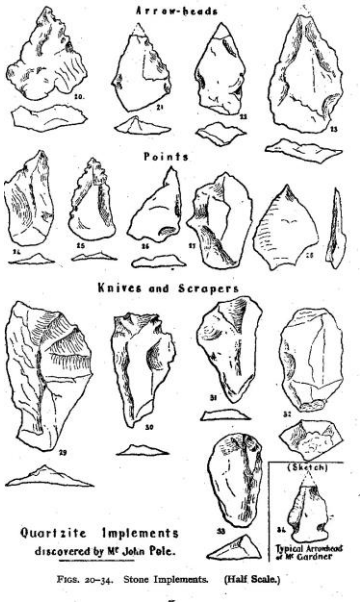
HUNTING AND GATHERING

Protohistoric evidence

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 illustration at left is of Stone tools found by Pole and Gardner (lower right).[v]

There is also some evidence that fire was used which fits with the archaeological evidence that fire was used for cooking well into the Paleolithic and beyond. [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]

Around 10,000 BCE the people of the Balangoda culture began herding and managing wild oats and barely.[viii] However, 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.[ix]

The Wanniya-laeto

Vaddahs, Beda, Bessadae, Vadda, Vedda, Yakkha, are the names by which the people of Sri Lankan who now call themselves the Wanniya-laeto, 'forest dwellers', have been called over the past 1000 years of written records of their lives, records written about them but not by them. When I was a kid in primary school in Sri Lanka I was taught that the Vaddahs, were 'stone-age hunter-gatherers' who lived in the forests of the island rarely having contact with 'civilisation', wild men. Some parts of this characterization remain true.

Both the present day Wanniya-laeto and Sri Lankan paleo-archaeologists claim the Wanniya-laeto as the Indigenous population of Sri Lanka, in the sense of being descendants of the earliest known human settlers of the island, dating the ancestors from at least the Neolithic period and possibly further back to the Mesolithic Balangoda cultures.[x]

Descriptions of their foodways give both a look back to the basic food elements and cooking practices present in Sri Lankan cuisine today.


A Vadda or Wild Man

Robert Knox was the first to describe the Wanniya-laeto in English. Knox sailed with his father and brothers to India on an East India Company charter, during the course of which their ship, the 'Ann' was dismasted on the coast of Sri Lanka. Knox and others were taken prisoner by the king of Kandy, with Knox being held for 20 years. On his return to England he wrote a 'Recollection' his time in Ceylon, including a description of the 'Vaddah'.[xi]

'They kill Deer and fry the Flesh over the fire, and the people of the Countrey come and buy it of them. They never Till any ground for Corn, their Food being only Flesh. They are very expert with their Bows. They have a little Ax, which they stick in by their sides, to cut honey out of hollow Trees. 'It hath been reported to me by many people, that the wilder sort of them, when they want Arrows, will carry their load of Flesh in the night, and hang it up in a Smith's Shop, also a Leaf cut in the form they will have their Arrows made, and hang by it. Which if the Smith do make according to their Pattern they will require, and bring him more Flesh: but if he make them not, they will do him a mischief one time or another by shooting him in the night. If the Smith make the Arrows, he leaves them in the same place where the Veddahs hung the Flesh…They have a peculiar way by themselves of preserving Flesh. They cut a hollow Tree and put honey in it, and then fill it up with flesh and stop it up with clay. Which lyes for a reserve to eat in times of want. It has usually been told me that their way of catching Elephants is, that when the Elephant lyes asleep they strike their ax into the sole of his foot, so laming him he is in their power to take him. But I take this for a fable, because I know the sole of the Elephants foot is so hard, that no ax can pierce it at a blow; and he is so wakeful that they can have no opportunity to do it…'

The phrase 'It hath been reported to me by many people…' applies to more than the Vaddah practice of exchanging meat for arrows. Knox nowhere recounts ever actually meeting a Vaddah, his only close encounter being passing unnoticed (thankfully, he says) by a distant encampment as he was escaping from Kandy. This may also explain his quite fanciful image of a Vadda.

Nonetheless, it captures the essentials of hunting practices of the Wanniya-laeto as they continued to be described by later writers who did have contact with the Wanniya-laeto.[xii] So, I'm going to use it to frame the discussion of Wanniya-laeto hunting and gathering.

Hunting

Knox's larder is a tad thin – just Deer, which would have been any of four species in Sri Lanka - spotted deer (*Cervus axis*), sambhur (*Cervus unicolour*), yellow-striped mouse deer (*Moschiola kathygre*) and the Indian Muntjac (*Muntiacus muntjak*).

