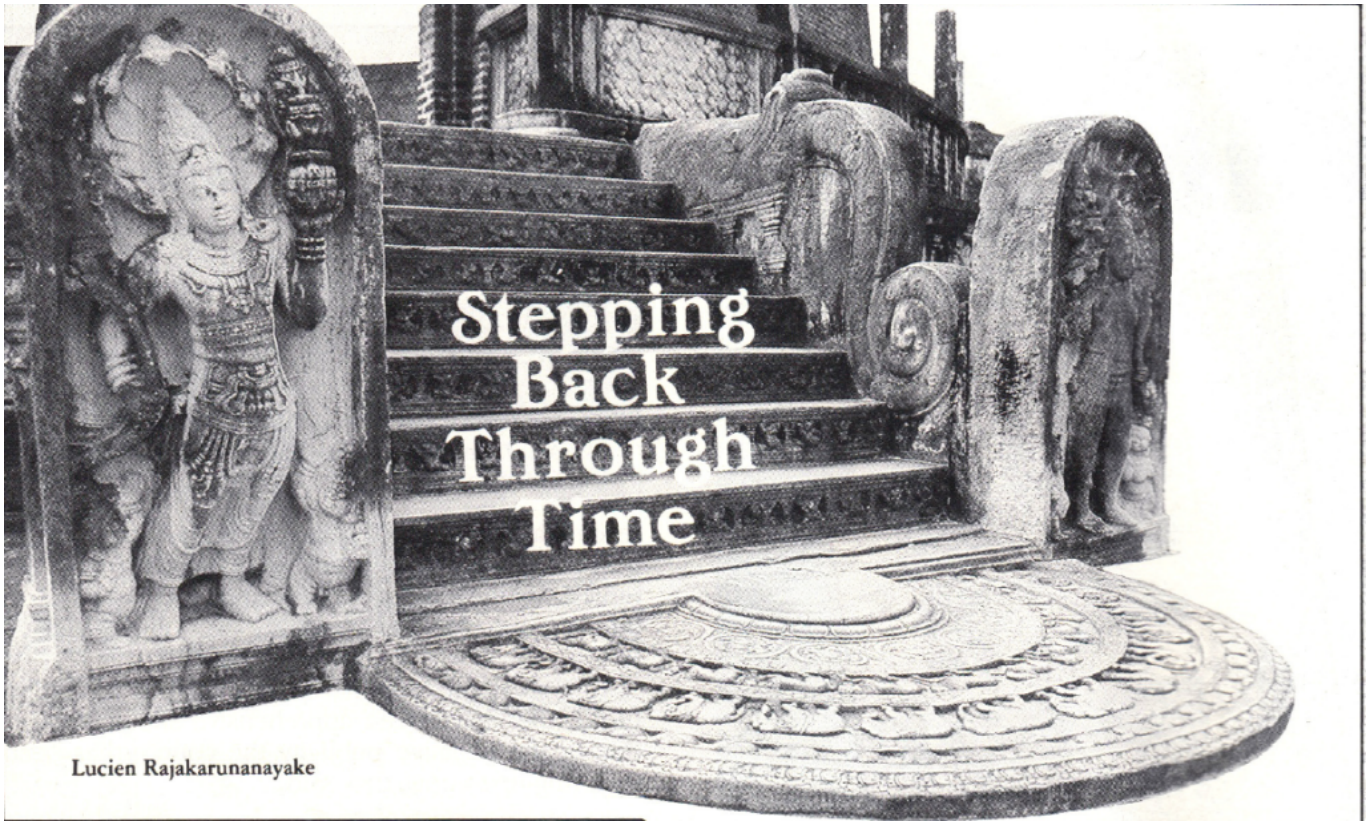
Stepping Back Through Time

Posted on

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Determining the origins of the irrigation works of the ancient cities of Sri Lanka provides a constant challenge both to the imagination and modern expertise. Here in the arid zone of an island, where today's governments have to induce people to settle down, are the remains of a civilization which flourished many centuries before the birth of Christ, and certainly a few centuries before the birth of the Buddha, too. While the researches and discoveries of archaeologists keep pushing back the chronological limits of the beginnings of an advanced agricultural society in Sri Lanka, there is hardly room for disagreement that such a society did exist in the North Central region, as far back as the 5th Century BC.

That is how far back the beginnings of Anuradhapura, the most famous of Sri Lanka's ancient cities, could be traced, with little chance of contradiction.

Anurogramam, or the village of Anura (named after Anuradha, a follower of Vijaya, the acknowledged first king of Sri I.anka who arrived here 2,532 years ago), became the city of Anuradhapura as long ago as 437 B.C. in the reign of Pandukabhaya. He made it his capital and laid the foundation for what was to be a beautiful and large city. In its heyday, when Anuradhapura exchanged ambassadors with Rome and Peking, the city was almost as large, or even larger, than London today.

The ancient Sinhalese, who had brought the rudiments of irrigation when they arrived here from Northern India, soon proved their mastery in harnessing rain and river, and found the leisure to beautify their cities with parks, pleasure gardens, palaces and other magnificent buildings.

It was to that society, already highly advanced in the technology of its age, that Buddhism was introduced in the 3rd Century B.C. From then on, the ancient cities of Sri Lanka became, in the main, the ancient cities of Buddhism. There were times, few and far between, when these cities had dominant Hindu influences; but by and large, during the sweep of the centuries, they became the great monuments of Buddhist culture that they remain today. Panduvasnuwara, Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa, Tissamahararna, Yapahuwa – cities and fortresses, places of beauty, centres of excellence in art, architecture and sculpture-the ancient cities of Sri Lanka take one on a long journey back in time, and yet to the signposts of a vibrant civilization. Magnificent dagabas, comparable in size to the Pyramids of Egypt, vie for attention with gigantic reservoirs, their earthen bunds holding back thousands of acres of water as they did over a thousand years ago. Canals take water many, many miles, from one giant tank to another, and sluice gates are located in places where the calculations of modem engineers have coincided with the work of their counterparts of two thousand years ago.



