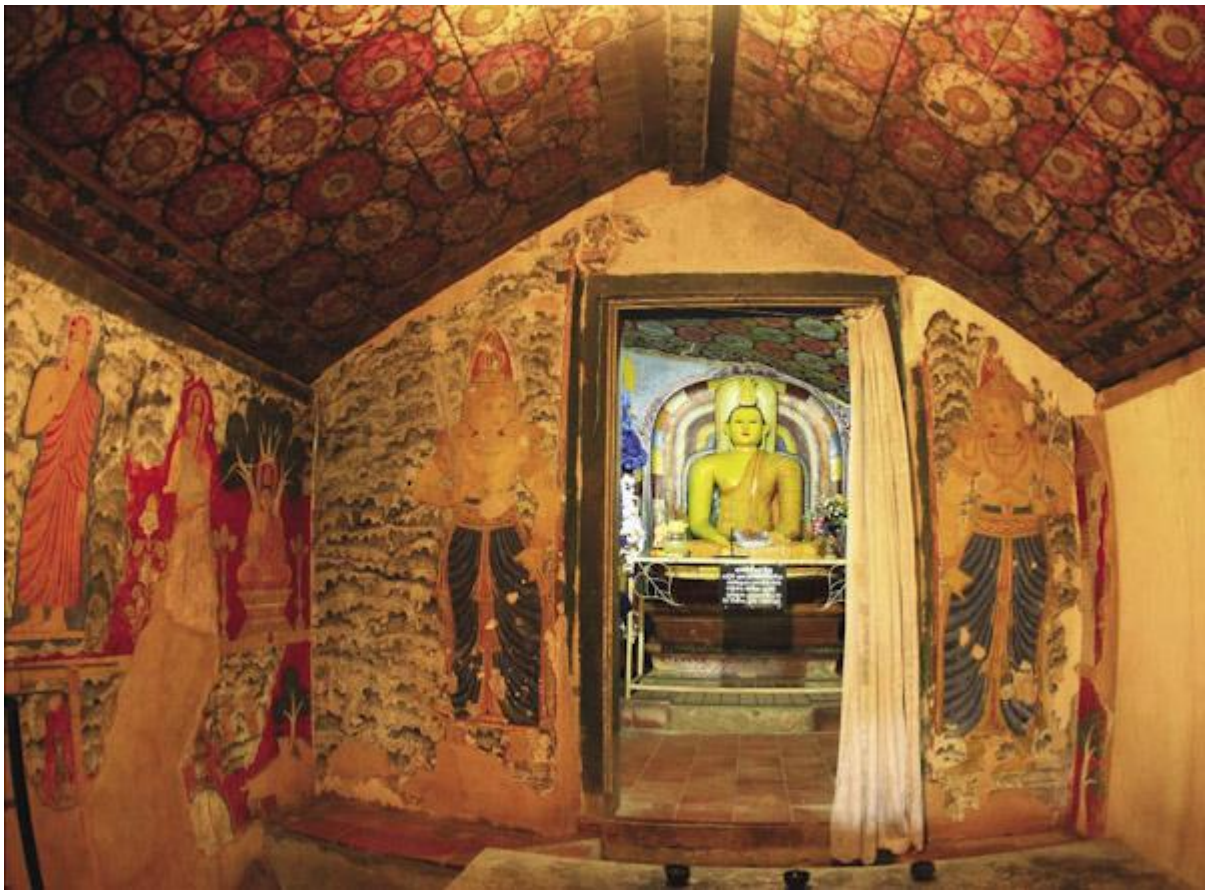
A Sanctuary where Myth And Fact Combine

Posted on



The paintings and the Samadi Buddha statue in the rock temple

Stepping out of the vehicle in the compound of the Asgiriya Purana Raja Maha Viharaya in Minuwangoda, Gampaha, and surveying the leisurely scene of the monks' quarters, canopied by leaves and bathed in sleepy afternoon sunlight, I never expected the temple's peaceful exterior to open up and reveal ancient – even mythical – stories of royalty fleeing foreign invasions, buried treasure, secret tunnels, superstitions and mythological demons.

