# Mantai: Port, Settlement and Indian Ocean Crossroads

Archaeological evidence for a long-lived entrepôt on Sri Lanka's north-west coast

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**Direct answer.** Mantai, near Mannar on Sri Lanka's north-west coast, was a dense, moated settlement and major port whose occupation developed over many centuries. A 10-metre-deep trench excavated in 2009–2010 identified 11 stratigraphic periods and produced a radiocarbon-supported sequence. Its finds include mostly Sri Lankan ceramics alongside imports from India, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and China; a large bead assemblage; and botanical remains including rice, pepper and clove. The evidence supports Mantai's role as a place of residence, craft, consumption, storage and exchange rather than a simple anchorage. Its networks changed over time, and imported objects show circulation rather than the permanent presence of any one foreign community. Historical names and texts enrich the reconstruction only when tied carefully to archaeological phases.

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## 1 Site and research problem

Mantai's position near Mannar connected coastal routes and inland Sri Lanka. Its moated mound preserves an urban settlement whose households, crafts and food systems must be studied alongside maritime exchange.

## 2 Excavation and sampling

Campaigns since the nineteenth century vary greatly in documentation. The 2009–10 three-by-three-metre trench reached about ten metres, recording 65 contexts and 11 periods with sieving, flotation and radiocarbon dating. It gives depth rather than complete spatial coverage.

## 3 Chronological reasoning

Radiocarbon, stratigraphy and diagnostic ceramics establish a long first-millennium sequence. Sample material, calibration and residuality affect dates. Political events should be tested against deposits rather than used as automatic archaeological boundaries.

## 4 Ceramic evidence

The renewed assemblage contains 11,418 sherds and 123 wares: 77.7 percent classified as Sri Lankan, 20.9 percent imported and the remainder uncertain. Indian, Middle Eastern and Chinese classes appear in different phases. Counts do not directly measure value or cargo volume.

## 5 Beads and craft

A 1,580-bead assemblage documents consumption, circulation and probable craft activity. Provenance assignments require compositional study and comparison; finished objects must be distinguished from production waste.

## 6 Archaeobotanical evidence

Flotation made rice, pepper and clove visible. These remains connect everyday subsistence with long-distance commodity movement. Individual specimens establish presence in a context but not route, merchant identity or commercial scale.

## 7 Entrepôt model

Mantai redistributed goods among local, regional and oceanic circuits while supporting a resident population. Local ceramics and foods numerically dominate. The port's role changed with monsoon navigation, political power, demand and harbour conditions.

## 8 Texts, identities and historical events

Place-name correlations and narratives are hypotheses requiring chronological control. Imported goods cannot independently prove foreign colonies or ethnic ownership. Historical disruption may transform networks without causing immediate abandonment.

## 9 Future research

Spatial excavation, palaeochannel reconstruction, compositional analysis, isotope work, open catalogues and integrated botanical and faunal study can connect the mound, harbour and hinterland while preserving uncertainty.

## 10 Evidence assessment

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|---|---|
| Strong | Mantai was a substantial, long-lived settlement engaged in Indian Ocean exchange. |
| Strong | Stratified ceramics, beads and botanical remains document connections with South Asia and more distant regions. |
| Strong | Locally produced ceramics formed the majority of the renewed excavation assemblage. |
| Probable | Mantai functioned as an entrepôt redistributing goods between ocean routes and Sri Lanka's interior. |
| Probable | Craft production and service activity formed important parts of the settlement economy. |
| Contested | Exact starting and ending dates, the scale of particular trade phases and correlations between archaeological Mantai and every textual reference. |
| Unsupported | The claim that imported objects alone identify the ethnicity, permanent residence or political ownership of the port. |

## 11 Conclusion

Mantai is best understood as a living port city whose local households and regional supply systems enabled long-distance exchange. Its stratigraphy tracks changing connections from nearby South India to the Gulf, Southeast Asia and China. The evidence is strongest when ceramics, beads, food remains, dates and context are combined; it weakens when one exotic object is made to stand for a route, people or empire.

## References

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This paper is an evidence review for public scholarship.

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