

An inquiry of Information Professionals in ancient Sri Lanka: unto the Kandyan Period

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Abstract

Budding literature across the world explores the antecedents of Information Professionals in historical societies while there is a paucity of knowledge on them in ancient Sri Lankan context. Therefore, the study attempts to explore the nature of history of Information Professionals in ancient Sri Lanka employing a qualitative approach through content analysis of primary sources such as inscriptions. The study brings to light a silhouette of professionals engaged in preserving information from the early historic period to the end of the Kandyan kingdom. These officials were mentioned as scribes, chief secretaries, registrars and record keepers such as *Lapana*, *Kanapedika*, *Mahale*, *Muk-hi*, *Mukaveti*, *Sanhas Sivatta Nayinarun*, and *Sannissiwatte Kulaperumal*. Most importantly, they were members of the Royal Council. Duties of these officers involved noting down the orders of the Kings, keeping copies in different formats for future reference, setting up inscriptions/manuscripts/charters, and being accountable for recording, attesting, publicizing and provision of access to the information.

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The research contributes to the literature on Information Science studies as well as historical literature, while it deepens existing knowledge by focusing on a new-fangled look at ancient primary sources. This novel information provides access to a new arena for further research on the history of Sri Lankan information preservation institutions such as lekamge and badageba etc.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Information Professionals, Inscriptions, history, antecedent

Introduction

The term Information Professionals (IPs) is a versatile denomination that designates occupations such as record managers, archivists, librarians, information managers, information scientists, information consultants, and museum curators (Greer, G. & Fowler, 2013; Wormell et. al. 2011). While distinguished by different central cores inherent to their occupations, the mission of each calling is of overlapping characteristics. In commonality, IPs act as the mediator between the source and the client. As a result, the role of IPs involved in collecting, organizing, storing, preserving, and providing access to information for the benefit of clients or users of information (Given & Mc Tavish, 2010). With the emergence of digital technologies, it appears that the role of IPs is of recent origin. Eugene Garfield, founder of bibliometrics and scientometrics, involved in a sheer number of innovative research in Information Science tracing the antecedents of IPs, contends that scribes are the prototype of information managers (Garfield, 1986). He describes how the calling of scribes developed gradually into the profession of information managers (ibid). Budding literature across the world explores the antecedents of IPs in the historical societies. In Egyptian history, scribes in their role had “recorded the particulars of business transactions, handled correspondence, and performed other tasks that are plainly secretarial. With skills in reading and writing, they were among the best-educated men of their time. All men born to high position in administration, the priesthood, and even royalty received their first training as scribes. Their schooling included work on practice compositions that extolled the virtues of the scribe’s calling” (Garfield, 1986, p.113). The transformation of skills of scribes

from the pre-colonial period to the colonial in South India was discussed by [Raman \(2012\)](#). She contends that the introduction of paper management in their job has “ported ‘native scribes’ into something very different from what they were under Indian rulers.” In the meantime, in ancient Israel, scribes, belonged to the erudite class “through New Testament times studying the Scriptures and serving as copyists, editors, teachers, and jurists” ([Merriam-Webster, 2022](#)). A similar profession was mentioned in ancient Roman literature as *Scrobae*. They were “public notaries or clerks, in the pay of the state. They were chiefly employed in making up the public accounts, copying outlaws, and recording the proceedings of the different functionaries of the state” ([Smithers, 1912, p.11](#)). Officials involved in record keeping and handling clerical activities and communication and document management were known as *grammateis* (secretaries) in ancient Greece ([Filiis & Dionysios, 2020](#)). Scholars have also attempted to explore the social, cultural, and political worlds of India’s various scribal groups. Describing the role of *lekaka* in early historic India, [Visvanathan \(2014\)](#), explains that scribes have become one of the hierarchies of court society due to their employment in the court. He further states that the function of the scribes was significant in “mediating the boundaries between the oral, the written and the performative” ([Visvanathan, 2014](#)). Studies such as broader histories of scribal families ([O’Hanlon, 2010](#)), their role in Indian history ([Raman, 2012](#)), and how scribal skills supported the sustenance of political administration ([Chatterjee, 2010](#)), have also greatly enriched the understanding of the scribe’s position in Indian history.

