Obituary of Siran Deraniyagala, Founder of Sri Lankan Archaeology (March 1, 1942–October 5, 2021)

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OBITUARY

Siran Upendra Deraniyagala was a remarkable and influential figure in South Asian archaeology. His extensive excavations of Paleolithic sites, his massive synthesis of chronology and ecological context of prehistoric life in Sri Lanka, contributions to conservation and research policy in his country, and his support of later generations of paleoanthropological researchers was all noteworthy. And as a popular and much respected public figure, he popularized archaeology and the length and complexity of Sri Lanka's past. His recent death was widely covered in Sri Lanka's media, with one commentator (Tharindu Muthukumarana) describing him as "A legend who rewrote Sri Lankan history". The anguish and sense of national loss represented in media commentary can be understood by reviewing his life and some of his accomplishments. We will concentrate here on his contributions to Palaeolithic archaeology, but we acknowledge that Siran made significant discoveries about Neolithic, Iron Age, and Historical periods as well.

SIRAN'S EARLY YEARS AND FAMILY: DEVELOPING A PASSION FOR ARCHAEOLOGY

Siran Upendra Deraniyagala was born in Ratnapura on 1 March 1942, a child born to a famous family. Family upbringing and traditions shaped his future. His paternal grandfather was the famous historian and civil servant/administrator and patriot, Sir Paul Edward Pieris Deraniyagala Samarasinha Sriwardhanaa (1874–1959), the first Asian admitted to Trinity College in Cambridge, and subsequently as barrister in London's prestigious Honourable Society of the Inner Temple. Sir Paul married Hilda Obeyesekere, a great-niece of Molamure Maduwanwela Disawe, a Sinhalese aristocrat and landholder who was appointed Disawe in the Colonial regime. They had four children, including Siran's father Paulus Edward Pieris Deraniyagala. Paulus followed his father's footsteps in attending St. Thomas' Preparatory School and then Trinity College Cambridge, eventually training at Harvard University in 1924. Paulus was fascinated by natural history, eventually becoming Director of the National Museum of Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) from 1939 to 1963, and Sri Lanka's foremost naturalist, naming multiple species and examining the paleontological record of Sri Lanka.

Paulus Deraniyagala married Prini Eknaligoda Molamure, and they had four children. Siran was the third son, a younger brother to Arjun and Ranil, and elder brother to Isanth. The brothers spent their early childhood on family estates at Molamure Walauwa in Ratnapura. Their father was also a martial artist of considerable repute, nationally famous for boxing, and the founder of Judo in Sri Lanka. Not surprisingly, Siran also trained in Judo. Siran also followed family tradition in his schooling: attending St. Thomas' Preparatory School, followed by residency at its Bandarawela branch as a boarder aged nine, and then taking his secondary schooling at St. Thomas' College Gurutalawa and Mt. Lavinia. At age 15, he departed for London where he completed his GCE Advanced Levels in Greek, English, and History in 1959. That same year, following in the family tradition and at age 17, he was the youngest entrant to Trinity College in its history.

At Cambridge, Siran read Architecture and Fine Arts under Sir Leslie Martin. He would later say that he did that only at his mother's request, not because of any great personal interest. Siran eventually altered his focus and completed his Bachelor's degree in Sanskrit studies, reflecting his interest in history. As a child, Siran was inspired by his father's natural history research and accompanied his father on excavations. This has often been thought to be Siran's motivation for his eventual shift to studying archaeology, however, in late night conversations Siran told the authors of another significant influence. He had arrived in England as a 15-year-old boy and had not returned home until he had completed his degree at Cambridge. In all those years he spent his term breaks living with a close friend of his mother, none other than Dame Agatha Christie and her husband, Lord Max Mallowan, who at that time was Professor of Archaeology at the University of London. His stays with the couple were enjoyable and Siran reported that he got along particularly well with Max Mallowan. Siran met many archaeologists through his connection with

PaleoAnthropology 2022:1: 149–154. https://doi.org/10.48738/2022.iss1.90 ISSN 1545-0031

