

“Maritime Trade and Cultural Exchanges in the Indian Ocean: India and Sri Lanka”

The organisation of East-West trade is well attested following the conquest of Egypt by the Roman emperor Augustus in 30 BCE. The political control of Egypt by Augustus gave rise to a very profitable sea trade utilizing the Red Sea to provide passage to India to acquire luxury goods that had become fashionable within the Empire. Roman ships left Egypt in July to reach the Gulf of Aden and, from there, utilizing the south-west monsoon, sailed to the ports of Barygaza (Broach in Gujarat) or Muziris (in Kerala), on the west coast of India. However, South Indian and Sri Lankan regional maritime network has a long history and goes back to the early historic periods. Interestingly, the discovery of a shipwreck near the southern coast of Sri Lanka, three miles from the ancient port-site of Godavaya, dated to the first century BCE has revolutionised our knowledge of the history of maritime trade in South Asia, particularly between India and Sri Lanka. During this period when the South Indian traders who were playing the intermediary role between Roman traders and Sri Lankans came from Andhra and Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka in search of merchandise. Some donors of the caves, the earliest dwellings of the Buddhist monks, were *nāvikas* (mariners) or *vaṇijha* (traders). The earliest Buddha images and some portable marble reliefs depicting various Buddhist themes found in Sri Lanka were originally executed in Amaravati-Nagarjunakonda and were brought to the island by pious traders or pilgrims as offerings. The focus of the conference will be on the cultural exchanges between India and Sri Lanka resulted from the maritime activities in the Indian Ocean during the early historic period. A particular attention will be given to the role of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara as the protector of mariners and the maritime trade in the Indian Ocean.