While studies worldwide identify the former shapes of the IPs,

there is a dearth of Sri Lankan studies on the focused area. Attempts can be seen in researching of reconstruction of the early history of Sri Lanka's institutions (Perera, 2001). Social characteristics of several groups that appeared in Early historic period inscriptions such as *Parumuka*, *Naga*, *Dameda*, Jain, *Brahmana*, *Bata*, and *Aya* have also been studied (Senanayake, 2017). A similar study that was aimed to identify the antecedents of early professionals engaged in bookkeeping in early Sri Lanka conducted by Liyanarachchi (2014) informs about *Nakaraganaka* (city accountant) appeared in King Gajabahu's Thuparama inscription (112–134 CE). Paronavitana (1970), reporting a comprehensive study of Early *Brahmi* inscriptions, describes a list of offices of state, professions and trades in ancient Sri Lanka. The role played by ruling parties in providing sponsorship to support Buddhist Monks engaged in literary activities is evidently established in some works. However, there is an apparent scarcity of previous studies on the antecedent of the information profession in Sri Lanka dedicated to understanding the history of the profession, the roles, and duties of the professionals, and the progression of the profession to the present-day context. The paucity of knowledge on IPs in ancient Sri Lanka remains a vital concern creating a lacuna.

Therefore, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- Who are the professionals involved in the preservation of information in ancient Sri Lanka?
- What are the roles and duties?
- What were the titles of positions they held? and,
- What shape of hierarchical position are they borne in the society?

As aforementioned research questions cannot be answered using

quantitative methods, the qualitative method was used in the study because, as a rule of thumb, it “includes data in the form of words rather than numbers” (Punch, 2013, p.13). Content analysis was used to draw data from the selected sources as it is considered a very powerful tool for analyzing historical material, especially for documenting trends over time. It also helps to elicit valuable historical and cultural insights over time (Columbia School of Public Health, 2019). Inscriptions from 3rd century BCE to the end of Kandyan period was selected for the study. Information provided by Copperplate Charters and Palm Leaf Manuscripts were employed to triangulate the information furnished by the inscriptions.

The study yielded key themes such as different names of titles assigned to professionals involved in information handling in ancient times, information about their social hierarchy, and various contributions they made in managing information. The research contributes to Information Science as well as historical literature. It deepens existing knowledge by focusing on a novel look at ancient primary sources.

Titles of the positions held by Information Professionals in Ancient Sri Lanka

Lapana

Details of various socio-economic information during the period have been preserved in Early Brahmi inscriptions (3rd century BCE to 1st century CE). Information on royal titles, and Local Rulers and Princes of the period, Officers such as Commander in Chief (*Senapati*), Treasurer (*Badagarika*), Minister (*Amata*) and Burgomaster (*nagara-gutiya*) appear in the inscriptions (Paranavitana, 1970). Details of professions associated

with different social hierarchies such as Revenue Collectors (*Ayaka*), Teachers (*Acariya*), Physicians (*Veja*), Astrologer (*nakatika*), Archers (*danugaya*), Kavi (*poet*), Actors or Dancers (*nata* or *nada*) also occur in the inscriptions since 2nd BCE. These inscriptions provide information about trade, corporations, and professions; however, occurrence of scribes/writers, and record keepers is significantly few. In the meantime, mentions of *Bhanaka* or *katikas* are prevalent in early Brahmi inscriptions (*ibid*). A few occurrences of term *Lapana* can be seen in early Brahmi inscriptions, which is identified as scribe or painter by [Paranavitana \(1970\)](#).

Kanapedika

Inscriptions of the same period (3rd century BCE to 1st century CE) record on Officials accountable for document related activities. Two early Brahmi inscriptions in Kadurvava in Kurunegala District occur, calling of record keeper (*kanapedika/kanapetika*). The term *Kanapedika/kanapetika* is identified as an official designation of a person who is “in charge of the chest of the scribes in which the official documents were preserved, he therefore had role of the modern Record Keeper or Archivist” ([Paranavitana, 1970, p.xcv](#)). He further states that “The officer *kanapedika/kanapetika* was thus “The Karanas with whom we thus make our acquaintance in an indirect manner must have executive functions in additions to that of recording official transactions of documents., *pedika* is taken as a derivative sanskrit *petaka* box, basket or chest” ([Paranavitana, 1970, p. xcv](#)). Thus, the position can be interpreted as keeper of the box or chest or in other words person who protects the documents in the box. Accordingly, the word *Kanapedika*, can be interpreted as the keeper of the

box or chest, or in other words, person who protects the documents in the box. Information on officials responsible for safeguarding important documents in temples treasured in caskets emerged in inscriptions of later period.