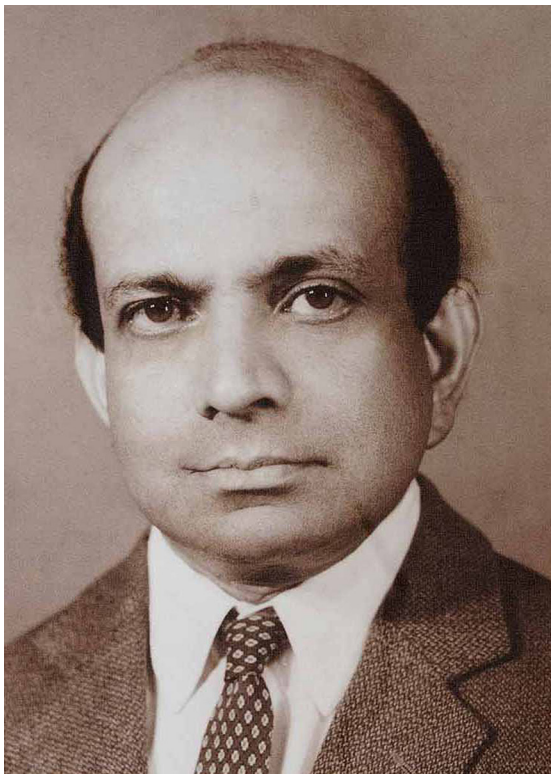

Figure 1. Formal portrait photograph of Siran after his appointment to the Department of Archaeology.

Mallowan and became interested in their lifestyle and intellectual concerns.

In 1963, having completed his degree at Cambridge, Siran took the advice of Max Mallowan and Mortimer Wheeler, and pursued his interest in archaeology by enrolling in a postgraduate diploma at the Institute of Archaeology in London (now University College London) under the guidance of Professors Kenneth de Burgh Codrington and Frederick Zeuner. Their interests in the environmental context of human actions coincided with his father's concern with past environments, and shaped Siran's future research interests. Siran Deraniyagala completed the diploma in 1965, winning the prestigious Gordon Childe Prize. He received an M.A. from Cambridge University in 1966, and now at the age of 23 he was ready to return to Sri Lanka.

ARCHAEOLOGY IN SRI LANKA

The return to Sri Lanka was made overland, by hitch-hiking and public transport, through Europe, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Codrington had arranged for the journey to be an extended training in the prehistoric and protohistoric material of South Asia. Siran spent a year as a guest of archaeologists and archaeological institutions, such as the Deccan College with Prof. H.D. Sankalia and V.N. Misra, the MS University Baroda with Prof. R.N. Mehta, the Birbal Sahni Institute of Palaeobotany Lucknow with the paleobotanist Dr. Vishnu-Mittre. And, finally, he spent time with the Indian Archaeological Survey in Delhi and attended its field school in Kalibangan with Drs. B.B. Lal and B.K. Thapar, both of whom were students of Sir Mortimer Wheeler when he had been Director-General of the Archaeological Survey.

When he eventually arrived in Sri Lanka, he was appointed to the government's Department of Archaeology, as the Assistant Commissioner heading the new Excavation Branch (Figure 1). The establishment of the Excavation Branch in 1968 marked a watershed in prehistoric research in Sri Lanka. After his appointment, Deraniyagala reviewed the archaeological scene and recognized the potential for research into Sri Lankan prehistory. He identified thematic problems and decided which could be examined by his Excavation Branch. Siran identified a number of key limitations that he and his group might tackle: (a) absence of a chronological framework to which prehistoric assemblages could be referred, even tentatively, (b) lack of a cohesive paleo-environmental history, (c) no coherent understanding of human/environment interactions, especially subsistence strategies, and (d) the failure of previous research to place Sri Lanka's prehistory within the context of South Asian and world prehistory. He conceived of a multi-stage project to overcome those limitations. At his disposal he had dedicated excavators, but he was the sole prehistorian in his country.

Siran began with a literature survey and excavations of promising sites. One of the initial sites was Bellan-bandi Palassa, an open-air site located in the dry lowlands directly beneath the Kalthota escarpment. This site had been dug by his father, P.E.P. Deraniyagala, but the excavation records left did not adequately describe stratigraphy, chronology, or the archaeological sequence. New excavations,

which Siran co-directed with evolutionary biologist Kenneth Kennedy (1930–2014), provided a chronological structure, employing a coherent stratigraphic description and radiocarbon dates, and examined the association of pottery and lithic artifacts in the upper horizons.

He also began excavation of the 'citadel' at Anuradhapura, with similar objectives. The 1969 dig was in collaboration with Codrington and aimed at delineating the transition between Protohistoric and Early Historic periods, to define the upper limit of Sri Lanka's Stone Age. This excavation introduced new methods and techniques and explicit stratigraphic excavation in a way not previously seen in Sri Lanka, initiating what we now think of as modern digging.

