

Parakramabahu of Polonnaruwa

Posted on

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Polonnaruwa, situated 102km to the east of Anuradhapura, was the second royal city of medieval Sri Lanka. It served as the nation's capital from 1070-1255 AD. Unlike Anuradhapura, which was the capital for 1400 years, Polonnaruwa's era of pre-eminence was considerably shorter. Despite this, Polonnaruwa together with Anuradhapura possess the most impressive monuments of Sri Lanka's civilisation.

Polonnaruwa reached the zenith of its glory in the reign of one of the greatest national heroes of Sri Lanka -Parakramabahu the Great (1153-1186 AD.). During his 33-year reign from the city of Polonnaruwa, he succeeded in inspiring and harnessing the nation's energy to make remarkable strides in the economic, religious, educational and cultural spheres. His patronage of the arts and the activities launched in the fields of architecture and sculpture saw the transformation of Polonnaruwa into a beautiful city " dotted with numerous edifices, secular buildings and parks". The splendour of these architectural undertakings is exemplified in impressive edifices such as the Gal Vihare sculptures, the Lankatilaka, the Thuparama and the Tivanka Image House.

The Gal Vihare (Stone Temple) sculptures, acclaimed as the peak of the artistic brilliance of the Polonnaruwa period, can be regarded as Sri Lanka's most famous rock shrine. The four monolithic statues and the shrine carved out of the living rock are the most splendid of Polonnaruwa's treasures. The first of these, the colossal 13.4 m long recumbent figure of the Buddha, is hewn from the huge boulder of granite. The recumbent Buddha, lying on its side with its head resting on its right hand, depicting the Buddha's moment of entry into Parinibbana, suggests a deep and abiding repose.

The 6.7 m tall erect figure of a man in a cross-armed pose, found nearby, is commonly believed to be that of Ananda, the Buddha's friend and favourite disciple. His restrained grief at the Buddha's passing is skilfully captured in stone in this, the best of the Gal Vihare sculptures.



Lankatilaka Vihara and Kiri Vehera.



The gigantic headless statue of the Buddha at Alahana Pirivena.

The rock shrine found beyond the standing Buddha statue houses an image of the Buddha in a sitting posture. The background of the statue is ornamented with carvings of pagodas and quaint designs. The tranquility of the enlightenment that permeates this image leaves one in no doubt that the sculpture is the work of a master-hand. As one gazes at these colossal statues standing in mute testimony to a glory long passed, it seems inconceivable that they have been exposed to centuries of sun and rain.

The Lankatilaka, or the ‘Jewel of Lanka’, is regarded as Parakramabahu’s most ambitious shrine. It is the most imposing of the Alahana Pirivena (monastery) ruins, with its polygonal pillars standing up to 16.7 m even today. The exterior as well as the interior of the shrine are etched with figures of deities, while a gigantic headless figure of the Buddha is to be seen in the sanctum. The Buddha-Sivan Prasada (House of the Elder), which is the main structure of the Image House, has four decorated stair entrances. The Thuparama, the smallest of the Polonnaruwa gediges, lies in the south-west corner of the “Quadrangle” along with several other structures built by the Polonnaruwa kings. The oblong brick building has massive walls that are corbelled to form a vault termed a gedige. The exterior is richly ornamented with figures of humans and animals, while the inner shrine is seen to contain many images of the Buddha.

The ruins of Parakramabahu’s palace lie within the citadel (the inner fortress of the ancient city) together with the scattered ruins of smaller structures directly to the east of the rest house. The hall on the ground floor measures 31 m by 12. m and its roof is supported by 30 columns. The ruins alone speak of the grandeur of this structure of impressive proportions.

Beyond the royal palace is the Audience Hall, while further away is the Kumara-Pokuna (Prince’s Bathing Pool)-a simple structure with diminishing rectangles.

The Tivanka Pilimage, or the Tivanka Image House, that formed part of the Jetavana monastery, stands at the end of the northern road that leads from the Gal Vihara. Counted as the largest of the brick shrines of Polonnaruwa, it houses an image of the Buddha in the “thrice-curved” pose. The hips and neck are bent in opposite directions – a pose generally associated with sculptures of the female form. The walls of the Image House are decorated with frescoes, many now in faint traces, depicting stories from the Buddha’s past incarnations.

In close proximity to the Potgul Vihare and the Topawewa is the well-known 12th Century colossal statue of an unknown man, generally referred to as the Polonnaruwa Statue. The 3.6 m high, silent, bearded figure has been the subject of controversy down through the ages. It is popularly believed to be that of Parakramabahu holding the yoke of kingship in his hands. Another body of opinion maintains that it is a Buddhist sage holding an ola manuscript or palm-leaf book in his hands. If religious edifices such as the lankatilaka and the Gal Vihare sculptures illustrate the architectural splendour achieved during Parakramabahu’s rule, the Parakrama Samudra, or the Sea of Parakrama, typifies the genius of the Sinhalese in hydraulic engineering. With the twin objectives of storing food and increasing the national coffers, irrigation works were repaired, restored, expanded or constructed. “That king of reservoirs”- the Parakrama Samudra – the largest and the best-known irrigation tank constructed in ancient lanka, is accepted as a gigantic feat of engineering. This vast reservoir was constructed by linking together five irrigation schemes, the largest being the Topawewa and the Dumbutullawewa. The bund, which rises to an average height of 12 m over its entire length of 13.6 km, enclosed 2262 h.a. of water.

It has an estimated irrigable area of 7365 h.a. of paddy land. The Parakrama Samudra that watered the thirsty paddy lands of the Polonnaruwa district in days gone by continues to irrigate its agricultural fields even today. The irrigation schemes undertaken to provide water to a parched land helped convert the dry zone into a land of plenty, with the result that Sri lanka came to be described as “the granary of the East” . One of the most notable moves by Parakramabahu to restore Buddhism to its pristine glory and purity was the healing of the schism between the Mahavihara and the Abhayagiri Vihara.

As the ancient chronicle, the Culavansa, contends, this task proved to be even more formidable than the problems encountered in the political arena. Following the death of King Nissanka Malla in 1207 AD., the rivalry between the various factions within the country and the repeated invasions from South India opened up a dismal

chapter in the history of the Polonnaruwa Kingdom. Less than a century after Parakramabahu's death, the Polonnaruwa Kingdom disintegrated, leading to the drift of the population into the central highlands. As one writer puts it, "Parakramabahu's brilliant revival of the ancient grandeur in retrospect looks like the last bright flare of a dying flame".