

# **Military Role of *Mahatittha*, the Ancient Seaport of Rajarata Civilization: A Historical Reappraisal**

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## **Introduction**

Located on the north-western coast of Sri Lanka, *Mahatittha* (modern Mantai in Mannar District, Sri Lanka) was the island's main sea port for more than 1500 years and therefore played an important role in historical developments during the country's early and medieval periods. Situated at a geographic nexus in the Indian Ocean, the site provided a key point of naval connection between the eastern and western regions of the Indian Ocean as well as with mainland South Asia. During its heyday, Mantai was a well planned city surrounded by a double moat, which is still topographically visible on the landscape. This port city is referred to in the literature and inscriptions by several names such as *Mahatittha*, *Mahatotta*, *Maha Theeratha* in Pali and Sankrit; *Maha tota*, *Mantai* and *Mahavoti*, in Sinhala and *Mathoddam* in Tamil. The meaning of these terms, in general, is the 'great port'.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The foreign accounts such as Cosmas (McCrinkle, 1897), Minorsky (Hudud *Al Alam* 1937), Fa-Hsien and Gunawarman (Gunawardena 1990; Kiribamune 2000) are explicit about the role of *Mahatittha* as an international trading port in the Indian Ocean. However, Sri Lankan chronicles and several Tamil inscriptions recorded from the island as well as South India (Indrapala, 2013) paint a different picture of the port city. Thus, what prime role in fact did *Mahatittha* play during the Rajarata civilization requires re-examination. Therefore, the objective of the present paper is to reassess the main use/ role of *Mahatittha* from ca. middle of the first millennium BC to the end of 13<sup>th</sup> century AD.

## **Methodology**

Methodology adopted in this research was essentially historical. Evidence gathered through the study of Sri Lankan chronicles and their

commentaries were compared and contrasted against those extracted from relevant epigraphic sources recovered both in Sri Lanka and India. The results obtained from this historical analysis questions the popular trading role *Mahatittha*.

### Key Findings

Present research on historical sources projects Mantai predominantly as a naval base for the landing of invaders as well as the launching of maritime expeditions by Sri Lankan rulers. Foreign invaders from South Indian King Elara in the second century BC to Javanese prince Chandrabanu in the 13<sup>th</sup> century used *Mahatittha* as their entry-exit port (Nicholas, 1963). During the Cola occupation of northern Sri Lanka, *Mahatittha* /*Mahatottam* was under their control and the port city was named after Cola King Rajaraja. Similarly, Sri Lankan rulers such as Sena II (AD 833-887) who sent an army through *Mahatittha* to invade Pandya Kingdom used this port for launching maritime military expeditions.

In preparation for his attack on Pandyan kingdom, King Pararakrambahu I (AD 1153-1186) used *Mahatittha* both for building of warships and embarking the attack. However, according to a Cola inscription (c. AD 1178), having learnt of the preparation of Parakrambahu's attack and building ships at *Matottam* (*Mahatittha*), the Cola king sent an army and landed at *Mahatitha*, which was captured and destroyed along with many other places. Thus, *Mahatittha* had been a port of strategic importance throughout Rajarata civilization.

Due to this strategic importance of *Mahatittha*, the securing of this port was considered a prime task in any military preparation/ operation as well as for safeguarding the security of the country. Thus, King Vijayabahu I (AD 1065-1120), for example, secured Mantai and prevented re-enforcements coming from South India before attacking Polonnaruwa, the Cola stronghold.

How the presence of an army and constant invasions through Mantai impacted international trade is not very clear from local historical sources. However, ancient rulers seem to have realised the importance of peace and stability as well as guaranteeing of security of smooth running of international trade. From about the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD onwards, therefore, kings took measures

not only to protect ports but also to secure the sea. For example, King Agrabodhi VII (AD 778) took steps to protect *Mahatittha* from possible enemy attacks and to secure the sea port for trade and commerce.

### Conclusions

Thus, as far as Sri Lankan historical records are concerned, *Mahatittha* has been used more often as a naval base- even aside trade- both by foreign invaders and island rulers. This seemingly predominant military role of *Mahatittha*, portrayed in the chronicles and their commentaries, however, does not completely conceal its many other uses such as trade.

Written by the Buddhist clergy, the prime purpose of Sri Lankan chronicles and their commentaries was to record the history of Buddhism, and hence they paid more attention to document events that were relevant to the endurance, promotion and propagation of Buddhism including threats that came as foreign invasions. In the process, they seem to have ignored economic and similar important aspects of island's history. Therefore, text dictated histories, where ever possible, should be cross-examined by independent sources such as Archaeological.

**Keywords:** Chronicles Commentaries; Historical Sources; Mahatittha; Military Role

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