A coherent framework for lithic artifacts was also needed, one that would characterize the diversity of artifacts found across the island and allow for an assessment of chronology on assemblages without a stratigraphic context. Siran concluded that earlier classificatory systems employed by Hartley, Noone, and Allchin were inadequate, and he embarked on the construction of a new classification. He chose a broadly based framework incorporating features of contemporary systems elsewhere in the world, such as those by Hallam Movius and François Bordes. The classificatory system he began to construct formed the basis for the one he later used in his doctoral thesis. Simultaneously, Siran began to devise a ceramic classification based on ware form and ethnologic analogy. The digs at the Citadel prompted this work, producing large ceramic assemblages. The final site report including the ceramic classification, was published in 1972 in *Ancient Ceylon*. In both the lithic and ceramic classifications, he opted for clear grouping and subdivisions using hierarchical systems that provided labels with little ambiguity.

INVESTIGATING THE SRI LANKAN PALEOLITHIC

By the start of the 1970s, Deraniyagala was ready for a new stage of research. With detailed artifact classifications and sophisticated excavated techniques, he embarked upon what he considered to be 'Stage II/III,' which was the field investigation of a Paleolithic phase and its climatic context in Sri Lanka. He had concluded that there was tremendous opportunity in coastal gravel deposits that were capped by fossil aeolian dunes. Studied by British geologist Edward Wayland prior to World War I, these were deposits of considerable antiquity. Siran redefined these as the Iranamadu Formation, and he selected four promising locations (Bundala Wellegangoda, Pathirajawela, Lewagangoda, and Embilipitiya Site 43) at which he undertook intensive macro-stratigraphic sampling in 1972. Considering the environmental evidence, such as uplift and sea-level data, he proposed a tentative chronology extending back into the Middle Pleistocene. Subsequent OSL dating indicated ages of 25–75 kya for capping dunes and ages of 80–150 kya for the basal gravels. Lithic artifacts were found throughout the sequence, indicating a considerable antiquity to hominid occupation.

STUDIES AT HARVARD

In 1973, Siran was granted a fellowship for doctoral studies at Harvard University, supported by a Fulbright Travel Grant. This took him away from Sri Lanka for a period but also accelerated his thinking about prehistory in his homeland. He spent five years at Harvard (1973–1978) and revelled in the scholarly environment. He was supervised by Hallam Movius, with advisor input from Carl Lamberg Karlovsky and Ruth Tringham. They exposed him to American anthropological archaeology, as well as a wider theoretical and methodological base. The ecological and evolutionary perspective solidified the approach he had already developed and Siran later recalled their strong support. In particular, the praise from Ruth Tringham for his clear definitions and critical thinking was never forgotten. This was an intense period of study but Siran took additional opportunities. He undertook fieldwork in Europe, with André Leroi-Gourhan, Henri de Lumley, and Jean-Philippe Rigaud in France, and Raymond Newell in the Netherlands. He also undertook summer studies at Cambridge, including some focused on environmental studies. In retrospect, we can see this as a crucial transfer of skills to Sri Lankan archaeology.

RETURN TO SRI LANKA

In 1978, Deraniyagala returned to Sri Lanka and pursued the next stage in his investigation of the Paleolithic there. The most dramatic step was to begin, between 1978 and 1986, a series of rockshelter excavations in the lowland Wet Zone. These sites had been tested by his father (Paulus Deraniyagala) several decades earlier and Siran knew they would provide long, well-sealed continuous sequences, with better organic preservation conditions than in the Iranamadu Formation. He began excavations at Kithulgala Beli-lena, and they continued from 1978 to 1983. He reached bedrock at a depth of ca. 4m from the surface, with the deposit recording nine major occupation phases. For the first time in Sri Lankan archaeology, a large series of radiocarbon dates were obtained, giving a detailed chronology. When calibrated by Nimal Perera, they revealed an occupation sequence dating from 31,070 to 3,878 cal BP.

Deraniyagala then excavated Batadomba-lena, a cave near his home in Kuruwita. Four seasons of excavations (1979–1982) yielded a wealth of data that challenged long-held concepts concerning Sri Lanka and its place in world prehistory. For example, at that time microlithic technology in South Asia was considered a Holocene phenomenon, but at Kithulgala and Batadomba-lena, as well as other sites he dug, Siran found them securely dated to before 28,000 years ago. When these dates were first announced by Deraniyagala to international academia in the early 1980s, considerable scepticism followed. Ironically, it was only after van Noten reported microliths of a similar antiquity in Matupi Cave in Zaire that the Sri Lankan dates were positively received, but today there is general agreement as to the validity of Siran's interpretation of the age of Batadomba-lena microliths.

