would have been "*unrecorded large movements of people consequential to natural disasters such as deluges*". Early Tamil literature records the movement of the Pandyan capital of Madurai from the south (*Ten Madurai*) to the north, to 'Old Madurai' the ruins of which lie 6 miles south-east of the modern town of Madurai. Some historians locate *Ten Madurai* in the region of the Great and Little Bases in the Indian Ocean off the south eastern coast of Sri Lanka. Other inhabitants (of **Ilamuridesam**) moved either east, to places like modern Indonesia, Burma and Thailand or went west to the Indus Valley, to places like Mohenjo-daro and Harappa or to Southern Mesopotamia, to places between the Euphrates and the Tigris. The people of the **Ilamuridesam** civilization used mainly rivers, to move within their continent. Roads were still unknown. In their migrations, they naturally sought places near rivers. As John Marshall has pointed out, in his monumental three Vol. 'Mohenjo-Daro and The Indus Civilization', the mode of transport and communication of the citizens of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, was the river and short man made canals extending the river where expedient. It is not surprising that these refugees from **Ilamuridesam** sought homes near rivers.

Some of the migrants from **Ilamuridesam** moved to Sumer between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. One of the states they founded here bore the name **Elam** (with the short 'E'). This name was possibly derived from the name of their home in the fast disappearing continent of **Ilamuridesam** that they had left behind.

Due to subsequent and frequent deluges coupled with earthquakes, this vast continent fractured and moved and what was left, shrank in size to what is today - Sri Lanka. Vigneswaran (Rock Cave Temple of Thirukoneswaram and Sequelae) states that a further, major deluge occurred in the second century B.C. affecting this island, which was all that was left of the vast continent of **Ilamuridesam**. This was when the city of Kalyani in the west of the island and the historic temple of Koneishwara in the east were submerged. He believes that the mountain range in south central Sri Lanka is one of the oldest in the

world. These mountains, he believes, existed when the Himalayas were still buried in the ocean.

The island which is all that remains of this vast continent of **Ilamuridesam**, is now known as **Sri Lanka**. However, prior to examining the various early names given to this island, it would prove useful to first examine the name given to it in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. The *Peripulus Maris Erythraei* (*Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*) by an unknown author, frequently referred to as '*the Periplus*', has this to say about the island. He says, "*The island now called **Palaisimoondus** but formerly Taprobane, lies out in the open sea to the west. The northern part of the island is civilized, but the passage to it from the Continent is seldom performed in less than twenty days*". It must be remembered, that we are talking here of the island that remained, many thousands of years after the disappearance, of the continent of **Ilamuridesam**. Despite the long gap, the name appears to have stuck. **Palaisimoondus** is none other than **Palaya-Sila-Mandalam** (**Palaya** (Tamil – old)-(**Sila-Mandalam**)-(the land of Silam). The 'I' and 'S' are often interchangeable in Tamil.

A quick comment about the unknown author of the *Periplus*, he was a native of Egypt and wrote his book in the time of Augustus Caesar and before the kingdom of the Nabathoeans was overthrown by the Romans. V. Kanakasabhai in his well researched book 'The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago' has very cleverly deduced the date the *Periplus* was written, in the following manner. He has noted that the *Periplus* mentions the king reigning at the time it was written was Zoskales who ruled over the Auxumitae. Kanakasabhai identifies this Zoskales with Za-Hakale who he believes must have been king of Abyssinia from 77 to 89 A.D. He concludes that we may therefore safely conclude that the *Periplus* was written a little after the death of Pliny between the years 80 – 89 A.D.

One could now examine the various names by which this island was subsequently known, before its current name of **Sri Lanka**. This island was known for many years as **Eelam**. Sadly, some writers on Eelam history have tended to confuse **Eelam** with the Sumerian **Elam** (with the short 'E'). When the first of the European invaders of the island of **Sri Lanka**, the Portuguese arrived, the island was still known as **Eelam**. The Portuguese called the island **Ceilam** (written in Portuguese as **Ceilao** – the sound 'm' being written in Portuguese as 'ao'), the Dutch, who followed the Portuguese and captured the island

from them, called the island **Zeilan (or Zeylan)**. The British, who followed the Dutch and took the island from them, called it **Ceylon**.