Samadhi (Seated) Buddha at Polunnaruwa

The pervading influence of Buddhism in an agricultural society made the dagaba and reservoir the symbols of Sri Lanka’s ancient civilization. From the bell-shaped Thuparama, which is believed to enshrine a collar bone of the Buddha and was the first dagaba built in Sri I.anka, the great monuments of Buddhism record a mighty trail of reverent construction. From the Thuparama with its graceful dome and modest proportions built in 245 B.C., the dagabas and other monuments of Anuradhapura increase in size; reverence and grandeur.

What King Devanampiyatissa, the first convert to Buddhism, began the later monarchs continued with greater zeal. While Devanampiyatissa’s crowning achievement was the planting of the Sri Maha Bodhi, the Sacred Bo Tree, in Anuradhapura, others who followed him like Dutugemunu (2nd Century B.C.), Valagambahu (1st Century_B.C.) and Mahasena (3rd Century AD.), to name just three of the greater builders, added to the magnificence of the city with great dagabas such as the Ruvanveliseya, Mirisavetiya, Sat Mahal Prasadaya (a seven-storeyed monastery supported on pillars of which 1,600 are seen in situ tcxiay), the Abhayagiri which at its height of fame in 88 B.C. was 405 ft tall, and the Jetawanarama Dagaba, the bricks of which according to Sir Emerson Tennent would

“form a wall one foot in thickness from London to Edinburgh”.

While the white domes and tall, jewelled pinnacles of Anuradhapura’s dagabas would have been an inspiring sight, it was not only a city of temples. What is still extant makes clear that it was a well planned city, with wide streets, stone bridges spanning the rivers on which heavy carts rolled on and elephants treated with ease, and separate districts for the different craftsmen. It had its hospitals and monasteries which were also the places of education. The remains of royal palaces, pleasure gardens such as the one near the Isurumuniya, great rolling parkland, swimming pools for royalty and members of the Buddhist Order, ornate ponds, and religious and lay sculpture all indicate a city of great beauty.

Providing the much needed water for this city in the dry zone were the reservoirs such as Basavakkulama, Tissawewa and Nuwarawewa, and not far away the huge Kalawewa and Balaluwewa.

If the edifices to religion dominate Anuradhapura, what is seen at Sigiriya (5th Century AD.) is an interregnum of strictly lay construction. The 600 ft rock fortress where the parricide King Kasyapa I built his palace and abode of pleasure has even inspired modern writers such as Arthur C. Clarke into feats of imaginative skill. The construction of a palace atop this huge rocky outcrop would have demanded the skills of a great many engineers and technicians of different disciplines. The moat surrounding Sigiriya and the massive walls around it protect excellently planned and executed gardens complete with gravity-fed fountains, geometrically perfect walks and pathways; and, as one climbs through what is left of the mount of a huge couchant lion, one discovers a palace of magnificent proportions. The Sigiriya maidens, painted on a ledge midway up the rock, lovely as they are, and great works of art, are but a part of this whole complex of beauty and fine taste.

The decline of Anuradhapura after a sway of nearly a thousand years did not destroy the skills of the ancient Sri Lankan builders. Soon there rose Polonnaruwa (8th to 13th Centuries AD.), smaller in size but rivalling the older city in urban design and architecture, unique in sculpture, and even surpassing Anuradhapura in irrigation.

While the same influences of Buddhism and the culture of paddy were what purred the builders of Polonnaruwa, there was also a strong influence of Hinduism here. The Palace of Parakramabahu I, the Council Chamber of Nissanka Malla, the two Hindu temples dedicated to Shiva, the huge Rankot Vihara (which was

Polonnaruwa’s Ruwanveliseya), the Kiri Vehera done at the direction of Queen Lllavati, the Lankatilleke Vihara which resembles a Western cathedral in many ways and stands in contrast to the traditional mould of Buddhist temples, and the Tivanka Image House where are found some of the best examples of Buddhist temple frescoes, all bear testimony to the grandeur of what Polonnaruwa was.



But what most visitors to Polonnaruwa would remember it for is the Gal V ihara, earlier known as the Uttararama or Northern Monastery. At the Gal Vihara Complex, as it is popularly referred to, are seen three rock sculptures of the Buddha, which show the Buddha seated in meditation, standing, and reclining, believed to be at the time of death. These are among the best examples of Buddhist sculpture found in the country and indicate the height of artistic achievement of Polonnaruwa.

Another great place to visit is the Vatadage Complex – the Circular Relic Chamber- and the remains of several other temples that are nearby. The Vatadage itself has

one of the best preserved moonstones and two fine examples of guardstones at its entrance, and some more fine examples of Buddha statues. The columns of the Nissanka Lata Mandapa still resemble in their grace the stems of lotus flowers, and the pillars at the Vatadage are interspersed with erotic sculpture possibly indicative of the Hindu influences of the time.

When one has had one’s fill with the achievements of brick, granite, the easel and the sculptor’s chisel, one could relax on the bund of the Parakrama Samudra – the Sea of Parakramabahu – a veritable inland sea, the largest of the ancient reservoirs of Sri Lanka. Stretching out for miles around, it adds a serenity to a vast plain, dotted in the distance with the spires and pinnacles of the ancient temples.

Cormorants dart in the water or swim or fly in perfect formation. A lone fisherman will cast his net from a little boat, and the sun will set in a red haze over the unending sheet of water, with the distant dagabas in dramatic silhouette.