Words Haseena Razak Photographs Mahesh Prasantha

After meeting with the Chief Priest of the temple and being introduced to my guide for the day, we made our way to the ancient stone steps leading up the hill, on which the temple buildings are laid out on several different levels. A quick scan of the sign at the foot of the steps told me that while King Walagamba may have used this area between 104 and 88 BC as a sanctuary from invading South Indians, it was under the patronage of a Provincial King named Sakala Kala Wallabha – in power during the 15th Century AD – that the temple buildings were constructed.

2600th Sambuddhathva Jayanthi This year marks the 2600th year since the enlightenment of the Buddha with the Sambuddhathva Jayanthi. The attainment of Nirvana and Buddhahood by the Siddhartha Gauthama is recalled by Buddhists all over the world with profound veneration.

As we began climbing the steps, my guide waved his hand over his head to indicate the long passage of time and said that back when King Walagamba came here for shelter, the hill was covered in thick jungle. The rock caves offered a place to live and the unobstructed view of the whole area from the top of the hill presented the perfect sentry point. The Asgiriya Mountain, on which this temple is located, is 513 feet high.

Finally at the top of the long flight of steps, I found a wattle and daub construction, akin to a verandah, with a tiled roof and a huge rock behind it. Upon closer inspection, it became clear that the little verandah led into a room under the rock itself. This cave temple was built by King Sakala Kala Wallabha and is covered with ancient paintings. A hush fell over us as we gazed at the murals depicting images of the Buddha. A few wooden steps led into the tiny image house. The rock-cave roof here is also decorated with lotus flowers. Beneath this canopy is a Samadhi Buddha statue. There is also a painting of God Saman, considered one of the guardian deities of the Island, and a statue of God Vishnu, signifying the influence of Hinduism among Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

Interrupting my fascination with the murals and statues, my guide revealed a tantalising piece of information. A white cobra living in the area is known, on occasion, to enter the image house and coil up in a corner. As images of a cobra – hood extended – resting amidst the statues began to fill my mind, I was told that the locals believe the cobra acts as a guardian of the cave temple.

Shaking off chills brought on by the mental images, I stepped back out into the sunlight. Adjoining the cave temple and also housed within the rock is a devale

dedicated to a local deity. As ancient as the cave temple, the devale has been frequented by residents of the area for centuries. They seek the blessings and protection of the deity and make vows to him.

Behind the cave temple and the devale is a rock with letters and a figure of a horse inscribed on it. This is an ancient sannas gala or ‘Deed of Grant’ authorising the property to the temple.

Heading towards a rock cave in which King Walagamba was believed to have taken shelter, I found myself on a winding footpath that led us to a wide, sheltered chasm in a gigantic rock. On the back wall of the cave, there is a long narrow crevice. According to folklore, this is believed to be the entrance to a secret tunnel leading all the way to Polonnaruwa, the capital of King Walagamba’s kingdom.

According to my guide, although the opening is narrow, a young boy had recently managed to squeeze in and crawl on hands and knees for a short distance before a large space opened up and he was able to walk upright. He had kept lighting matches to see in the dark and he was terrified when in the unpredictable light he had suddenly seen a short, stocky man with long hair and blood-red eyes. The boy had blacked out at that point and only became conscious when he was pulled out of the cave by friends who had noticed his disappearance.

Caught up in my guide’s faith in the boy’s tale, I found myself edging nervously away from the crevice when he added that local people believe there are bahirawayas or mythical demons, protecting treasures buried in this rock.

When it was time to see the rest of the hill, I was more than happy to be able to leave the cave. Scaling more steep steps, a beautiful white chaitya framed within an archway came into view. Just beyond it was a Bodhi tree thought to date back to the time of King Sakala Kala Wallabha. One of the oldest stone inscriptions found in the Gampaha District makes up part of the boundary wall around the Bodhiya.

Scrambling up the last flight of steps (there are 189 steps in all), I reached the peak of Asgiriya Mountain. The breathtaking scenery from this elevation stretches all the way to Colombo. In the early mornings on some days, a glimpse of Adam’s Peak is visible far into the horizon. Standing here, looking out on seemingly the whole world, I wondered how much the view had changed since, centuries ago, a sentry guard stood here, watchful of any developments his King should be notified of. Recalling the enthralling story of this hilltop temple, I wondered how much it

differed from what had really happened. But these are musings that are unlikely to ever be absolutely resolved. And this, I realised, is the allure of the Asgiriya Purana Raja Maha Viharaya: the mystery created by the merging of historical fact with superstition and folklore.

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