Parker, writing in 1909 adds pigs, iguanas, monkeys and fish.[xiii] The iguana is the *thalagoya,* a land monitor, *Varanus bengalensis*.[xiv] Parker quotes another writer, Nevill, as saying that for the Vadda 'of all food the greatest delicacy is considered to be little bits of lean flesh, chopped up, and wrapped in fat of the Iguanas, taken from the entrails apparently. This is broiled'. When I was a kid, we were told that a person could become a great talker if they ate the tongue of an iguana. I failed to try this, but Parker tasted iguana and found it 'rather wanting in flavour, but not in any way unpalatable'.

The monkey preferred by the Wanniya-laeto is the wanderoo, grey langurs. Spittel has a lovely description of a group of Wanniya-laeto he became close to finding wanderoos by beating axe heads against trees to make a booming sound that's 'like rolling boulders or a panthers roar' leading the wanderoo to give cry out in warning and so give themselves away. Red monkeys were also eaten and their skins used for bark/tobacco pouches. The ever adventurous Parker also ate monkey (probably a lemur) and found the flesh 'dark-coloured and somewhat strongly flavoured'. Though he ate it more than once felt that it eating them was 'as it were, the next-door neighbour of palaeolithic man, and practising something allied to cannibalism'

The pig would be the good old *Sus scrofa*, wild boar.

We can also add to the larder pangolin (*Manis crassicaudata*), bandicoot rat (*Bandicota indica*), giant squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*), langur (Semnopithecus priamus) and tortoises.[xv]

As for elephants, Homo erectus was eating mammoth as early as 1.8 million years ago, and that elephant meat has been part of the diet of many cultures and still is into the 21st century. The demand for 'bush meat' is considered one of the primary causes in increased poaching in Central Africa. Despite Knox's skepticism, the underside of an elephant's foot is actually quite soft, so crippling it would be a pretty smart way of disabling the animal enough to make a meal of it.

The flesh of bigger beasts was often butchered at the kill site, making it easier to carry. Spittel describes a hunting group eating the offal raw while doing this. If the hunting happened while travelling between waterholes some would be roasted and eaten soon after the kill, some would be smoked and carried, and Knox reports that some was preserved by being buried within honey.[xvi]Spittel notes that whenever a large animal, such as a deer or pig, was killed, the lokko or chief of a clan, 'impartially apportioned it to the families according to their number'.

Fish aren't mentioned by Knox, but they form a significant part of the diet. Parker, Spittel and the Seligmann's all describe forest dwelling Wanniya-laeto stupefying fish by throwing crushed plant and

tree parts into pools – timbiri, kukurumahan, kalavael, damba, mahapata and puselpata. Coastal Wanniya-laeto alone catch fish by netting or spearing.

Birds also don't figure in Knox, but the Seligmann's reported an interview with a Kandyan Sinhalese who has spent many years as a child hunting with a group of Veddas during the course of which the Kandyan said that birds, including peacock and jungle fowl were hunted.

The Seligmann's described religious rites associated with hunting.

'…the word *yaka* (feminine *yakini*) is used to denote the spirits of the dead, and the Vedda religion is essentially a cult of the dead [some of whom] may be regarded as legendary heroes. The most important of these is Kande Yaka, the yaka of Kande Wanniya, a celebrated hunter who lived many generations ago and whose assistance is invoked for good hunting. Kande Yaka especially helps in the tracking of sambar and spotted deer…When a deer has been killed the head is set aside, and with rice and coconut milk (when procurable) dedicated to Kanda Yaka, after which it is eaten with rice.'[xvii]

Other writers have noted tabus against eating elephant, buffalo, porcupine, jungle fowl and snails, but this is generally ascribed to the influence of Hindu and Buddhist foodways and unlikely to have been of long-standing.[xviii]

Gathering

Honey gathering is noted consistently as a significant activity of the forest dwelling Wanniya-laeto, being used as food (Spittel describes it as 'the staff of the Vedda's existence'), as a trade item and, according to Knox, something like tribute for local kings. Spittel and Knox identify three species from which the honey is collected - the bambara, ('the aristocrats of the bee world'), the mee massa (which Knox calls ' the right English bees'), and the kanava (which Knox calls 'Connameia, signifying a blind Bee'.[xix]

Spittel also has a lovely little description of the gathering of swiftlet nests, the nests used for bird's nest soup. The birds build their 'dainty little cup-shaped nests, fashioned of saliva and moss' on the roofs of deep caves from which they are dislodged by arrow-heads removed from their shafts, and gathered into sacks formed from tying together the four corners of a piece of cloth. Spittel writes that these nests had more trading value than most of what the Wanniya-laeto brought to the itinerant Moorish traders. He doesn't say, but I imagine that these traders on-sold to Chinese traders in a practice established during the early second millennium when Sri Lanka was at the centre of world trade from West to East

