Mystery of the Pulligoda Painting: The Fresco That Time Forgot

Posted on
The forgotten fresco of the Pulligoda Cave

Less than five kilometres away from Dimbulagala lies another ancient rose of artistic genius – but one born to blush unseen. Adorning a rocky wall in a shallow cave in the midst of dense jungle foliage and rocky outcrops, this lovely bloom isn't easy to get to. But it's worth the effort – this forgotten cave holds an example of ancient Sinhalese art at its sublime best.

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena

The granite slab on which the Pulligoda fresco is painted is approximately 4.5m x 2m. Originally it would have been a large mural covering the entire rocky wall. But exposure to the wind and rain has seen the major portion of the painting washed away. Today only five mysterious male figures remain, packed into one corner, while a seemingly solitary female figure dangles from the roof of the cave.

Who are these men? And where did they come from? Are they humans or deities or arahants or mere phantoms of an artist's imagined world? And who is the woman at one end of the rock? What brings her to the picture? What joy, what sorrow, what hope, what faith does she hold in her tender heart as she hangs suspended in mid air? Who is the master painter whose brush created this gorgeous work and gave it artistic life, and yet left it to the vagaries of the weather?

> The male figures in the fresco radiate spirituality and serenity

Over the years, the work has tantalised some of the greatest archaeological minds Sri Lanka has ever produced. Much scientific analysis has been undertaken, yet few answers have been found. The painting remains an enigma.

It was the British archaeological commissioner of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), HCP Bell, who first stumbled upon the fresco in 1897 while exploring Dimbulagala. He would

have been bewildered to find five seated men dressed in vivid hues staring down at him from an otherwise insignificant rock face, and his discovery created a buzz among the archaeological elite.

Sri Lankan paintings dating back to the 8th century had survived the ravages of the elements, shielded as they were in the relic chambers of dagobas in Mihintale, Mahiyangana and Gonagolla. There have been other paintings found in Karambagala in the South, Vessagiriya in Anuradhapura and Hindagala in Kandy. But apart from the famous damsels of the rock fortress of Sigiriya, no other early Sinhalese paintings had ever been found outdoors and in such remarkably good condition. True, the majority of the mural has been destroyed – most likely washed away – but the part that has survived is still in good shape.

But what of its antiquity? To which period does it belong? Ananda Coomaraswamy, archaeologist, philosopher, historian and expert on Indian art, was the first to offer an answer. In his considered opinion, the Pulligoda painting belonged to the 8th century AD. Art historian William Smith agreed with Coomaraswamy's dating. But Dr Senarath Paranavithana, Sri Lanka's archaeological commissioner from 1940 to 1956, had his own view, stating that it was more likely to belong to the 12th-century Polonnaruwa period.

According to former archaeological commissioner Raja de Silva, however, both guesses were wide of the mark. His feeling is that the fresco dates back to the 4th century, to the same school of temple paintings as those found at Sigiriya. For while the Pulligoda fresco is older, it bears a strong resemblance to the technique and style deployed at Sigiriya, he says.

The archaeologist is fascinated, in particular, by the way the male figures in the fresco radiate spirituality and serenity while in an apparent state of veneration. What or whom they were venerating, however, is the missing piece of the puzzle. Rubbed out by remorseless nature's brash hand, alas, it will most likely never be known.

So what can be made of the precious fragment that has survived the vandalism of time? Thanks to the discerning archaeological eye of Raja de Silva, we now recognise that the male figures are shown to have reached a state of mental attainment, the red auras behind their heads symbolic of this achievement. Furthermore all of them are seated cross-legged, the traditional pose of meditation. The soles of their feet, like the palms of their hands, are painted red, and they wear

ankle- length pantaloons, some stripy, some plain. Their headdresses vary, distinguishing two of the figures as Brahmins, and the white band of sacred thread across the bare upper body of another marks him out as a sage. Earrings, necklaces, armlets and bracelets are also worn and the asana on which the lotus cushions are placed is ornamented too. One figure, for some reason, is green in complexion.

Many years ago the Department of Archaeology erected a mesh around the cave to prevent acts of vandalism. But determined vandals intent on inflicting irreversible damage to the paintings wouldn't have any problem getting through, observes Ven Bogaswewa Rathana Lankara Thera,a monk from the nearby Pulligoda Temple. He has taken it upon himself to launch a one-man crusade to protect the fresco.

The Ven Rathana Lankara Thera says that trees have grown round the cave for centuries and hidden it from view, protecting it from the Chola invaders who would otherwise have destroyed it during the Polonnaruwa era. His theory as to the origins of the painting goes like this: hundreds of years ago a band of Muslim artists were shipwrecked near Batticaloa; having spotted the rock of Dimbulagala, they decided to explore the area; and inspired by the beauty of the landscape, they left their mark in the cave.

A few hundred yards away from the Pulligoda Temple is the site where the last recorded Sri Lankan arahant, Maliyadeva, used to preach his annual Dhamma sermon, over 2,000 years ago. The Arahant who used to live in the Dimbulagala cave used to preach too, but did so twice each year: one of these sermons took place at Anuradhapura, the other was here in the area known as 'Nava Vilhana'. It is a very holy place indeed.

But this is also elephant country. The chief priest of the Pulligoda Temple gives me directions but warns me that three wild elephants are known to frequent this patch of jungle. I'm eager to visit the spot where the arahant preached, but am well aware of the dangers posed by elephants and make my way through the forest with some trepidation.

I come to a grassy clearing with a villu, or pond, at its edge. On the right hand side of the clearing is a path that leads me up a series of stair-like rocks and onto a sloping rocky plateau. In the distance is the Dimbulagala mountain range, with the distinctive Singhagala, or Lion Rock, outlined against the sky.

This beautiful rocky plateau, strewn with boulders and covered by grass, is called Molahitivelegala, and it’s where Arahant Maliyadeva is said to have preached his annual Dhamma sermon, the Ariya Wansha, in the 1st century BC.

On one side of the plateau is a pool whose edge seems to meet the faraway lakes of the plains below, creating an ‘infinity pool’ effect that is truly a sight to behold. Near the pool is an inscription etched in the Brahmi script: it states that Sundara Devi, the wife of Vijayabahu I, gifted this spot and the surrounding lands to the Maha Sangha Buddhist order.

Elephant dung, perhaps a day old, serves as a reminder of the chief monk’s warning. I take one lastlook at the place where, 2,000 years ago, a congregation would have gathered to hear an arahant deliver his profound discourse on the Buddha’s noble Dhamma, then start my journey back down through the jungle.

We may never get to the bottom of how the Pulligoda painting came to be, or what it means, but it’s fitting that this marvel should have such a beautiful place to call home.

