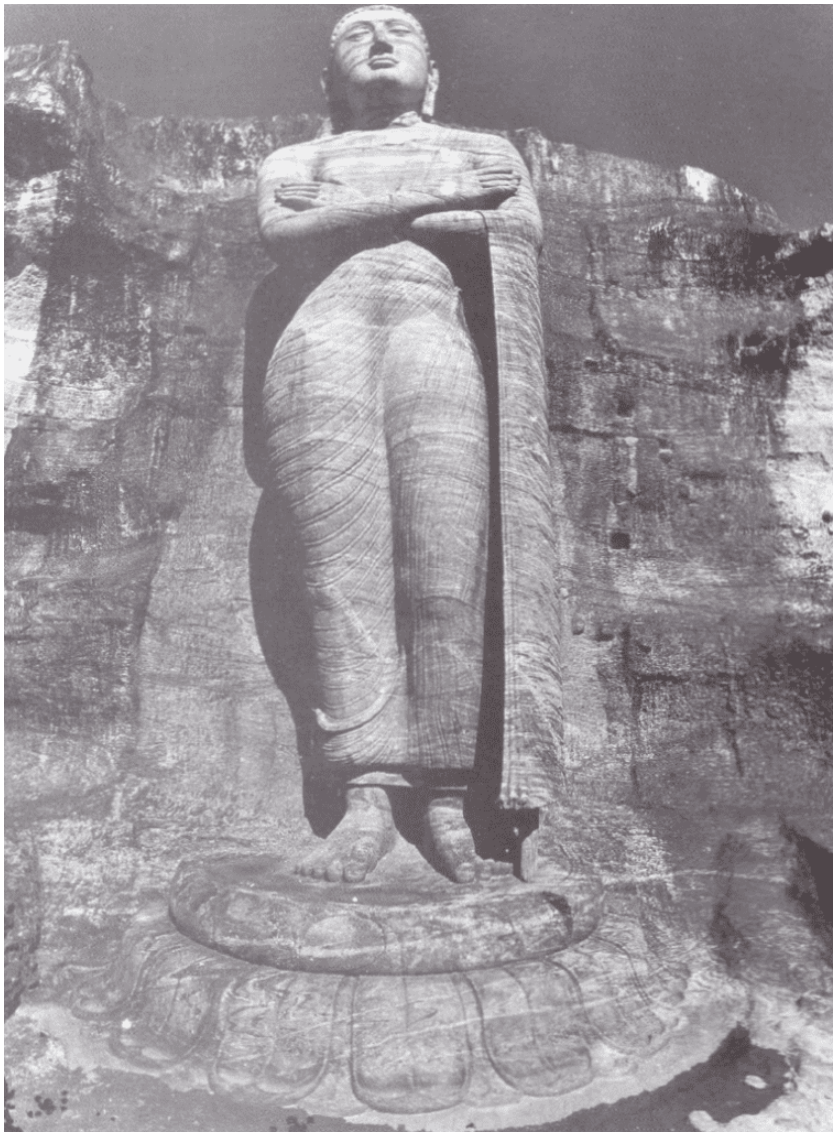
Polonnaruwa Medieval Capital

Posted on

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The blurbs and brochures speak much of the ancient cities of Sri Lanka. A visitor to the island’s North Central Dry Zone which was the seat of the early civilization will be struck by what remains of the ancient cities. Magnificent capitals, which still

show the advances made by Sri Lankans, particularly the Sinhalese in, construction and engineering, city planning, and also social organisation.

If Anuradhapura deservingly gets pride of place being the oldest of the great cities – holding sway for nearly a thousand years, Polonnaruwa is mentioned almost in the same breath. Polonnaruwa came later, it was the medieval capital. The place to which the kings retreated, and finally established themselves. after repeated forays by South Indian plunderers and adventurers. But the comparative youth of Polonnaruwa does not diminish its beauty and grandeur. It's special place in the record of sculpture and art. It's pre-eminence in certain of engineering, and it's great King Parakramabahu the Great, the only one designated as great among the Sinhalese monarchs. This splendid medieval capital was established in the 10th Century A.D. It enjoyed its greatness for just over a century and began its decline in the 12th Century once again with the ravages from invaders from across the Palk Strait, and the disunity of the indigenous ruling clan. But, in that short span of a century and more it achieved such greatness which continues to dazzle today. To most Sri Lankans, Polonnaruwa's niche in history is e re Q'Il of Parakramabahu who even took his armies to Burma, and whose generals fought with success in South India, and his great gift to the country, the Parakrama Samudhra, literally the Sea of Parakrama. An irrigation reservoir of 5,940 acres. The high point of irrigation engineering among the people who had already shown great achievement in the field at Anuradhapura.

