

A Recollection Of A Past

Posted on



Velgam Vehera, a unique temple in the eastern coast of Sri Lanka

Peaceful, that is the first thought that comes into your mind as you step into Velgam Vehera....

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Said to date as far back as the 2nd Century BC, Velgam Vehera holds a significant place in the annals of history. At a glance it may look like any other temple complex, but it is the role that it played to the people in this area that makes it unique.

Velgam Vehera is situated in Kanniya, Trincomalee and can be reached via the A12 (Trincomalee-Anuradhapura Road). Located in close proximity to the Periyakulam Tank, the Hindu devotees in the area referred to the ruins as Nathanara Kovil, whereas the Buddhists referred to the temple as Velgam Vehera. An interesting aspect about Velgam Vehera is that it is said to be the only temple in Sri Lanka with

rock inscriptions written in ancient Tamil.

Tamil inscriptions written during the period of 1022-1057 indicate that the temple was referred to as *Velgam Vera*. An inscription in ancient Sinhala dating back to the reign of Vijayabahu I (1055-1110), refers to the temple as *Velgama*. At the time King Nissankamalla (1187-1196) was the monarch of Sri Lanka, *Velgam Vehera* had become an important place of worship and the King himself had visited the temple. *Velgam Vehera* is said to have been mentioned in the *pritidanaka mandapa* inscription of King Nissankamalla in Polonnaruwa along with the other great sites of worship in the country, thereby signifying the great importance of *Velgam Vehera*.

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During the conquest of the Cholas (992 AD), according to historical chronicles a Chola camp was situated near *Velgam Vehera*. During this period in India revered Buddhist clergy such as Buddhappiya, Kashyapa and Ananda Theros had a large following among the Cholas who were predominantly Tamil. It is said that the Chola ranks that were based at the camp near *Velgam Vehera* included Buddhists who worshipped here and as such developed and maintained the sacred site according to their culture and beliefs. The temple was renamed as *Raja Raja Perumpalli* at that time after the Chola monarch *Rajaraja I*.

In his book 'Glimpses of Ceylon's Past' renowned archaeologist, Prof Senarath Paranavithana describes *Velgam Vehera* as the "Buddhist shrine of the Tamil people". However, with Sri Lanka being a multicultural society, it would be correct to say that the temple has been and still is a place of worship for everyone.

Today what remains of *Velgam Vehera* gives you a glimpse of what it was. From the northern entrance you can see the remains of the entire complex. It must be because the Periyakulam Tank was close by that there was a constant breeze. Large trees surrounded the complex and the dark brownish bricks of the ruins stood out from the green backdrop.

The main image house (*maha pilimagey*) is situated in the centre along the North-South axis with the building balanced on both sides equally. This image house consists of five sections, the sanctum and the four surrounding enclosures. The layout is similar to that of a *kovil*. There are two smaller image rooms as you enter the building and at the furthest end within the sanctum, standing serenely is a

limestone image of Lord Buddha. Displaying the skill at that time, a water tank carved out of stone is located close to the main image house with the drainage system also visible.

The Stupa sits on a platform near the eastern entrance. This entrance is on a higher elevation with a flight of steps leading to the path. A smaller shrine room is located near this entrance where the remains of a Samadhi Buddha statue have been placed.

The main entrance of the temple is said to be the southern entrance. A tank carved out of a single granite rock is located on the outside and another inside.

Devotees from all communities had worshipped at Velgam Vehera, faith knows no boundaries, and why should it?

On the southwestern corner a platform lies on a higher elevation with a rectangular structure in the middle. This is thought to be where the sacred Bo tree was located. The view from here captures the peaceful aura of Velgam Vehera. The remains of the image house where the statue of the reclining Buddha was located is on the western side. The ancient rampart encircles the entire complex thus giving a sense of completion.

I had visited Velgam Vehera ten years ago, what drew me back was the profound serenity of this spiritual site. Devotees from all communities had worshipped at Velgam Vehera, faith knows no boundaries, and why should it?

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