

A Forgotten Past...



The rocky planes at Veherabandigala

Buried deep under and rigged with obscurity amidst the renowned historical sites in the District of Anuradhapura are spaces where we have only begun to scratch the surface of. Scarce is the information but vast are the spaces and this is our small attempt to gather the fragments of the lost past to piece together an arresting story...

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Veherabandigala or Kiralagala

Shading our eyes against the scorching sun rays, we gazed at the narrow pathways and the parched grass that lined them. However, venturing in, we were pleasantly surprised to find some shade under the numerous trees. Soon we were surrounded by countless structures where stone columns and foundations belied the grandeur that must have pervaded the Complex at one time.

Veherabandigala is believed to have been built during the third and fourth

Century, according to the information deciphered in two aged and weatherworn inscriptions at the site. Through the worn-out letters, experts have come to deem that the Complex was most likely built by King Gothakabhaya, also known as Meghavanna Abhaya.

The multitude of structures scattered throughout the Complex are Padhanagharas or Meditation Houses as suggested by the labels pegged at most edifices. It is said that during ancient times the Temple grounds encompassed an area of 85 acres. From which only about 30 acres have been uncovered today while the rest are hidden deep within the thick jungle, covering the periphery of the uncovered area. Some of these Padhanagharas seemed to be larger than others and is believed to have been accommodations of monks. According to historians about 300 such Padhanagharas are located in Veherabandigala.

Following the narrow winding paths, at times stopping to observe scattered remnants - such as olden toilet stones, altars - and unusual patterns that differed from the typical Padhanaghara designs at Veherabandigala, we came across, maybe the most unique structure of all. This building was a Jantaghara, or a room reminiscent of a present day sauna. The walls of this structure were much higher and in the middle were a square hollow that could have served as a place to either light a fire or to keep water. It is said that this building functioned as a space for relaxation for monks long ago, where they came to rejuvenate after applying medicinal herbs.

The water, hued green, shimmered reflecting the shadows of the surrounding trees

An ancient stupa, made of brick and located atop a stone plane with an age old inscription, railed off with a protective fence, was our next stop. Taking in the serene atmosphere that held a spell of enchantment, we exited this space making our way to a pond. The water, hued green, shimmered reflecting the shadows of the surrounding trees. There were four staircases. Two led downwards disappearing into the murky depths while the other two were much shorter. It could be deemed, come rainy season the pond would fill to the brim rendering the longer staircases unnecessary.

Na Vehera

The sun dappled ground with grass softening the hard soil below, presented an

inviting expanse to sit and enjoy the shade of the innumerable trees. The greenery over here seemed to possess a quality of being evergreen despite the harsh rays of the sun. A stupa, built of brick dominated the site while more edifices spread the extent of the temple grounds. Still more were hidden in the shrubby area, behind the stupa.

Gazing at the stupa we lost ourselves in the reverence that the chantings evoked deep within us

A soft chanting of sutras drifted in the breeze catching our attention. Gazing at the stupa we lost ourselves in the reverence that the chantings evoked deep within us. The soft wind stirred the leaves and we spied the origin of this revered worship. A group of people dressed in white, young and old, were sitting facing the stupa. Soon their veneration came to an end and we left Na Vehera with a deep calm ruling our hearts.

Rasnakewa Raja Maha Viharaya

A modern one story building and a large pond met our scrutiny as we stepped into the premises of Rasnakewa Raja Maha Viharaya. Divided into two sections as the upper and lower terrace, the temple is believed to have been built in the time of King Makavana Abaya (254-332AD) for Arahats. To one side of the lower terrace, under a tree, was a great stone slab, which proved to be a flower altar.

A fascinating tale tells of the origination of the name of the temple that at one time had 12 villages conferred. Long ago when people in the villages made sweet meats and other cuisine, they had first offered a portion to the temple before tasting the food. Therefore, the temple was known as the 'Rasa Nokawa' or 'not having tasted', which later had become Rasnakewa.

A small gravel path led towards a flight of stone steps, carved on to a rock surface, that ascended to the upper terrace of the temple. As we climbed the narrow steps, we noticed some of the steps, ten to be exact, had an inscription carved onto the surface. Ending our ascent, we came upon a white stupa that was only 60 years old or so. But a much older stupa is said to be enshrined within this stupa.

The Image House was rendered colourful with paintings decorating the roof of the cave

Our exploration did not stop there, as we proceeded to climb higher, bending double to pass through caves and jumping over small rocks to come to a small Image House, built inside a cave. The Image House was rendered colourful with paintings decorating the roof of the cave. Many Buddha statues encased in a glass case completed this vibrant setting. However, many more caves, about eight and structures are said to be hidden inside the jungle thicket needing a whole days worth of exploration in order to catch a glimpse of the long forgotten past of this temple.

Paying our homage at the Image House, we went outside stopping a moment to look at the surrounding vista. Greenery dotted with small plots of land, that must have been cleared for cultivation, pervaded the area.

With the sun setting low, we had to end our journey. And we climbed down quietly contemplating that we have indeed only managed to scratch the surface of these hidden gems.