The engineers of Polonnaruwa combined three reservoirs to make it one gigantic man-made inland sea, which still gives water to the fields of the country around. It's waters are now augmented by those diverted from the Mahaweli River, in what is the most ambitious schemes of modern irrigation engineering undertaken by present day governments, keeping alive the country's tradition of irrigation. The monuments of Polonnaruwa are mainly scattered around the vast Parakrama Samudhra. Close to the Rest House one could see the Council Chamber of one king, where the pillars have inscribed on them the status and title of the various ministers and chiefs who gathered there. The Royal Citadel enclosed by a large rampart includes the palace of Parakramabahu, easily one of the most imposing buildings of its day, which archaeologists and historians say was a sevenstorey edifice. A fact borne out in good measure by the sheer brick-laid girth of the walls at the base and lower levels which still exist. Nearby is the Royal Bath – the Kumara Pokuna (Princely Bath – to translate directly from the Sinhala) which through an ingenious method of plumbing, drew water from the reservoir nearby and kept it in constant

flow and circulation. Of religious monuments t□□ere is an abundance in Polonnaruwa, and places of such exquisite beauty too. There is the Vatadage, the circular relics house, with its elegance untouched by the ravages of time. Move up stepping on an intricately carved Moonstone, pause at the guard stones beside the steps, and go on to a huge circular platform where seated Buddhas carved in granite still meditate facing the four cardinal points. Many of the carved pillars of the dagaba still stand, with no roof to support, while others which have collapsed in time still retain the fine sculpture of their finials. The nearby Satmahal Prasadaya, was, as its name implies, a seven-storeyed structure of magnificence. Built in a style which appears to combine Siamese architectural trends, it is a square pyramidical tower in seven tiers. Each of the sides of each tier has an arched niche which is the repository of a figure of Buddhist worship.

The Thuparama also at the Vatadage complex, still retains the original vaulted roof showing the type of shelter the shrines of old had. An opening just below the roof level sheds light into the dark inner chamber, with the beam falling where the face of a giant Buddha would have been, now destroyed. The guide will describe vividly how the light reflected from the Buddha image and face would have lit up the chamber with a golden glow. The heights of skill of the medieval painter is best seen at the Tivanka Image House – the largest among the many brick built shrines of Polonnaru wa. The shrine which gets its name from the unusual figure of the standing Buddha, with three gentle curves in the stance (Tivanka – three curves) had almost the entirety of its walls covered with beautiful frescoes displaying stories of Buddhist teaching and lore, the heavens of deities, the netherworld of demons, the many previous incarnations of the Buddha. What is remaining of the paintings give a good clue to the heights reached by the artists of the 11th century, and of the magnificence that would have been in the now roofless shrine. If the paintings draw one’s attention within, the ornamentation outside is of no little interest either.

The entire outer wall of the Tivanka Image House is decorated with stylised depictions of lions and dwarfs, in the most intriguing of poses, some definitely meant to evoke laughter. A good guide will show you a few examples of the bawdy and risque in sculpture in some little outer niches on the wall. But the centrepiece of Polonnaruwa is the Gal Vihara – the Rock Temple – where is found the most impressive of in a place where the skill of the sculptor seen everywhere. Here are found three col 1 Buddha images carved on the face of a huge granite outcrop on the grassy plain, and another in a specially carved out chamber in the rock. The

figure of the recumbent Buddha measures 46 ft and beside it an image of a serene standing Buddha. measuring 23 ft. The two other images which make up the complex of sculpted beauty are those of a seated meditative Buddha – in the Samadhi pose – all making up easily the finest example o he sculptors art in Sri Lanka. It is a shrine of unusual serenity. and exquisite artistry, and in proportion an insight into the broad scope of achievement in the medieval capital of Sri Lanka. Wha remains of brick foundations nearby indicate that this was once a sheltered temple, with each beautiful statue in separate chambers. and there are signs that they would have been covered in plaster too. Here ancient devotees would have come with trays of flowers to place at the feet of the Buddha. as the devotees still do from dawn to dusk. whether they come on pilgrimage, educational excursion or picnic.

