

Sri Lanka

Five hundred years before Christ was born, whilst Mediterranean Europe was the domain of the Greeks, and the ancient Britons were still running around in bear skins and woad, Sri Lanka already had a highly advanced civilisation. However, unlike the Greek, and later Roman cities, Sri Lanka's ancient capitals were built primarily of wood and clay, only those monuments built in honour of Buddha being of stone or brick. As a result most traces of these ancient times disappeared into the jungle long ago, and it was only in 1820 that a British civil servant, Ralph Backhaus, mounted an expedition to uncover the history of what was once the well-ordered city of Anuradhapura.

Anuradhapura was the first capital of Sri Lanka and so remained, other than for one brief period, during the reign of 123 kings over a span of 1,400 years. In the early 11th Century the capital moved to Polonnaruwa, where it stood for only two centuries, before falling to invading Chola and Pandya adventurers from Southern India.

From Colombo, following the road to Kandy, Anuradhapura lies some 200km away. Kandy was itself a past capital, though of more recent times as the Kahdian dynasty surfaced only with the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16th Century AD. Along the way one passes through a tropical landscape of jungle, and padi fields with many small villages hugging the road. Each village seems to have its own specialised 'agro-industry', besides the essential rice, with small stalls adorning the way. In one village the stalls piled high with pineapples, in the next with almonds or bananas or onions, or even rattan.

Upon arrival at Anuradhapura a vast lake belies the fact that this ancient city is sited in the dry zone of the country, attesting to the remarkable engineering skills of the local populace all those many years ago. By the time Christ was born large-scale irrigation canals and reservoirs (*wewas*) adorned the plains bringing life sustaining water to the parched land. The reservoirs were controlled by valve *pits* (*bisokotuwa*) invented by the 3rd Century BC - the prototypes of modern sluice systems. One of the largest and most spectacular of these 'tanks' being at Polonnaruwa, built by King Parakramabahu I (1153-1186). The bund measures nearly nine miles long and at times rises forty feet in height; the lake formed measures 5,600 acres.

The only relic of Anuradhapura's past to survive the ravages of time, and to be attended by man throughout its long history, is the Sri Maha Bodhi. Here worship at the ancient bo tree has continued unbroken for twenty-three Centuries. This tree, the oldest historically documented living tree on earth, was brought here as a sapling of that tree under which the Lord Buddha himself gained enlightenment. Adjacent to this temple is a stone forest of 1,600 columns, a remnant of a 12th Century restoration of a nine storey monks' residence, originally built in the 2nd Century BC.

Ancient burial mounds (*dagoba*) are seen at every turn, the oldest of which is the Thuparama Dagoba built in the 3rd Century BC and said to enshrine a Collarbone Relic of the Lord Buddha. One hundred years after being built it was covered in wood as a vatadage, and remnants of the 7th Century stone pillar additions still survive. Originally of water-bubble shape, the bell shape seen today is due to restoration work carried out in 1862.

When Buddha's disciples asked how they should remember him after death, he is said to have folded his garments and inverted his ricebowl on top. Each dagoba comprises of five sections and have at their base three 'steps' representing Buddha's folded garments. The first step being Sanga (religion); the second Darma (prayer); and the third Buddha. Above the steps is a domed structure, symbolising Buddha's inverted rice-bowl, on top of which is the chamber containing the ancient relics. Eight spirals representing the Eight Commandments - correct thoughts and actions for wisdom, correct speech, conduct and livelihood for morality, and correct effort, mindfulness and meditation for mental discipline - reach to the crystal peak symbolic of Nirvana.

In front of the Rock Temple of Isurumuniya, which is built around two huge boulders, is a pool adorned with famous rock carvings of elephants. The most famous carving, however, can be seen in the adjacent museum, being that of 'The Lovers' and said to portray King Dutugemunu's (c. 160 BC) son Saliya and the maiden of lowly birth whom he loved.

Many of the ancient sites have guardstones to the left and right of the entrance and a 'moonstone' to the fore. The guardstones show Vishnu with seven cobra-heads, representing power, flanked by two 'demons' to guard him. He is holding a pot of plenty in the left hand and a coconut flower, for happiness, in the right. Animals adorn the guardstones, elephants for birth or rebirth, the goose or swan for purity, horse for old-age, the lion sickness and the bull death. The most famous moonstone is that at the Abhayagiri Monastery, where one can clearly see the detail.

In Polonnaruwa the ruins attest to their more recent construction. At the Citadel, the inner fortress and administrative centre of the city stand the three-storey ruins of what was originally a seven-storey palace built by King Parakramabahu 1 - the Vejayanta Pasada. Nearby one can see the Council Chamber, the royal bath (Kumara Pokuna) and a Hindu Temple to the God Shriya, built for those of the three hundred wives of the King who worshipped in that religion.

The Buddhist religion is glorified just a short distance away where the remains of twelve buildings stand today. Here, following the fall of Anuradhapura, the most famous Sri Lankan relic the Tooth of Buddha - was housed. (Today this relic can be seen at the temple in Kandy). The circular Vatadage is probably the oldest monument in the area, the four Buddha statues, which face the cardinal points, have their backs to a small pile of bricks - all that remains of the original dagoba. The best preserved building is the Thuparama whose brick walls are seven feet thick, but the true masterpiece of Polonnaruwa is the Gal Vihara, where four 12th Century AD statues of Buddha were hewn by hand out of a single granite wall. The first statue is of the seated Buddha, deep in serene meditation. Then a smaller seated Buddha surrounded by various deities, including Brahma and Vishnu, carved in an artificially created cave. The third statue is of Buddha standing in a rare folded arm pose, whilst the fourth is as Buddha enters Paranirvana.

For a short period of 11 years (484-495 AD) Anuradhapura was supplanted as Capital by the red rock fortress of Sigiriya, which rises six hundred feet from the jungle covered plain. To scale the fortress you first walk through Asia's oldest landscaped gardens before climbing over seven hundred steps (some built of iron in recent years by British engineers) to the peak, on which stood the royal palace. Along the way a

short spiral staircase takes you to a small grotto in which the Sigiriya Maidens - beautiful bare-breasted maidens - are painted on the rock face. Sadly of the five hundred original maidens only eighteen survive today.

Despite the turmoil of more recent times a visit to these ancient cities is well worth the effort. A good staging post is Habarana where accommodation to suit all pockets is available. Habarana is not without history, being the site of the last battle of King Kasyapa, - he who built Sigiriya. Kasyapa originally seized the throne from his father eventually entombing his father alive. His half-brother Mogallan at this time fled to India. Kasyapa came down from his fortress to meet Mogallan, who had returned from India with an army comprising both Sinhalese and Chola troops. As Kasyapa's elephant turned away from a swamp ahead of him, his troops thought he was turning in retreat and broke up in confusion. Defenseless, Kasyapa is said to have drawn his dagger, cut his own throat and returned his dagger to its sheath before falling. On his death Mogallan ascended to the throne and Anuradhapura became the capital once again.

© 1993 Mike McLoughlin & The Beam - Official Publication of The British Association of Singapore