After independence, the island underwent yet another name change, to its present one of **Sri Lanka**. It would appear that this final name change was made by the island's legislators primarily, to break free of the original historical name of the island viz. **Eelam** and its historical associations. One must remember in this context, that the major inhabitants of the island are today, not the Tamils but people who are known today as Sinhala Buddhists. These Sinhala Buddhists and their Buddhist monk influenced history, primarily the Vamsa (the Mahavamsa, Culavamsa, Datuvamsa etc) chronologies written by the monks, hold that the Sinhala Buddhists were the original and long standing inhabitants and that the Tamils were relatively new arrivals from South India. This could be the reason for the country's legislators going for a name that broke clear of the old and long established name of **Eelam**. It might be noted, that the prefix **Sri** used in the current name **Sri Lanka**, is normally usually used for an individual (like Sri Jawarharlal Nehru) and not for a country. Apparently, Sri Lanka is the only country in the world to have a name with a prefix that is normally used for persons.

A brief comment about those inhabitants of **Ilamuridesam** who moved north, to various areas of present day India; V. Kanagasabai in his "The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago," has this to say "*That the Tamils had attained a high degree of civilization before the advent of the Aryans is established indisputably by the fact that the pure Tamil language is so copious and exact that it can do well without borrowing Sanscrit words. In fact in ancient Tamil classical works, the terms relating to Music, Grammar, Astronomy, and even abstract Philosophy are of pure Tamil origin; and they indicate most clearly that those sciences were cultivated by the Tamils long before the arrival of the Brahmins or other Aryan immigrants*".

In this connection it is interesting to hear what John Marshall (Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilization) has to say. Marshall believes of the language of the excavated inscriptions that there is "*no reason for connecting it in any way with Sanscrit*". He says, "*The Indus civilization was pre-Aryan, and the Indus language or languages must have been pre-Aryan also. Possibly, one or other of them (if as seems likely, there was more than one) was Dravidic. This, for three reasons, seems a most likely conjecture – first, because Dravidic-speaking people were the precursors of the Aryans over most of*

*Northern India and were the only people likely to have been in possession of a culture as advanced as the Indus culture; secondly, because on the other side of the Kirthar Range and at no great distance from the Indus Valley the Brahuis of Baluchistan have preserved among themselves an island of Dravidic speech which may well be a relic from pre-Aryan times, when Dravidic was perhaps the common language of these parts: thirdly, because Dravidic languages being agglutinative, it is not unreasonable to look for a possible connection between them and the agglutinative language of Sumer in the Indus Valley, which as we know, had many other close ties with Sumer.”*

For further evidence of the mass movements and migrations, one might again refer to V. Kanakasabai's "The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago". *"The modern Malayalam preserves, I believe, that form of language which was spoken by early Tamil immigrants, some time after they settled in Southern India. They had then learnt to use Dravidian words, but were not familiar with the personal signs of verbs. In this condition, the Malayalam of today resembles the Mongolian, the Manchu and other primitive tongues of Asia."*

The Sumerians (sometimes referred to as the Cushites) settled in Southern Mesopotamia around 3200 and 2800 B.C. Western historians have not been able to pinpoint their origin, apart from being definite that they came from the East and were related to the creators of the Indus Valley Civilization. In this connection it is interesting to note a theory advanced by Samuel Livingstone in his eminently readable book "The Sinhalese of Ceylon and The Aryan Theory". He has written his book as a series of letters to his son, very much in the style of Jawaharlal Nehru's "Glimpses of World History" that was written mostly from prison, to his daughter Indira Gandhi. Livingstone refers to the book on Chaldea by Ragozin in the 'Story of the Nations' series. Ragozin is quoted as saying that the land where the Sumerians lived was also called Chaldea. Livingstone theorises that this word 'Chaldea' sounds very similar to the word Choladeam (Chola Thesam – land of the Cholas).

Ragozin, quotes Berossus, a learned priest of Babylon, who lived immediately after Alexander the Great had conquered the country (Babylon) around 300 B.C. who says "there were originally at Babylon a multitude of people of foreign race who had settled in Chaldea". Who were these people of foreign race who came from somewhere else and settled down in Chaldea in immemorial times? Livingstone states that Berossus supplies

the answer by saying that they were **Turanians** meaning a people who came from a distant land. Livingstone, in a footnote, says that the word **Turanian** appears to have been derived from the Tamil word '*Thuram*' meaning far.

The Turanians, according to Berosus, at one time covered the whole of Western Asia, dwelt there for ages before any other race occupied it and were called '*the oldest of men*' and were everywhere at the very root of history. It is interesting to read of the legend of **Ea the Fish** The whole body of this being was that of a fish, but under the fish's head he had another head – that of a man while under the tail of the fish were the legs of a man. His speech was that of a man. Images of this figure are preserved to this day. Apparently, this Fish/Man spent his days among men teaching them science, letters and every art. He taught them to build cities and temples; sow seeds and gather crops; introduced laws and taught them mannerly behaviour. At the end of each day, as the sun went down, this Fish/Man would plunge back into the sea.