Siran continued to collect field data, and developed his

Figure 2. Nimal Perera (left) and Siran Deraniyagala (right) at the excavation at Pahiyangala. (photograph by H.M.S.K. Eregama).

synthesis of this material. He completed this work in 1988, as his doctoral thesis to Harvard University. Soon after that, this massive work was published as *The Prehistory of Sri Lanka: an Ecological Perspective*, the first comprehensive in-depth account of the prehistory of Sri Lanka. A slightly revised 2nd edition, incorporating results from additional cave excavations was published by the Sri Lankan Department of Archaeology in 1992 under the same title. His thesis, and the book that it became, studied archaeological signals and the foraging cultures that had created them from a biogeographic perspective. This landmark 800-page volume surveyed almost the entirety of knowledge available on prehistoric archaeology in Sri Lanka at the time of writing and became a standard reference work for South Asian prehistory.

DEVELOPING PALEOLITHIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN SRI LANKA

Throughout that productive decade, Siran displayed his qualities as a mentor. He worked to create a national capacity for prehistoric research by mentoring and supporting capable young archaeologists. By the late 1960s, the first graduates in archaeology from the University of Peradeniya under Professor P.L. Prematilleke were able to attend practical training at the Department of Archaeology. An initial success of this training program was W.H. Wijayapala, who Siran saw had great qualities and appointed as his assistant for the Kithulgala Beli-lena excavation. That dig provided a foundation for Wijayapala's subsequent career, and he used its data as the basis for his doctoral dissertation at the University of Peradeniya. Wijayapala continued to be Siran's excavation assistant into the 1970s, and eventually succeeded Siran as Assistant Commissioner (Excavations), and in directing the digging at Fa Hien-lena near Bulathsinhala, reporting a cultural sequence back to more than 34,000 years ago.

Another example of Siran's patronage of capable young archaeologists was his support of Nimal Perera, who was appointed as Assistant Commissioner of the Excavation Branch in 2000 and who undertook further investigations of the Late Pleistocene cave and rock-shelter habitation sites that Deraniyagala had initiated (Figure 2). That was a collaboration between Sri Lanka's Department of Archaeology and the Australian National University, and resulted in Perera's 2007 doctoral dissertation submitted to the Australian National University. The success of that pattern, using international collaborations to facilitate research and train promising Sri Lankan archaeologists was repeated with Oshan Wedage in collaborations with the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History of Germany (2016–ongoing). In these projects, Siran Deraniyagala kept a watchful and helpful eye on the fieldwork endeavors and the progress of individuals in doctoral research and their careers. These collaborations were part of a broader vision.

CONNECTING THE WORLD TO SRI LANKA

Siran consistently sought to persuade scholars, administrators and their institutions that it was not only appropriate to encourage foreign inputs to service the needs of Sri Lankan archaeological research, but also that collaborative projects with foreign teams heightened awareness among Sri Lankan archaeologists as to what could be considered acceptable practice. He believed that international collaborations represented the long-term means of transferring

much needed state-of-art technology from advanced countries. Acting on this premise, Siran Deraniyagala invited selected foreign teams to collaborate with the Excavations Branch in continuing the research excavations at sites in Sri Lanka and directed it in the national interests by providing operational guidance to each project.

A number of projects related to the protohistoric and Early Historic periods. Examples included the excavation of Matota (1980), the Island's premier port from the commencement of the Early Historic Period, as a joint project with the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, with inputs from Harvard University (M.E. Prickett as field director) and British and Indian field supervisors. That project saw the introduction of the Harris stratigraphic matrix to Sri Lanka and by 1985 Deraniyagala incorporated its use in the Department's excavation procedure. Another collaborative project was the Samanalawewa survey and excavations (1988–1990), supported by the construction firm Balffour Beatty Ltd and the Institute of Archaeology, London (G. Juleff). A third example is the re-excavation of the site of Salgahawatta in the Anuradhapura Citadel (1989–1994). Siran invited a British team, headed by Raymond Allchin (Cambridge University), and the excavations confirmed his earlier work at the site, dating pre-Ashokan Early Brahmi scripts on potsherds. There are other examples, but our point is that Siran strategically kept research in Sri Lanka open to the scholars from the First World as a mechanism for enhancing not only knowledge of Sri Lanka's past but also his country's archaeological future. This strategy fed into his advice to government.

