

Ancient Bronzes from Polonnaruwa

Maureen Seneviratne





A beautiful bronze of Tara in seated position

Discovered by the then Archaeological Commissioner, H.C.P. Bell in 1907 and 1908, the “Polonnaruwa Bronzes of Sri Lanka are among the most magnificent of their kind of bronzecasting-work in the world. They are displayed in rooms on the ground floor of the Colombo Museum in their glass cases, each exhibit complete with its relevant tag to make its identity clear to the visitor. They make a very impressive collection and few fail to be fascinated by these works of a master-craftsman in Polonnaruwa a thousand years ago.

H.C. P. Bell himself, and other scholars of the time examining these ‘finds’, were inclined to believe the “Bronzes” had been cast in South India, but further

discoveries made in 1960 in Polonnaruwa compelled scholars and experts to revise their views. Bronze casting was an art long known and practised in Sri Lanka and bronze statues and other artefacts from the island were exported to the sub-continent and the eastern islands, even to Thailand and China, long before the 11th century AD. which is the undisputed date of the “Polonnaruwa Bronzes.”

Polonnaruwa or ‘Janathapura’ as it was then called was the seat of a South Indian (Cola) Governor at that time. In AD. 993 the country had been invaded by the powerful Cola ruler, Rajaraja who was extending his empire from Tanjore in S. India to the islands of the Indonesian archipelago and Sri Lanka was of vital strategic importance to him in his campaign. A weak ruler in Anuradhapura (ancient capital of Sri Lanka), an indifferent bureaucracy, a discontented militia and an aggrieved people taxed to the hilt without economic relief, had created a state of anarchy in the island which conditions the Cola emperor was quick to exploit. Cola rule was established all over the island’s north and the king of Lanka taken away a prisoner to S. India. “The hands that built viharas and dagobas and fashioned images of the Buddha were made to build shrines for Siva and Vishnu and to sculpture their images.” (Archaeological Art Series: No. 5 C.E. Godakumbura) But the Sinhalese sculptors of Polonnaruwa...conscientiously or not introduced their ideas and forms to the architecture and sculpture they executed.” (Godakumbura) This is evident in the “Polonnaruwa Bronzes” as well. The unearthing of more “Bronzes”, as well as other statuettes and the discovery of the remains of at least sixteen Siva devales in the ancient city of Polonnaruwa, now give scholars and experts greater opportunities to examine and study the “Bronzes” excavated in the first decade of this century. Today’s evidence confirms that the statues and statuettes were cast in Sri Lanka in the North Central Province itself (then known as the Raja Rata or King’s Province). Among the most compelling of the “Bronzes” displayed in the Colombo Museum are those of Nataraja an incarnation of Siva and Parvati as Sivakamasundari.

The “Nataraja Bronze” images are 55 and 3/4 inches and 5 and 5/8 inches in height respectively. They are among the finest discovered, and unique in many respects. One noteworthy inset is the row of musicians superimposed on the original frieze of pilasters and lions on the front side of the lotus pedestal. A rare feature are the female musicians: a cymbalist and a drummer beating kettledrums which is proof that during the Polonnaruwa Period of Sri Lanka’s history (10th -

12th centuries AD.) women drummers were not unknown. The dwarf in the statue closely resembles the dwarfs at the Vatadage or Circular Relic Chamber in Polonnaruwa and are further proof of the 'local' craftsmen at work on these masterpieces. The smaller "Nataraja" figure is complete in every detail of the concept of Siva as "King of the Dance of the Cosmos". The higher-than-three-foot statues of Parvati, consort of Siva is one of the most beautifully proportionate statues of a goddess ever to be discovered in the medium of bronze-cast statuary. The neck is long in the tradition of Indian beauty down the ages and the breasts large and full but of a natural size. The drapery, it has been claimed, has some resemblance to that of the statue of Parakrama Bahu at Polonnaruwa. It has a marked resemblance to the great five-foot goddess "Tara" Bronze-casting appropriated by Governor Sir Robert Brownrigg and taken away by him to Britain when he left Sri Lanka in figure of Siva as Somaskandamurti in a very well proportioned pose; a 30 1 inch size statue of Visnu, the Preserver, second in the Hindu Triumvirate.

Several small statuettes of the Hindu gods and goddesses and their artefacts are also displayed. Apparently most of these were also found embedded in clay pots and buried in the soil around the Saiva devales and their vicinity in Polonnaruwa. It could have been that when at last the Colas were challenged in 'Janathapura' by the people of Lanka, now ready to retrieve their land from the yoke of the conqueror, the Hindu priests were taken by surprise as the Sinhala armies poured in through the breached gates. In their haste to save the "Bronzes" they must have placed them in pots or buried them in the premises, removing the jewellery and ornaments that decked the statues as was customary and as is still done to images in Hindu temples in India and Sri Lanka. More systematic and scientific excavations undertaken long after Bell's time have revealed many more such "Bronzes" yet to be classified and displayed. And we can only wonder at how many of these superb masterpieces of the medieval cast-bronze-sculptors art in Lanka have been lost forever, stolen or removed to other museums and private collections in other parts of the world.



Image of Siva as Nataraja, Lord of the Cosmic dance. Brahma, the creator in the Hindu. Siva in another form. Siva with two female attendants from the ancient saiva shrines of Polonnaruwa.