It is clear that, despite this picturesque description, this fish man came from the sea and from the east and introduced an advanced civilization. It was the Turanians or the fish/man (men?) who introduced the rudiments of civilization to a backward people. We can visualise the people of **Ilamuridesam** fleeing their fast disappearing land and landing from their boats out of the sea among these comparatively 'backward' people! These strange new people who seemed to know so much and were far more advanced in all things. It is not hard to imagine how the legend of the fish/man was born.

Dr Hall quoted by Sir John Marshall, in his "Mohenjo-Daro and the Indus Civilization", says that the ethnic type of the Sumerians, as marked in their figures, is very different from those of the races surrounding them. Even their language was strongly marked from the Semites or Aryans or others around them, but '*were decidedly Indian in type*'. Hall goes on to say that the Sumerians are "*very like the Southern Hindus of the Dekkan (who still speaks Dravidian languages). And it is by no means improbable that the Sumerians were an Indian race*". It is clear that it was the Southern Dravidian Hindus, who were worshipers of Siva, who took the torch of civilization westwards.

Reference to the Sumerian **Elam** (as also the Sri Lankan **Eelam**) may be found in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. The close connection of Sumerian **Elam** with the Indus Valley civilizations like Mohenjo daro and Harappa could be explained. Apart from their

common origin from **Ilamuridesam**, their religion, which was an early form of the worship of the God Siva, promoted a close affinity between the Indus Valley civilization and the Sumerian civilization. It must be observed that the civilization, of Sumer and other Mesopotamian states in the vicinity of the Euphrates and the Tigris, was contemporaneous with the civilization of Mohenjo daro and Harappa, among others, in the Indus Valley.

These migrations, from the gradually disappearing continent of **Ilamuridesam**, were possibly made in boats, across the then unknown seas. These seas were rapidly changing, with increasing waters from the melting ice. It might be relevant to mention here, that today (2005), a similar change, can be observed as a result of global warming. The world, in the words of a Sunday Observer (U.K.) headline of 19 June 2005, is "*Fiddling as the Planet Burns*". Carbon emissions on today's earth have begun to heat up the planet. According to this newspaper, "*The temperature of the earth depends on a balance between the incoming energy from the Sun and the energy that bounces back into space. Carbon dioxide absorbs heat that would otherwise be lost to space. Some of this energy is re-emitted back to earth, causing additional heating of the planet*". In a worst case scenario, as published by the same Sunday Observer, by 2020 the snows of Kilimanjaro will have vanished; the Maldiv Islands will risk complete submersion by 2080; by 2050 the waters around Bangladesh could have risen by a metre while in China, whole cities could be swamped by melting Himalayan Glaciers.

The people of **Ilamuridesam** who were used to movement around their land, by the waters of the rivers, now trusted their fate to the waters of an unknown and constantly changing sea, in their effort to seek a safer home. It is clear, that the movement of the migrants (one could describe them as the earliest '*economic refugees*') was over the now treacherous sea, by boats used for river transport but clearly, considerably strengthened for a long sea voyage, a very risky and daring journey indeed. Today, in the island of Sri Lanka (all that is left of this continent of **Ilamuridesam**), there are many stone boats to be found, particularly in the early cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. There is no historical evidence, either from the Sri Lankan Buddhist vamsa texts (Mahavamsa, Culavamsa, Datuvamsa etc) or from inscriptions, as to who was responsible for them. These stone boats were clearly carved in symbolic memory of those who had left in similar wooden boats into the vast and rapidly changing ocean, in search of a safe haven. John Still in his book '*Jungle Tide*' (1932) mentions these stone boats. He says "*by the*

*edge of that wood a thing lay that was even older than the trees, not moulded by hand but shaped like a boat. It was five or six feet through and twenty or more in length, and it had grown to be a subject of veneration to the coolies who worked amid the tea. When one smote upon its bows with a piece of rock, it boomed with a deep musical tone, like that of some church bell, and the sound went echoing on through its solid mass. I have found flowers laid before it or even cooked food, but whether it was a god I never learned.” - page 15 “Jungle Tide”.*

It is clear that this practice of making offerings of food, had continued over the millennia and in the process, the people making these ‘offerings’ have forgotten the reasons for why they made them. Incidentally, the stone canoe in the citadel of Anuradhapura, records lands belonging to Tamils and villages belonging to them. It is known locally as the ‘Galthoni’ (*‘kal’* Tamil for stone, and *‘thoni’* Tamil for boat).

