

Tales From Mathota

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The sacred Bo tree, which provides shade to the compound

The weariness and fatigue of a long drive vanished as we walked into the peaceful realm of Mathota Rajamaha Viharaya, where the age old sacred Bo tree spread its branches to extend its protective shade, cooling the entire compound. The Bo leaves rustled in the afternoon breeze that blew by, soothing our senses. And onwards we went to explore the tales of history that hid beneath this rustic setting.

Words Hansani Bandara | **Photographs** BT Images

Situated in a quaint town in Mannar is the historic Mathota Rajamaha Viharaya, believed to have been a flourishing monastery long time ago. The temple has been named after the ancient port of Mahathiththa, which was also known as the port of Mathota in Mannar.

According to Ven Ambagahawave Sangarakkitha Thero, Chief Incumbent of the temple, the only records of written information on the Mathota temple are contained in the historical texts of *Vihara Asna*, a manuscript, which contains records of all historic temples of the Island, and the *Purana Sinhala Bodhi Wansaya*.

The historical significance of the temple is associated with many events that repainted the cultural fabric of the nation. Mathota is believed to be the place where Arahath Mahinda Thero entered the Island, while in his mission to introduce Buddhism to the country. It is also said to be one of the places where Arahath Sangamiththa Theri rested for a night, during her journey to Anuradhapura from Jaffna to deliver the sapling of the Sacred Bodhi Tree, which is revered today as the Sri Maha Bodhi.

The temple today is on a journey of revival due to the unwavering efforts of Ven Ambagahawave Sangarakkitha Thero. It was Sangarakkitha Thero who came to Mannar in 2009 and took measures to safeguard the temple with the help of authorities.

Artefacts found from the site include lids of *pankendi* (pot-like water containers), a damaged Bodhisathva statue, and the ruins of the foundation of the compound of the Bodhi tree, which are scattered across the premises. Such ruins suggest that the temple structure had been built on a *kanupadam aththiwarama*, where pillars are dug into stone blocks buried on the ground.

A stone inscription belonging to the Tenth Century AD, discovered from the temple grounds reveal of a meritorious act performed by an unnamed king in Salahu in Mannar. It also contains details of 500 Buddha statues that were present at the time. Mentioned further is information about the establishment of a victory pillar. Epigraphic data expresses that this pillar was brought for the benefit of the people of the south and assembled at a place named Kasatota. These stand testament to how the temple and the area have flourished in its prime.

Remnants of a bygone era can still be seen at the temple premises, narrating the stories from history and what may have been. Much of it has succumbed to decay, confirming the impermanent nature of all worldly things, which is a well-known Buddhist philosophy. But what is left remains intact and safeguarded, and with great effort, Ven Sangarakkitha Thero ensures that the heritage of the Mathota temple is preserved for posterity so that they too can see how our ancestors prospered.

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Our Lady Of Lourdes Church



Façade of the church

In close proximity to the temple is 'Our Lady of Lourdes Church'. It is said that this was the place where the statue of Our Lady of Madu was securely kept before it was brought to the current Church of Our Lady of Madu.

The church has also played a significant role in promoting Catholicism in the country, after the arrival of Portuguese in 1505. According to historical records, its origin goes as far back as 1950, when it was established in reverence of Our Lady of Madu. When the Dutch invaded the Island, there were attempts to supplant Roman Catholicism with Protestantism; and as a result many catholic churches were destroyed. Lourdes Church too suffered the same fate, but devotees were able to rescue the statue by hiding it in a tree hole in the jungle, where the current Madu Church is situated. Despite numerous efforts to destroy the church completely, even today, part of the church remains intact, and a grotto has been built in this part to perpetuate the original church of Our Lady of Madu.

