In search of Gedige

Posted on
The magnificent Lankathilaka Image House

Traversing through the sun dappled grounds of the ancient city of Polonnaruwa, we let our minds drift though the tides of time to a kingdom that once thrived in abundance and splendour…

Words Krishani Peiris | **Photographs** BT Images

Entering through the gates that separated the ancient city of Polonnaruwa from the main road going towards the new Polonnaruwa town, we felt that we were indeed transported to another world. A world that was caught between a bygone era and the threshold of modernity with its ruins and carpeted roads running back and forth.

As we stepped through the grounds, our pace was hurried and purposeful—we were here in search of ‘gediges’ and nothing but. Gedige is an architectural marvel and a type of building from ancient Sri Lanka. The main feature of the structure, which resembles a vault, is the roof constructed in brick or stone, semi-circular or arched in shape. There are three image houses built according to the gedige architectural style within the old kingdom of Polonnaruwa. They are the Thuparama and Lankathilaka Image Houses and Thivanka Pilimage (image house). It is believed that all three image houses were built by King Parakramabahu (1153-1186) while some believe that the Thuparama may have been a creation of King Vijayabahu (1070-1110).

Thuparama Pilimage

The interior chamber at Thuparama where age old statues of Lord Buddha are placed

The Thuparama Pilimage is one of the best preserved structures from the Polonnaruwa era. It is also the only temple with the gedige type architecture to have survived from the time, with its roof still intact. Made entirely of bricks, which includes the roof, the exterior of the building is filled with murals, sculpted onto the surface. What’s more, the outline of the building has also been sculpted on to the walls, beside the entrance to the image house, and provides a glimpse of how the

structure once was.

A two storey building, visitors are only allowed on the ground floor as the old stairway leading to the upper level, once believed to have housed the tooth relic, is deemed hazardous. From the entry passageway, one can step into the inner chamber where statues of Lord Buddha from a bygone era are placed. The statues, consisting of both standing and seated Buddha images and showing signs of age, are said to be made of marble, moonstone and limestone. In the far end of this small chamber is what seem to be a pile of bricks. Yet if you are to stand to the side of this pile, you will see that it is the remnants of a seated Buddha statue complete with the pedestal at the base.

Legend has it that the eyes of this seated Buddha statue, believed to be 15 feet in height, once held blue sapphires. When the sun rose in the mornings, the sunlight would stream in through a lone window (that can still be seen) located high up on the wall, facing the statue, and would fall on to the eyes. The eyes in turn would reflect the light to the other statues, illuminating them.

Lankathilaka Pilimage

Ruins of Lankathilaka Pilimage

Lankathilaka Pilimage is made entirely of bricks and is magnificent in its structure. It is said that 27 different types and sizes of bricks were utilised in the construction of this image house. The two massive pillars by the entrance rises to a height of 58 feet. And according to chronicles, the image house had been five storeys high and more than 100 feet tall in its original form, before time and other perils reduced it to its current state. As such, the roof of the building has also been destroyed long ago, though historians have identified its architectural style to be that of a gedige.

The outer walls of the Lankathilaka Pilimage is covered with elaborate carvings and sculptures, and experts deem that this is the only place in the Island where one can find the image of a *nagini*, a divine guardian, on a balustrade. As you step inside and look around, you can glimpse remnants that were once part of a grand interior. The Buddha statue, made out of brick, 42 feet in height and still awe inspiring, though in a worn out state, is the centre piece. Another unique feature found within the building, is the staircase that lead to the second floor. Width of one step is about four inches while the height is about one foot. It is designed such that devotees would find it impossible to climb the stairs in the normal way and would

have to turn their back against the wall and ascent sideways; as turning one's back towards a Buddha statue was regarded as a disrespect.

It was clear that devotees still held the image house in great esteem as an altar has been set up in front of the standing Buddha statue where pilgrims had left offerings of flowers and clay lamps.

Thivanka Pilimage

The Buddha statue bent from the right knee, waist and shoulder.
A new
addition is the rafters, which bears striking resemblance to the Madol Kurupuwa found in the Embekke Devalaya

If you are to gaze at the external walls of the image house, you can clearly see the similarities to the Thuparama and Lankathilaka image houses where many sculptures have been moulded onto the surface. Walking through the entrance, a narrow passageway leads to the inner chamber where a statue of Lord Buddha, sculpted on a lotus shaped pedestal.

This statue is unlike any you may encounter in Sri Lanka as it is bent from three places—the right knee, the waist and shoulder. And it is surmised that the image house was named *Thivanka* (three bends) due to this fact. A fascinating tale, surrounds the sculpting of this statue. Lord Buddha after his visit to *Thawuthisa* (heaven where devas reside) to preach dhamma, descended to Earth at Sankassapura in India. In order for Him to descend from the heavens, a special ladder was created from precious gems. Two more ladders were also created, in gold and silver, for the Gods and Maha Brahma respectively. It is said that the statue at Thivanka Pilimage captures the posture of Lord Buddha as He first stepped onto Earth from the final ring of the ladder where the right knee was slightly bent forward while the left waist and shoulder were lowered to some degree. To the right hand side of the wall next to this statue, one could make out the faint etchings of this tale.

Throughout the image house there are countless paintings, mostly faded now, that depict the many lives of the Bodhisathva and it is identified that all images have been painted using only three colours—red, yellow and green. In the passageway there are two doorways, facing each other, one with a taller frame and the other a smaller one. If you are to enter through the door located on the left hand side, you

would traverse between the outer and inner walls of the image house. There are exactly three passages with three turns and you would alight at the door located on the left hand side. This has been built to provide a space to circumambulate (walk all the way around in worship). This practice was carried out by both laymen as well as priests. The doors were made of different proportions so that devotees, who come with an unclear mind, burdened with many troubles, would enter in such a state unaware of their surroundings. However when leaving, they would depart through the smaller doorway, with a clear mind after completing his/her worship, being mindful to bend their heads to avoid hitting the door frame. In the olden days, the upper floor of the image house, which carries a structure similar to this passageway was utilised by priests to carry out a special kind of worship.

Stepping out of the Thivanka Pilimage, we were spellbound and impressed by the ruins that we had seen, which served as a testament to a great civilization that once was. Shaded and surrounded by countless trees, the breeze that rustled by seemed to still whisper the wonders of a long forgotten past, that is being rediscovered.