Fewer appearance of the profession of writers/scribes or record keepers during the early historic period indicates that the profession of writing has not been widespread in this period, as lay people appear to be listening to the sermons of the learned Buddhist reciters (*Bhanakas*). The practice of preaching the doctrine brought down by ear to mouth tradition prevailed for a long time, until a major turn was marked by the beginning of writing on Palm leaves. With the spread of the Buddhism there existed a need for preserving Dhamma in a long-lasting manner. As a result, remarkable increase in literary works could be noted during this time. Writing process appeared to be increasing using both perishable materials and long-lasting mediums, such as palm leaf and stones respectively. In parallel, number of careers related to information preservation also remarkably appear in inscriptions.

Veher-leya and Karand-leya

Two tablet inscriptions, each found in Mihintale ascribed to the times of King Mahinda IV (975-991 CE) consist of 58 lines and deal with the regulations passed by the King on maintenance and administrative activities of a Buddhist monastery of the 10th century CE. These lengthy inscriptions reveal officers appointed at the monastery, including three professionals engaged in information preservation in the temple and their duties and disbursements allocated for them ([Wickramasinghe, et. al.](#)

1912).

Among many officers mentioned in the inscriptions, the officers; *Veher-leya* (clerk/scribe) of the monastery, *karand-leya*, (a registrar/scribe of the caskets), and *Karandu at-samu* (keeper of caskets) were responsible for maintaining a register known as *pas-pot*. *Veher-leya*, the clerk of the monastery appeared to have recorded day to day activities and other important information related to the temple. The clerk was the most common name used for professionals who handled documents in recent history. [Oxford English Dictionary \(1961\)](#) describes the word clerk as derivative of cleric, a word related to clergy, as clergy persons were engaged in clerical activities in the Middle Ages in Europe. This is also corroborated by the involvement of Buddhist monks in literary activities, as revealed in ancient Sri Lankan historical sources. These tablet inscriptions provide information about antecedents of lay IPs engaged in clerical duties in the preservation of information in a Buddhist Monastery of 10th century CE. *Karand-leya* mentioned in these tablet inscriptions, comes to light as a clerk or registrar of the casket. This position is a post similar to *kanapedika* mentioned in Kaduruvava inscriptions. *Kanapedika* was known as keeper of the box, while *Karand-leya* was responsible for writing and managing the documents that are to be secured in the casket. This position can be considered similar to the post of record keeper in the present-day context. The third officer, the keeper of the casket (*Karandu-at-samu*) may be the official who grants permission to open the casket, where both relics and documents written in palm leaves were secured safely ([Wickremasinghe, et al., 1912](#)).

It was the responsibility of these three IPs to record information about expenses of the Buddhist monastery on its renovation activities, expenditure on meals, costs related to revenues, information on other daily expenses, etc. Accordingly, all information related to the monastery shall also be documented and safeguarded in a locked casket. At the end of every year, these documented records are taken out from the casket and compiled together. These records were confirmed and approved at the annual assembly of monks at the end of each year. Employees who trespass the regulations stipulated in the inscriptions were instructed to be fined and dismissed from the service of the monastery. All officials employed in the monastery were paid for their duties. Thus, three IPs mentioned above were also paid five *kiriya* of land as an emolument.

Mahale

With the increasing literary activities, a high occurrence of the title of professionals related to the management of information has appeared. For example, Vavalavava rock inscription of the 4th century CE mentions about two scribes (*lekiye*), namely Naga and Siva (Dias, 1991) while the Ruwanvalisaya slab inscription of queen Kalyanavati (1202-1208 CE), provides details about *liyannavun* (scribes) employed in a monastery. *Attani* pillar inscriptions ascribed to the 8th and 10th CE in the meantime bring forward information about the post of Chief Secretary (*Mahale*). *Attani* pillar inscriptions are generally dealt with grants of immunities made by the King to a religious or public institution or private lands (Ranawella, 1987). Once the “King has declared the grant amid the dignitaries assembled together in the Royal Council, members of Council are instrumental in proclaiming the Council Warranty. They pay a visit to