M D Ragavan - ‘Tamil Culture in Ceylon (1963)’ – citing Paranavitarna says “*Archaeological evidence of a Tamil community in ancient A’pura found in a Brahmi inscription in the face of one of the ruined buildings of A’pura discovered in 1959. The script reads, ‘The terrace of the Tamil householders caused to be made by a Tamil Samana (residing in ILUBARATA.’ Paranavitarna observes that the inscription proves that the stone terrace was the common property of Tamil householders of ancient A’pura*”. The inscription found on the face of a boulder in the vicinity of Ratnapasada on the outer circular road in Anuradhapura, has drawn attention as the earliest instance of the mention of the word ‘**Dravida**’.

Dr. R. Vigneswaran – (Rock Cave Temple of Thirukoneswaram and Sequelae) - says, “*What has been overlooked is the obvious significance of the use of the word Ilubarata by these householders. It conveys the impression of their origins in Ilubarata (i.e. Ilavarta of Bharatavarsa – Ilam of ancient times – Ilamandalam). Insofar as they were concerned, they were residents of Ceylon known to them from ancient times as Ilubarata, though they might not have known of the sequence of events leading to their residence in A’pura*”. He goes on to say, “*What is essential is to note the contiguity of the use of the name Ilavarta (Ilam – Tamil Ilavarutham). There is a suspicion that they might have known of something of their past*”. It is certainly not a far cry from Ilubarata or Ilavarutham to **Ilamuridesam**.

These stone boats are known today as ‘oruwas’. Some of the boats are known as ‘bath oruwas’ (rice containers) while others are known as ‘beth oruwas’ (medicine containers). In time, Buddhism established itself in the south, of this remnant of the continent of **Ilamuridesam**, particularly in Anuradhapura. Anuradhapura as the Sinhala Buddhist capital, swarmed with hordes of hungry monks who were not only hungry for food but also hungry for political power.

To quote C. M. Henriques “Ceylon Past and Present”, – 1884 pp. 68 -69 – “ *In A’pura and Polonaruwa, stone boats abound, purportedly used to hold cooked rice for alms, called ‘bath’ (rice) oruwa (container) and ‘beth (medicine) oruwa (container). Many other kinds of stone boats are seen lying about, but of which the most curious are canoe shaped troughs. There is one near Ratna Pasada that is 63 feet long. These troughs were used for the offering of rice to the priests, their extraordinary size, I suppose, being intended to suggest the generosity of the royal donor. It is hard to believe that they were ever filled with rice, but on the other hand we have to remember **A’pura was infested by thousands of hungry and politically minded priests** (my emphasis) whom it was no doubt desirable that the king should support in comfort. The troughs are usually to be found on the site of alms houses”.*

These monks became in time, politically powerful as they began to own land and property in their own right, gifted by various kings and wealthy citizens. The kings had no option but to feed these powerful monks. In more recent times, one must remember that it was a monk who shot the then Prime Minister (the father of the current (2005) President), The Sri Lankan Parliament today (2005) has eight monks who have been elected members of parliament, while there were rumours that a monk could even contest the Presidency elections of 2005.

It is relevant to see what V.Kanakasabhai has to say regarding the Buddhists eighteen hundred years ago. “*The information afforded by these poems (poems composed more than two thousand years ago), regarding the religious and social customs of the Tamil people, would alone guide us to fix the probable date of this literature in the earliest centuries of the Christian era. For, we find from them that there were Buddhists in the Tamil country, but **they had set up no images of Buddha and had no priests**” (my emphasis).*

One could examine the theory that the early kings had these stone boats filled with rice and medicines for the benefit of the monks. If this were true, this would have been a misuse of the symbolic boats that the early inhabitants had built, in memory of their people, who had bravely sailed the seas in search of a haven. The shrewd monks of later years, made out that these stone boats had been placed solely for their (monks) own benefit.

One must remember that these early monks, very like today's monks, did not work for a living nor perform any productive work like say, the Brahmins of India who are in the various professions or are academics or scientists and suchlike. The Buddhist monks, particularly those in Sri Lanka, believe they need to be supported by the king or state and the people. The monks of today, like the monks of the past, have as a result, a great deal of spare time on their hands. Instead of using this spare time to spread the message of the Buddha they have begun interfering in politics and the manner in which the country should be governed.

