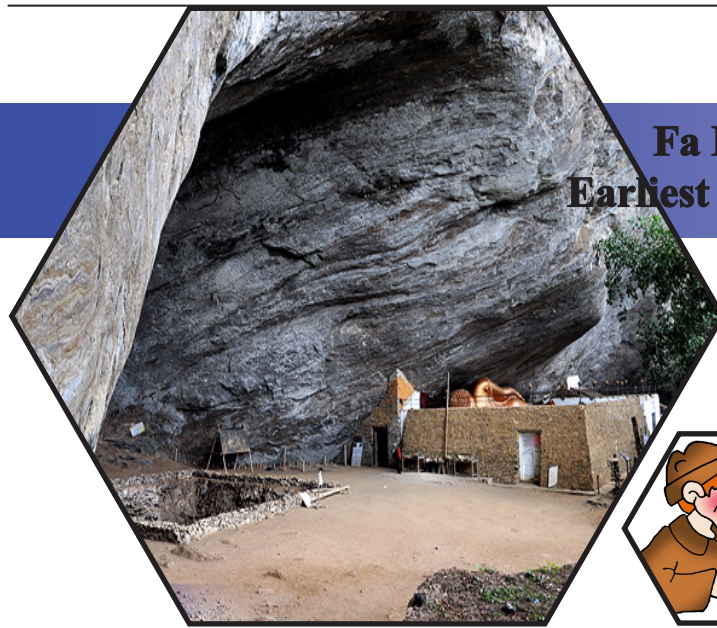


Fa Hien - Lena Prehistoric Cave, Earliest Modern Humans from South Asia

Dr H. Nimal Perera

Shelter B, a smaller subsidiary shelter located approximately 20 m east of the main chamber (shelter A), proved to be far more productive. Excavations conducted in 1986, and subsequently in 2009-2012, have yielded a secure sequence of human habitation deposits dating to c. 38,000 to 5400 years ago (late Pleistocene to mid-Holocene). The lowermost deposit dated to c. 38,000 years ago produced a set of fragmentary human remains which are considered to be those of anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) by the eminent American bio-anthropologist Prof. Kenneth Kennedy and his team at Cornell University, the earliest known from the whole of South Asia. They were succeeded by a series of skeletal remains, the most recent being from a layer dated to c. 5400 years ago.



Fa Hien-lena, one of the largest habitable rockshelters in Sri Lanka, is situated in south-western Sri Lanka, at Yatagampitiya off the small township of Bulathsinhala near Horana in the Kalutara District, approximately 75 km southeast of Colombo (80 12' 55" E by 6 38' 55" N). Popular belief has it that the famed Chinese Buddhist monk Fa Hien sojourned there while on his pilgrimage to Adam's Peak.

The site lies in the foothills abutting the coastal plain and is a complex of interconnected rockshelters developed in a coarse crystalline gneiss cliff. The entrance faces east and is easily accessed along a short, fairly steep, path. From the entrance, one is afforded a view of Sri Lanka's central hills through the gem-bearing strike valleys of Ratnapura. The mouth has a width of c. 30 m and an average height above the cave floor of 20 m. The interior extends for c. 10 m into the cliff. Secondary lowland forest adjoins the cave complex, the primary rain forest having been cleared for

plantations at the turn of this century.

Archaeologically, the site was initially recorded in 1968 by the then Assistant Commissioner of Archaeology of the Department of Archaeology of the Government of Sri Lanka, Dr S.U. Deraniyagala, when it was being used as a Buddhist cave temple. Subsequently it was reserved for future archaeological investigations once adequate resources become available. This did not materialize until 1986 when W.H. Wijeyapala, then Assistant Commissioner in charge of excavations, commenced excavations as part of stage 5 of Deraniyagala's prehistoric research design titled 'The systemic interaction of man and environment in prehistoric Sri Lanka', in which a series of rockshelter excavations were conducted. Shelter A, the larger of the two at the site, was first excavated to a depth of over 6 m. It yielded a consistent mass of what appears to be roof-fall flakes or decaying bed-rock throughout the profile, without any indubitable trace of early human habitations.

Fa Hien - Lena Prehistoric Cave, Earliest Modern Humans from South Asia

Some of the latter specimens had been coated with red ochre prior to interment.

The excavations revealed strong evidence of the technology employed by prehistoric man at Fa Hien shelter. The great majority of the artifacts are made of quartz, with a much smaller proportion made of organic materials such as bone, antler and shell. Compared to other rockshelters in Sri Lanka, the stone artifact component was found to be meager, the reason for which is unknown. They are overwhelmingly dominated by waste products from the manufacture of finished tools, often comprising small quartz flakes of less than 2 cm in length. Noteworthy among the other lithic finds are grindstones smeared with red ochre and hammer-stones. As with stone artifacts, bone and antler tools were present from the lowermost layers upwards. They comprised predominantly single- and double-ended bone and antler points, commonly with abraded or polished ends. They are small, and remarkable for their high degree of workmanship, notably a fine serration along the edge of one.



A large assemblage of faunal remains was found in the excavations, including molluscs, from the initial phase of habitation up to the final phase. They are well preserved and shed important light on the environments and subsistence patterns of hunters and gatherers in equatorial South Asia between c. 38,000 and 5400 years ago. Fa Hien's prehistoric inhabitants had foraged a broad spectrum of plant and animal resources derived from their rainforest environment.

It is noteworthy that remains of the miniscule lagoon habitat mollusc *Potamides cingulatus* have been found in the habitation deposits from as early as c. 20,000 years ago. This form occurs by the millions on lagoon flats in the inter-tidal zone. The only mechanism by which they could have reached Fa Hien-lena' is as inclusions in rock-salt which would have been transported from

the lagoons situated in the southeast of the island over 100 km away.

Prehistorians believe that ornaments and exotic items are a form of symbolism associated with anatomically modern humans.



Beads of marine shell and shark vertebrae, shark teeth and a shell pendant from the earliest cultural layers were found in the Fa Hien-lena excavations. These findings indicate personal adornment in Sri Lanka from c. 38,000 years ago onwards. They are among the earliest dated markers of symbolic practices from (apart from Africa) anywhere in the world.

Fa Hien-lena rockshelter is of global importance for understanding the physical and cultural evolution of anatomically modern humans, particularly in the context of South cum Southeast Asia. Its deposits contain a sequence of habitations by equatorial rainforest hunter-gatherers from over 38,000 years ago; and they include their skeletal remains which constitute the earliest known modern humans from South Asia. They also demonstrate evidence of fully modern behaviour in their mortuary practices, stone tool technology and symbolic artifacts such as beads and red ochre.

Dr H. Nimal Perera

Department of Archaeology
0719711438