the particular place and set up an *Attani* Pillar inscription”. *Mahale* or his representative are among other state officials who participated in stipulating these inscriptions. According to the information provided by inscriptions, King Sena II (853-887 CE) and Udaya II (887-898 CE) had three *Mahales* each, and King Kashyapa IV (898-915 CE) had employed twelve *Mahales* during his rule. Visit of Mahale in stipulating the inscription is described in Kirigallava Pillar Inscription of King Udaya I (952-963 CE), “ Whereras it was [so] decreed by His Majesty in Council, we all of us, namely, Mantila–Kiliyem and Gangulhusu Ag-boyim of the family of Mekappar-VadarumVadura, and Kavasilang Gavayim of the family of thee Chief Secretary Araksama Kasba have conjointly and with due inaugural ceremonies granted [following immunities] to the village Itnarugama” (Wickremasinghe, 1928, p.230). Nagama Pillar Inscription of King Kassapa IV (898-914 CE), Madirigiriya *Attani* Pillar-Inscription of Kassapa V (914-923CE), Aluthvava Pillar-inscription of Kassapa IV (914-923 CE), Attani pillar-inscription of Dappula V (940-952CE) at Ataviragollava, and Rambava Slab Inscription of Mahinda IV (956-972 CE) indicate that either Chief Secretary or his representative has participated in establishing each inscription (Wickremasinghe, 1928). The involvement of the Chief Secretary in setting up inscriptions indicates the authority that was vested in him to carry out, implement, and secure royal orders. Activities related to preservation, management and attesting of information, as well as provision of access to information during the period, is evident in these inscriptions. Wickremasinghe, et al., (1912) pointed out that Chief Secretary has held the positions of Chief Conservator, as well as the Chief Archivist. Having held all three prime positions in the Royal Council implies his authority and social status. This

fine example adds a clue to the shared historical origin of Libraries archives, and museums.

Pas-laduvan

Pas-laduvan is another information related career that occurs in several *Attani* pillar inscriptions, such as Timbirivava, Noccipotana, Madirigiriya, Aytigevava, Billavaetc. Wickremasinghe, et al., (1912), identifies *Pasladdan/pasladuvan* as keepers of pas-pot (district records) (Wickremasinghe & Codrington, 1933). Jetavanarama Sanskrit Inscription states that when a person is assigned to supervise renovation activities of a temple, his name and duties were recorded in pas-pot registers (Wickremasinghe, et al., 1912). The term pas-pot registers were also referred by aforementioned two tablet inscriptions of Mahinda IV (956-972 CE). Wickremasinghe, et al., (1912), describes that pas-pot as an earlier form of *lekam-miti* (tenure registers) that were maintained under the patronage of Kings. The tradition of preserving government records by *pasladdan* was carried forward under Portuguese rule and ended with a much more organised Department of Archives of Ceylon in the early 17th century (Khurshid, 1973). Carrying *lekam miti* belonged to the Temple of Tooth Relic annual pageant by *Mohottala*, who leads the procession, implies the significance of the profession.

Muk-hi

In Polonnaruva Council Chamber Inscription and Mada-Ulpota Pillar Inscriptions, which can be assigned to the 10th to 11th century CE, bring to light another Official known as *Muk-hi*, who came to establish an *Attani* Pillar Inscription (Wickremasinghe & Codrington, 1933). *Muk-hi*

is described as an officer whose duty was to note down the verbal orders of the King. The term is identified as the earlier form of *Mukavetti*, officers frequently mentioned in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The word could be a prototype of *Mohotti*, a name used in Sri Lanka today (Paranavitana, 1983). These Officials as mentioned in the Badulla pillar inscription (Udaya IV 946-954 CE) as well as the Ruwanveli stupa slab inscription (Kanttha Tissa (161-179 CE), maintained duplicates in other formats.