The early monks had apparently, succeeded in creating the 'myth' that these stone boats were placed there specifically to contain food and medicines for their own (monks) benefit. Clearly, the terms bath oruwas and beth oruwas are later creations for which, I believe, the monks themselves are responsible.

Talking of boats, excavations at Abydos in Egypt covering the kings of the late pre dynastic period circa 3100 B.C. and the early dynastic period circa 2950 – 2575 B.C. have brought to light interesting facts. Among the excavations was a boat cemetery containing 75 boats some as long as 75 feet. These boats are made, however, of wood connected with ropes passing through slots in the wood and plant matter stuffed in the seams. Most of the wood has been destroyed by insects but their construction technique is evident.

These boats unlike the Sri Lankan oruwas, have clearly been provided for the journey of the king into after life. What concerns us here however is the symbolism of these boats, which is very much like the Sri Lankan stone boats that were carved, also as symbols.

Vigneswaram (Rock Cave Temple of Thirukoneswaram and Sequelae) has this to say about the significance of early boats. "*At Thiruketheeswaram, Rameswaram,*

*Mavittapuram and Madurai Meenatchi Amman temples, the boat festivals known as 'Theppaththiruvila' are performed, in normal times. It could well be thanksgivings for their 'great escape', accompanied by almsgivings, the raison d'etre being lost in the mists of time – believed to be to attain moksha according to some and, to serve rice, to hold medicines according to others.....The etymology of **Illam** should be clear now – it is apolitical and factual.”*

With the deep belief of the people of **Ilamuridesam** and the other inhabited lands, in the warmer regions of the earth, in a 'power' above them, it was inevitable, at least with the people of **Ilamuridesam**, that there was an attempt to explain these strange and 'unnatural' happenings of nature by attributing them to the actions of the Gods. Vigneswaran again, has in his useful book, given a number of references from the Bagavata Purana and Garuda Purana.

#### Bagavata Purana

*“15. At the time of the oceanic deluge in the epoch (Manvantara) called Cakusa. He (Vishnu) assumed the form of a fish and protected Vaisvata Manu by making him board the **earth boat**.*

*16. In the eleventh incarnation in the form of a tortoise the omnipresent Lord supported the Mandara mountain on his back while gods and demons (asuras) were churning the ocean....Here, the ocean was churned for Amirta (nectar), and Halahala (Kalkuta) **poison fumes emitted during it was drunk up by Siva to save all.**”*

The reference to the '*churning of the ocean*' is of particular interest to us to whom, the television pictures of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami are still fresh in our minds. We have the benefit, today, of the works of various authors in the field of geology, geography, astronomy, astro-physics and the like, apart from verbal and pictorial reports from various learned people, thanks to television and the radio. Imagine the reactions of our ancestors at the time of these early instances of tsunamis (*churning of the ocean*). They did not know what caused them and this 'ignorance' led them to ascribe these events, to the Gods causing it on account of their anger with humans or, because they were fighting among themselves.

This was not only so among the Hindus. The Christians had the story of Noah and the Ark and the great flood. They created the story of Noah's ark, in which Noah and his wife took into the ark, a pair of each of the wildlife in the world. Apart from the problem of separating the carnivores from the more peaceful leaf/grass eaters, Noah and his wife would have had the obvious logistical problem of feeding these animals for the duration of the flood. There was also the problem of obtaining, at short notice, a large enough vessel to hold all of them!

### Garuda Purana

*"28. Oh, birthless Lord: Piloting this earth, the abode of herbs and creepers, along with me (Manu, then in birth of Satyavarta) you sported enthusiastically and vigorously in the ocean of deluge meeting with heavy billows.*

*23. (Vishnu) took the form of a fish in the Great Deluge at the end of Caksusa manvantara and saved Vaivasvata Manu by putting him in a **terrestrial boat**.*

*24. In the eleventh incantation took the form of a tortoise and bore mount Mandara on his back."*

We find here, our early ancestors ascribing these strange happenings, to the supernatural powers of the various Gods they believed in, in their attempts to explain the ravages of the sea. These Gods take the earthly forms, in their written works, of a tortoise or fish and save humans, or support mountains on their backs. Similarly, the numerous and varied fundamentalist Christian sects believe in the story of Noah's ark as real and factual.

Perhaps, global warming and the indifference of the world powers to it, will lead to another 'churning of the ocean' and a 'new' world order. If this were to happen, we hope it will take the form of wiping the slate clean and a fresh start with fresh minds, taking into consideration the lessons of the past or – will it be the end of the world?

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