SERVING HIS COUNTRY AND GUIDING ARCHAEOLOGY IN SRI LANKA

Siran was invited to guide the development of archaeology in the nation, and though it came at a cost to his research goals and his private life, he accepted an appointment as the Director-General of Archaeology in the national Department of Archaeology of Sri Lanka (1992–2001). His tenure at the apex of national archaeology policy making saw him plan and coordinate several 'thrust' programs, notably: (a) formulation of a National Archaeological Policy; (b) vertical integration of archaeological policy planning with national planning; (c) a catalogue of sites, monuments, and movable antiquities; (d) the legal protection of archaeological heritage; (e) a focus on heritage conservation; (f) encouragement of research into Sri Lanka's archaeological record; and, (g) enhancement of public awareness of archaeology.

Siran was visibly proud of these accomplishments when recalling his career. When he took up his post, the main legal code in Sri Lanka was the Antiquities Ordinance, first drawn up in 1940 and still operating without major amendment fifty years later. Before his term ended, Siran Deraniyagala, with considerable determination and incisiveness, had seen that old code replaced by the *Antiquities (Amendment) Act No. 24* (1998). New features included the re-definition of the powers/duties of the Director-General of Archaeology; enhanced punishments for infringing on the provisions of the act; the re-definition of the term 'monument' to explicitly include all sites other than buildings with cultural remains, such as prehistoric sites and water management systems (e.g., tanks/ponds); the inclusion of the territorial sea to come within the Act's purview; and, the requirement of Archaeological Impact Assessments as a compulsory prelude to certain categories of activities such as land clearing. This brought Sri Lanka's heritage legislation in line with modern legislative changes being enacted in other parts of the world.

To support the new legislation, Siran crafted a *National Archaeological Policy and the Codes of Practice*, which was eventually approved by Parliament and adopted by the Government in 2006 and constitutes perhaps the only national archaeological policy of its kind in an Asian country. By this time Siran had retired as Director-General of Archaeology and acted as a member of the Advisory Committee to the new Director-General (initially W.H. Wijayapala and then Senerath Dissanayake), giving him time to develop ways to implement that policy. At the request of the Ministry for Culture and the Director-General of Archaeology, Siran formulated a proposal to re-structure the Department of Archaeology to meet the requirements on short-, medium- and long-term bases. These policies and proposals had numerous components but a significant one for Paleolithic research was to accord training the highest priority, and that, wherever considered necessary, this should see Sri Lankan archaeologists being upgraded to the international standards required to make any tangible qualitative progress. That approach reflected Siran's constant support for younger archaeologists and their development.

LATER YEARS

In retirement Siran remained active (Figure 3). We have already described his involvement in national planning as a prominent member of the Advisory Committee to the Director-General of Archaeology. His interest in Paleolithic research remained undiminished, and he was active in research and writing, and especially of publicizing the importance of Sri Lankan archaeology on the world stage. Just a few of his many contributions as co-author to major papers illustrates his fascination with the prehistory of his island. For instance, the *Antiquity* paper of 2008 on early rainforest occupation (with Kourampas, Simpson, and Perera), the 2011 paper on Pleistocene occupation at Batadomba-lena in *Journal of Human Evolution* (with Perera, Kourampas, Simpson, Bulbeck, Kamminga, Perera, Fuller, Szabo, and Oliveira), and the 2015 report on Pleistocene rainforest use in *Science* (with Roberts, Perera, Wedage, Perera, Eregama, Gledhill, Petraglia, and Lee-Thorp). He felt proud of Sri Lanka's history of high-quality prehistoric research and the way it informed global discussions. His input maintained his reputation as a rigorous and trail-blazing scholar.

Siran acted as custodian of the artworks of his father P.E.P. Deraniyagala, and those of his brother, the late Ranil Deraniyagala, one of Sri Lanka's eminent modern painters. He was also, by tradition, the chief trustee (*davaka*) of the ancient Ekneligoda Katuthiyambarawe temple founded by

Figure 3. Siran retained his excitement for archaeology in his retirement. (photograph by H.M.S.K. Eregama).

his family. Ekneligoda Katuthiyambarawe was the head-temple for numerous subsidiary temples in Sri Lanka, and Siran was committed to his duties and care for the social web that entailed.

To those of us who knew him, Siran was a charming and convivial conversationalist, often revealing a cheeky sense of irony. Conversations with him were wide-ranging, and often allowed him an opportunity for avuncular commentary. His support for younger scholars and his unwavering commitment to the quality of scientific research were always evident. It was a pleasure to spend time with him, and to appreciate his welcoming approach to life. We began this piece with a quote about the loss sensed by Sri Lankans across the globe, and we share their respect for Siran Deraniyagala as well as their sadness at his passing.