Kayastha

Professionals known as *Kayastha* is mentioned in the inscription at Audience Hall in Polonnaruwa. Inscriptions found on the Lion and eight pillars of the building indicate that high officials in the council stayed near the King according to order (Davids,1875). The Commander of Chief, Heir-Apparent, Prime Minister, other Chiefs, members of the Chamber of Commerce, Governors of the district, Sheriffs, Secretaries, and Record Keepers were the members of the council who were attending the meetings at Assembly Hall. *Pothwarun* (record keepers) and *Kayasthas* (secretary) were standing near the first pillar, at the prime position, next to the King. Attending the Assembly just beside the King indicates the significance of their role as well as their hierarchical position in the council. This is the first reference to *Kayastha* in an inscription of Sri Lanka, while it is often mentioned in Indian literature. The first such occurrence of *Kayastha* in India appeared in an inscription dated to 171-72 CE, in Mathura. The inscription provides details of a donation of a Buddha image by a *Kayastha Sramana* (Visvanathan, 2014). The term *Kayastha* is translated as “ that which stay near the body , lay in the role of literate official always

at the side of his master”(Sarkar, 1949). *Kayasthas* are designated as paper managers, copyists and letter writers (O’Hanlon, 2010). *Kayasthas* primarily specialized in vocational-based literacy, such as accounts, writing, and paper management in Indian literature. This specialization eventually created a group of professionals incorporating hierarchies of caste society in India (Visvanathan, 2014). *Kayasthas* were visible until the beginning of the British period in India. In describing the nature of their service, Chatterjee (1998) states that *Kayasthas* were engaged in supporting administration of the regional kingdoms by the provision of their services in fiscal aspects such as tax rates assessments, records of debts, installment payments etc. Although, Assembly Hall inscription of King Nissanka Malla (1186-1196 CE) doesn’t provide much information about the post of *Kayastha* and other record keepers, information revealed from Indian literature implies that they were belonged to a continuous tradition and genre of influential professionals handled literary work, performed as copyists, record keepers, managers, letter writers, keeping records of debts and tax rate assessment etc.

Sanhasi

Several state officials accountable for record keeping, preservation, and attesting appear throughout Sri Lankan history. Inscriptions established in Gampola and Kandyan periods brings to light another silhouette of professionals engaged in information management. They were mentioned as *Sanhasi Sivatta Nayinarun*, *Sanhas Sivatteva Kala Perumal* and *Sannissiwatte Kulaperumal*. Gadaladeni Inscription (1511 CE) of Senasammata Vickramabahu relates “cut and given in obedience to the royal order” by an official known as *Sanhas Sivatta*

Nayinarum (Paranavitana, 1983). The same official appeared in the Aluthnuvara Amnesty record, Vannipola grant and Kobbakaduwa vihara sannasa. Since all these grants were awarded during the reign of Senasammata Vikarama Bahu, it shows that either it is one person or family of a person with the same name who has performed duties under the King. Officials such as *Sanhas Sivatte Kala Perumal* and *Sannisiwatte Kaulapperumal* are appeared as writers and attesters of Galgane Vihare and Kuttangal Vihare grants in 1510 CE (Paranavitana, 1983). Palkubura Copper Plate inscription was written and attested by a professional named *Sanhas Tiruvarangan Nay...* Duties of these officers involved writing down the decrees, maintaining records, keeping copies in different formats, and attestation of documents as ordered by the King in the form of Copperplate charters, Palm Leaf Manuscripts, and inscriptions. Names and families that are still prevailing in Kandy, such as *Sannasi-gedara*, *Sannasiwatte-gedara* appear to be descending from such names.

Social hierarchy

Officials accountable for information management in ancient Sri Lanka held higher positions in the social hierarchy. For example, the Brahmi inscription of King Batika Tissa II (141-165 CE), mentions about a donation made by a scribe named Siyata, who was a minister (Paranavitana, 1983). In later periods, Chief secretary (*Mahale*), held the positions of the Chief Conservator (*Araksma*, *Araksamana*) as well as the Chief Archivist (Wickremasinghe, 1928). At the same time, he was entrusted with the Chief-Guardian position of the Bodhi tree as well as in charge of the treasury (Wickremasinghe, 1928). The Chief Secretary was

