

Pliny: Description of Taprobane (Sri Lanka)

Book VI. c. 22 (24). Taprobane, under the name of the 'Land of the Antichthonēs,' was long regarded as another world. The age and achievements of Alexander the Great made it clear that it is an island. Onesikritos, the commander of his fleet, had stated that its elephants are larger and more bellicose than those of India, and from Megasthenes we learn that it is divided by a river, and that its inhabitants are called Palaegoni, and that it is more productive of gold and pearls of a great size than India itself. Eratosthenes has also given its dimensions as 7000 stadia in length and, 5000 stadia in breadth, while he states that it has no cities, but villages to the number of seven hundred. It begins at the Eastern Sea, and lies extended over against India east and west. The island in former days, when the voyage to it was made with vessels constructed of papyrus and rigged after the manner of the vessels of the Nile, was thought to be twenty days' sail from the country of the Prasii, but the distance came afterwards to be reckoned at a seven days' sail, according to the rate of speed of our ships. The sea between the island and India is full of shallows not more than six paces in depth, but in some channels so deep that no anchors can find the bottom. For this reason ships are built with prows at each end to obviate the necessity of their turning about in channels of extreme narrowness. The tonnage of these vessels is 3000 amphorae. In making sea-voyages, the Taprobane mariners make no observations of the stars, and indeed the Greater Bear is not visible to them, but they take birds out to sea with them which they let loose from time to time and follow the direction of their flight as they make for land. The season for navigation is limited to four months, and they particularly shun the sea during the hundred days which succeed the summer solstice, for it is then winter in those seas.

So much we have learned from the old writers. It has been our lot, however, to obtain a more accurate knowledge of the island, for in the reign of the Emperor Claudius ambassadors came to his court therefrom, and under the following circumstances. A freedman of Annius Plocamus, who had farmed from the treasury the Red Sea revenues, while sailing around Arabia was carried away by gales of wind from the north beyond Carmania. In the course of fifteen days he had been wafted to Hippuri, a port of Taprobane, where he was humanely received and hospitably entertained by the king; and having in six months' time learned the language, he was able to answer the questions he was asked. The king particularly admired the Romans and their emperor as men possessed of an unheard-of love of justice, when he found that among the money taken from the captive the denarii were all of equal weight, although the different images stamped on them showed that they been coined in the reigns of several emperors. This influenced him most of all to seek an alliance with the Romans, and he accordingly despatched to Rome four ambassadors, of whom the chief was Rachia (i.e. Rajah).

From these it was ascertained that in Taprobane there are 500 towns, and that there is a harbour facing the south, adjacent to the city of Palaesimundus, the most famous city in

the island, the king's place of residence, and inhabited by a population of 200,000. They stated also that in the interior there is a lake called Megisba 375 miles in circuit, and containing islands which are fertile, but only for pasturage. From this lake, they said, there issued two rivers, one of which, called Palaesimundus, flows into the harbour near the city of the same name by three channels, the narrowest of which is five stadia wide, the largest fifteen, while the third, called Cydara, has a direction northward towards India. They further said that the nearest point in India is a promontory called Coliacum, a four days' sail distant from the island, and that midway between them lies the island of the Sun; also that those seas are of a vivid green colour, and that a great number of trees grow at the bottom, so that the rudders of ships frequently break their crests off. They saw with astonishment the constellations visible to us--the Greater Bear and the Pleiades--as if they were set in a new heaven, and they declared that in their country the moon can only be seen above the horizon from her eighth to her sixteenth day, while they added that Canopus, a large, bright star, illumined their nights. But what most of all excited their wonder was that their shadows fell towards our part of the world and not to their own, and that the sun rose on the left hand and set on the right, and not in the opposite direction. They also informed us that the side of their island which lies opposite to India is 10,000 stadia in length, and runs south-east-- that beyond the Hemodi mountains they look towards the Seres, with whom they had become acquainted by commerce, also that the father of Rachia had often gone to their country, and that the Seres came to meet their visitors on their arrival. These people, they said, exceeded the ordinary stature of mankind, and had yellow hair and blue eyes; the tones of their voice were harsh and uncouth, and they could not communicate their thoughts by language. In other particulars their accounts of them agreed with the reports of our own merchants, who tell us that the wares which they deposit near those brought for sale by the Seres, on the further bank of a river in their country, are removed by them if they are satisfied with the exchange. The detestation of luxury could not in any way be better justified than by our transporting our thoughts to these regions and reflecting what the things are that are sought for to gratify it, from what vast distances they are brought, and for what low ends.

But yet Taprobane even, though isolated by nature from the rest of the world, is not exempt from our vices. Even there gold and silver are held in esteem. They have a marble which resembles tortoiseshell, pearls also and precious stones, and these are all held in high honour. Their articles of luxury surpass our own, and they have them in great abundance. They asserted that their wealth is greater than ours, but acknowledged that we excelled them in the art of deriving enjoyment from opulence.

There are no slaves in the island; the inhabitants do not prolong their slumbers till daybreak, nor sleep during the day; their buildings are only of a moderate height from the ground; the price of corn is never enhanced; they have no courts of law and no litigation. Hercules is the God they worship; their king is chosen by the people, and must be an old man, of a gentle disposition and childless, and if after his election he should beget children, he is required to abdicate, lest the throne should become hereditary; thirty counsellors are provided for him by the people, and no one can be condemned to death except by the vote of the majority--the person so condemned has, however, the right of appeal to the people, in which case a jury of seventy persons is appointed; if these should acquit the accused, the thirty counsellors lose all the respect they enjoyed, and are

subjected to the uttermost disgrace. The king dresses like Father Bacchus; the people like the Arabs. The king, if he offend in aught, is condemned to death, but no one slays him--all turn their backs upon him, and will not communicate with him in any way, not even by speech. Their festive occasions are spent in hunting, their favourite game being the tiger and the elephant. The land is carefully tilled; the vine is not cultivated, but other fruits are abundant. Great delight is taken in fishing, especially in catching turtles, beneath the shells of which whose families can be housed, of such vast size are they to be found. These people look upon a hundred years as but a moderate span of life. Thus much we have learned regarding Taprobane.

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