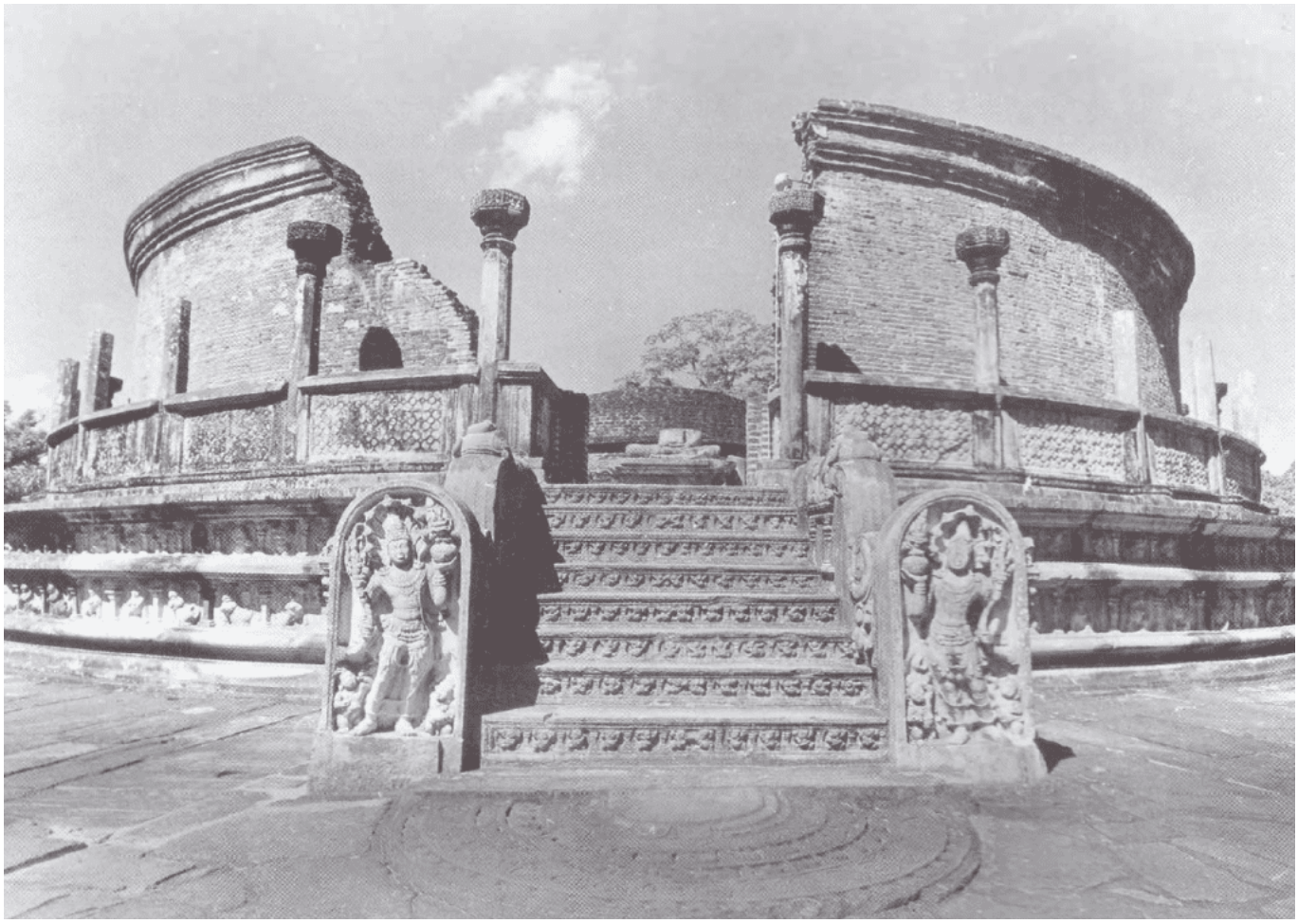
Another unforgettable sculpture at Polonnaruwa is the statue, believed by many to be that of King Parakramabahu the Great, which is situated below the bund of the Parakrama Samudhra. It is an image of great majesty and dignity. Many take it to be of the great king of Polonnaruwa. Others hold it to be that of a sage or philosopher. The statue faces the Potgul Vehera, a medieval temple which housed a library. It is not far from the great irrigation work of Parakramabahu. You can add your own theories to the many that prevail as to who is represented by the statue. That is part of the intrigue of Polonnaruwa. Just as the sinuous lines of the sculpted lotus stems at the Nissanka Latha Mandapaya – an ornamental hall built by a king for the chanting of Buddhist stanzas of blessings, or the other sculpted beauty, the Lotus Bath.

Pause awhile before the huge brickwork temple – the Lankatilleke, recalling to mind some of the huge cathedrals of the West, but done over thousand years before or the Kiri Vehera, a dagaba built by a queen, with a plaster still shedding a soft glow on a full moon night. You could marvel at the size of the foundation on the great Buddhist Monastery near the Lankatilleke, and also see the influences of Hinduism in Sri Lanka’s history and its own tradition of art and sculpture in the two Shiva Devales – Shrines of Shiva, which are a must on the rounds of this medieval capital. Polonnaruwa has so much of interest, it is always good to do some reading about the place, use a map which will help you locate the many archaeological sites. The Insight Guide has good information, as do the literature supplied by the Ceylon Tourist Board. The Tourist Board has licensed Guide Lecturers who can explain the finer points about each of the monuments. Photography at Polonnaruwa, as in all other ancient sites is restricted to those with a permit from the Archaeological

Department. See “Visitor Information” and check with the Tourist Board’s Travel Information Centre. There is good accommodation in Polonnaruwa, which includes the Rest House on the bund of the Parakrama Samudhra, which has the suite once occupied by Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip of England, and several other hotels such as the Amalien Niwas, Royal Lotus, and the Hotel Seruwa. A good excursion from Polonnaruwa is Giritale, and Medirigiriya, which have very good ancient monuments too. There is good accommodation at the Giritale Hotel located above the Giritale Tank.



Statue of a king. believed to be of Parnkramabahu the Great. Photo – Gamini Jayasinghe.



Entrance to the Vatadage at Polonnaruwa with moonstone and guardstones in the foreground.



Statue of the sedent Buddha at the Gal Vihara complex



Details of an *ornamental balustrade at Polonnaruwa. Photo* – Gamini *Jayasmghe*