

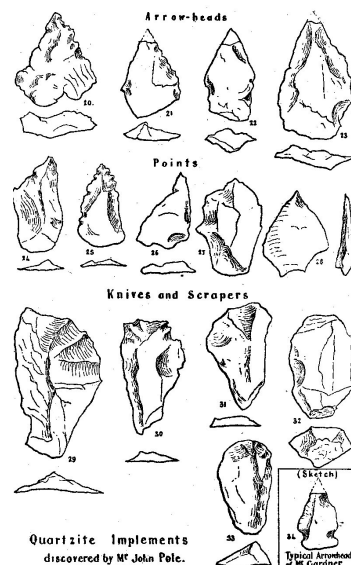
PALEO - MESOLITHIC SRI LANKA

Geological evidence indicates that Sri Lanka and India have been joined by a land bridge often as the sea levels rose and fell over the millennia, stretching from what is now the island of Mannar, off the North West coast of Sri Lanka, to Tamil Nadu. It's generally held that this provided access over time for the earliest humans to arrive in Sri Lanka.ⁱ The last separation is dated to around 7000BP. Sri Lankan prehistory, then, can't be viewed in isolation from the prehistory of India.ⁱⁱ

There is no evidence for human settlement, however, until around 125,000 BCE on the basis of quartz and chert tool evidence from coastal sands near Bundala. From the tools it's assumed that the settlers were hunters as were Paleolithic populations in other parts of South Asia and elsewhere globally.

There is stronger evidence of human settlement by 34,000 BCE, a Mesolithic group known as the Balangoda cultures. From the small size of their camps found so far, it's suggested that each camp would have been occupied by a couple of small - nuclear' - families. The food and microlith tool evidence shows that they had a wide ranging diet. [Yams](#) seem to have been a staple part (Singhalese *raja-ala* and *java-ala*), and other fruit and vegetables included [canarium](#) nuts, breadfruit and bananas. Animals eaten included fish, deer, snakes, rats, snails and even elephants.ⁱⁱⁱ This fits with what is known of Indian microlithic populations in India.^{iv}

The archaeological evidence here doesn't indicate the use of fire for cooking, but the evidence elsewhere for this is being pushed back well into the Paleolithic and beyond, so it's likely that these cultures did cook their food.^v



Stone tools found by Pole and Gardner (lower right)^{vi}

There is evidence that salt was brought in from the coast earlier than 27,000 BP, and this with the presence of shells made into beads indicates that there was trade between the coast and the inland at this time too.^{vii}

The dating of the final land separation may be why there is no evidence (at least to date) of the crops that formed the 'basic Neolithic package, of the Southern Deccan in area in India, horsegram, mung and two varieties of millet (*Brachiara ramosa* and *Setaria verticillata*), and the absence also of any evidence of the humped zebu cattle central to the herding practice.^{viii}

ⁱ It's no stretch to see this as the bridge the monkey god Hanuman builds, in the Indian epic *The Ramayana*, to enable the invasion of Lanka by Rama and his army to rescue his wife Sita, kidnapped by the Demon King who lives in Sri Lanka.

ⁱⁱ Deraniyagala 1998

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Achaya 1994

^v Wrangham 2009

^{vi} Parker 1909

^{vii} Deraniyagala op cit

^{viii} Fuller 2005