a member of the Council of the King as well. In addition to above, several other instances provide details about the involvement of Chief Secretary or his representatives in setting up Attani Pillar Inscriptions. Three officers mentioned dominantly in the inscription are identified as Chief Secretary (*Mahale*), Official of Royal Treasury (*kudasla*), and Military Officers (*mekappar*). *Araksamana* is another word that appear often with the name of the Chief Secretary, such as *Mahale Araksamana in Attani pillar inscriptions*. There were supporting officers coming under Chief Secretary's authority such as messenger (*dutaka*), and treasury officer (*kudasala*) (Wickremasinghe, 1928). Affirming Wickramasinghe's interpretation, Parnavitana (1983) pointing out Davy (1821) states that in charge of the treasury in Kandyan period was known as *maha aramudale lekam mahatmaya*. This confirms that the responsibility of the treasury was also vested in Chief Secretary (Parnavitana, 1955). Being the in charge of number of prime posts of the ancient society indicates the significant position held by the Chief Secretary in the social hierarchy.

Another instance of hinting social order of secretary and record keepers is portrayed in Nissanka Malla Assembly Hall inscription. Accordingly, a key seat is reserved for secretary and record keepers in the council. By 15th century persons responsible for writing and attesting royal documents were designated a minister (Adikara). Dadigama Slab inscription of Buvanekabahu VI (1344-1354 CE) refers to a Sanhas Tiruvarangana Vikramasinghe Adikara. Based on the reference made in the verse 50 of *Hansa Sandesaya* "*Sanhas liyana niti meti kula Tiruvarangamu*" (which was always the office of the Writer of Sannas). Parnavitana (1955) is of the opinion that "*Tiruvarangamu* seems to have

been the title of a family of which the office of sannas minister was inherited, and that Sannas minister belonged to a family, who had the titles of Vickramasimha and Bandaranayaka, that flourished during the early part of the reign of Parakramabahu VI”.

While *Arthasastra* suggests “scribes did not rank high, functioning essentially as servants to their masters” (Visvanathan, 2014), corroborations prove that scribes in ancient Sri Lanka were holding significant positions in the Royal Court throughout the history. However, it can also be surmised that all scribes might not have had similar social worth but ranked high being members of the Royal Council. Davy (1821) mentions number of *lekam* positions in the Royal Council, including petty officers during the Kandyan period. However, in general, scribes might have held prestigious positions which were of great deal of importance in the society due to specialized skills they held where the literates were few. Due to their knowledge and practical skills in writing, record keeping, copying etc. and long histories of scribal services scribes were noticeable in the society.

Conclusions

The study sheds new light upon the antecedents of IPs in Ancient Sri Lanka which was largely paid scant attention. Inscriptions were used in this study to investigate, and to enrich the understanding of how individuals with the specialized information skills performed as representatives in administrative structures, and social hierarchies in ancient Sri Lanka.

Accordingly, antecedents of IPs titled by various names throughout history were identified. These officials with different titles and positions in diverse forms and responsibilities were mentioned as Scribes, Chief Secretaries, Registrars, Attesters and Record Keepers. *Lapana*, *kanapedika*, *liyannavun*, *lekiye*, *veher-leya*, *Mahale*, *kayastha*, *Muk-hi*, *Mukaveti*, *Sanhas Sivatta Nayinarun* and *Sannissiwatte Kulaperumal*, and *Sanhas Tiruvarangana* are some of the terms used to identify them from time to time.

These professionals having specialized knowledge and skills on handling information held significant posts in the Royal Council such as ministers. Duties of them involved noting down the King's orders, keeping copies of the documents in different formats for future usage, and setting up inscriptions/manuscripts/charters. They were also accountable for recording and publicizing information as well as provision of access to the information. However, a constricted slice of the social worth and standing of the early IPs is revealed by the inscriptions. Other literary sources provided information of IPs that were not recorded in the inscriptions. Mahavamsa refers to a *lekhaka*, (secretary) who maintained a diary for the good deeds of the King Duttagamini (Geiger, 1908). Referring to a profession of *liyanna* (scribe/writer) in 17th century by Knox reveals that the occupation was existed throughout the history (Knox, 2022). As such deeper forthcoming investigations conducted by comparing and contrasting both primary and secondary sources would lead to enrich the understanding of contributions made by IPs in cultural, social and administrative structures of the historical time. Also, future explorations into the house of secretaries responsible for the duty of

drafting legislations, record keeping in institutions such as lekamge and badageba may inform of the role and shape of institutions played in preservation of administrative, trade and socio-economic information in ancient Sri Lanka.

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