



Ancient stonemasonry speak of past glory

Though with a name that rings no bells, Kiralagala hides in her heart some very impressive stone beauties from classical Anuradhapura.

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingam



Staircase leading to the monastic building

The Dry Zone is scattered with bleached bones of an ancient civilization. Fallen and standing relics of stone, how exciting they should have been for the pioneering British explorers to stumble upon accidentally. Though today these places have been surveyed, documented, and most of their secrets unearthed, the antiquarian can still wander through

them and commune with the eloquent silence of stone - like a true explorer.

Kiralagala in Horowpathana, surrounded by clumps of yellow sunburnt grass and thick scrub jungle, gets no pilgrims today. It is silent, save for a sudden wind that takes a fancy to howl through the trees. But at its heyday, this was a main spiritual hub and part of the ancient city of Anuradhapura - far enough for seclusion and near enough to maintain some kind of contact. Both were essential requirements for a forest monastery, where monks lived severed from the public world.

The word '*Padhaanagara*', which was used to describe Kiralagala, has the same meaning as '*Aaranya*' or 'forest monastery', connoting secluded glades and dark caves ideal for meditation. However, these monasteries were also large, well-planned and they manifest very clever, skillful architecture. The old name of the Kiralagala monastery was "*Vehera-bendigala*"- 'the rock where the stupa was built'. You imagine a stupa on a high rock- a spiritual beacon illuminating the entire lush landscape.

In the days when the monastery was still a refuge for ascetics on a spiritual journey, the whole complex sprawled over some 60 acres. Today it has dwindled to twelve acres and is inhabited by nothing other than whatever wild creature that calls the fringing jungles 'home'. But the rock and brick left behind are witnesses to past glory. Archaeologists categorise this monastery as a "*Pancha Maha Vihara*", (*pancha* meaning five in Sinhala) which is a very large type of a monastery comprising a giant artificial pond, a large stupa, a Bo-tree shrine, image houses, the Janthagaraya where the monks bathed, the residences where they lived and the paths they used for meditation.

The monks sanctified this place by occupying it for much more than one millennium: according to archaeological evidence, the origins of Kiralagala go back to 4th Century BC, while it was around the 6th Century that the monastery reached its apogee.



Kiralagala, once spreading over 60 acres, has today dwindled to twelve

All around us lurked stone hulks of every shape and size. The rocks, cut out, chiseled with simple patterns, or forming a natural plateau, seemed to link us with the monks who lived and perhaps attained Nirvana here. The rock seats they sat on, and the the clean air on which they meditated, are imbued with serenity, still pervading like the sweetest after-scent. According to Buddhism, immense restfulness and peace is felt in places like these because so many people ended the cycle of rebirth within their perimeters, attaining 'the supreme bliss.'

The biggest surprise is sprung upon you at the end. Your horizon is taken up by a majestic pond... the Banda Pokuna, the second largest pond in Anuradhapura

We walked across grid after grid of exposed foundation: skeletons of buildings that criss-cross upon a good part of the surviving 12 acres. If you enter Kiralagala half-heartedly, your interest will begin to pique as you walk into the heart of the complex; as you see the beautiful marriage of religion and nature. But the biggest surprise is sprung upon you at the end. Suddenly your horizon is taken up by a majestic pond which could have been a product of classical Greece and still be impressive. This is 'Banda Pokuna', the second most largest artificial pond of the whole Anuradhapura kingdom, and its waters are deep though green, going down 28 feet. In length it is 150 feet and in width 75 feet. This is altogether the most impressive part of Kiralagala, made out of granite blocks fitted seamlessly.

Kiralagala is a place that tells us that things don't essentially progress as time advances.

Speaking Stones of Kiralagala

The tables can be turned and the world can regress seriously. For example, such dexterous stone masonry is no longer to be encountered today; and it is doubtful if there is anyone today who could touch nature and impart to it this everlasting peace, as the monks who once lived here had done.