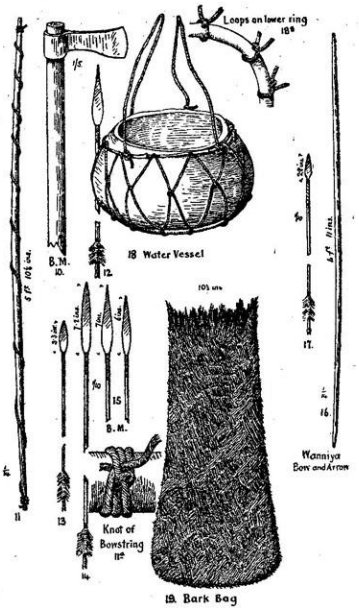
Yams are cited often as a staple in the diet and are likely to be those that also were part of the diet of the Mesolithic peoples collectively known as Balangoda Man as described in that section of this Guide. They are roasted in the coals of the fires before and above which meat is also smoked.

Fruit is also gathered with jak, pineapple and banana being mentioned.

19th and early 20th century observers also describe kurrukan (Eleusine coracana), a wild millet, cycad seeds, fruit pulps and wild rices ground into flour and cooked as roti or rolled into balls called talape.[xx]

Utensils and Weapons

Parker describes utensils used by the various groups of Vaeddas. The 'wilder Vaeddas' use the 'large hollow black shells of the hard fruit of a high tree' or of small pumpkins strung with ropes to make a pot for carrying water and honey. They also make bags from the beaten and sewn together bark of the Riṭi tree, the bags being called Riṭi-malla which are used for carrying millet and other food. The Wanniyas and coastal Vaeddas used gourds for water pots and earthenware pots 'obtained from Sinhalese potters, for cooking and containing water', for 'neither Vaeddas nor Wanniyas are acquainted with the art of making pottery'. The Seligman's also note that the clay pots they saw being used were trade goods. Parker cites Nevill as seeing copper pot used by the Village Vaeddas for cooking and keeping water.



FIGS. 10–19. Weapons and Utensils of Vaeddas.

Hunting weaponry as shown in this illustration by Parker included axes, spears, bows and arrows, sharp sticks. The earliest weapons would have used stone and shells for the head, usually attached with beeswax and rope made of bark or reed. With the arrival in Sri Lanka of the Iron Age Aryan settlers, iron replaced stone, and by the late 19th century rifles were also being used. They are also known to have used the sprung noose and dead fall traps and hunting dogs.[xxi]

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[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 2004

[iii] Deraniyagala 2004

[iv] Achaya 1994

[v] Parker 1909

[vi] Hussein 2012

[vii] Deraniyagala 2004

[viii] Deraniyagala 2004

[ix] Fuller 2005

[x] Deraniyagala 1998, Living Heritage Network 2009

[xi] Knox 1681

[xii] It also corresponds to the description of them by Father Fernaõ de Queyroz, a distinguished Portuguese Jesuit who began his mission term in South Asia at Cochin in 1635. De Queyroz wrote at an even greater distance than Knox; he compiled information from secondary sources and from speaking with Portuguese soldiers and magistrates who had direct experience of Sri Lanka during the years of Portuguese trading presence in the island. Whether Knox was one of his secondary sources, I don't know.

[xiii] Parker 1909

[xiv] Thalagoya image accessed at http://www.flickr.com/photos/chansomraj/3313891518/

[xv] Hussein 2012

[xvi] Preserving meat by putting it in honey sounds fanciful but has a sound basis. Honey has very low water content and so retards the growth of water-preferring bacteria. It also creates a viscous (sticky) barrier between that reduces the chance that whatever is covered by it will spoil with air or water based bacteria. While this might have been something the Wanniya-laeto could have found by experience another benefit of preservation with honey has had to wait for recent studies in, believe it or not, marinating burger meat to

come to light. It turns out that marinating raw meat in honey for around 4 hours significantly decreases the rate of lipid oxidation preventing bacterial growth in the raw product and increasing the shell life of precooked meat and chicken. Tsoumbakos 2008

[xvii] Seligmann & Seligmann 1911

[xviii] Hussein 2012

[xix] For Spittel's excellent description of the precarious job of collecting honey, see the article on honey in this Guide.

[xx] Hussein 2012

[xxi] Hussein 2012