The Short Dagaba: A Look at Little Known

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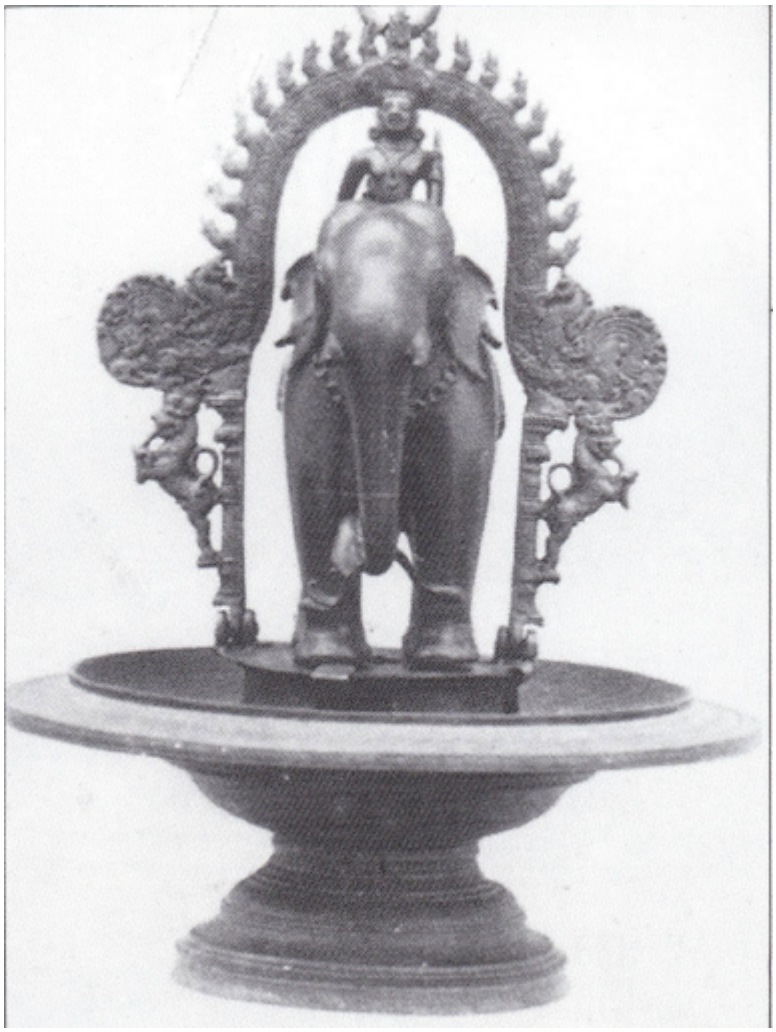


The unique elephant lamp found at the site of the short dagaba.

A hamlet in the mid country, 65km from Colombo, is the source of an unusual treasure trove of relics from eight centuries ago. The name of the hamlet is Dedigama. It is a village amidst verdant hills, with green gardens, vast stretches of paddy fields, coconut groves and a day-long cool climate. Babbling brooks add to the pleasure of the peasants who live there.

Legend has it that King Manabharana and Queen Ratnawalee, fleeing from their enemies in Polonnaruwa, settled in secret in this hamlet. Queen Ratnawalee gave birth to a son who eventually grew up and defeated his enemies. He united Sri Lanka, ruling from Polonnaruwa as King Parakkrama bahu, 1153 to 1186.

Proof that the king was born in Dedigama was unearthed by the renowned Sri Lankan archaeologist, Dr Senarath Paranawithana. The king himself built a dagaba at Dedigama as a tribute to his religion and the nation.

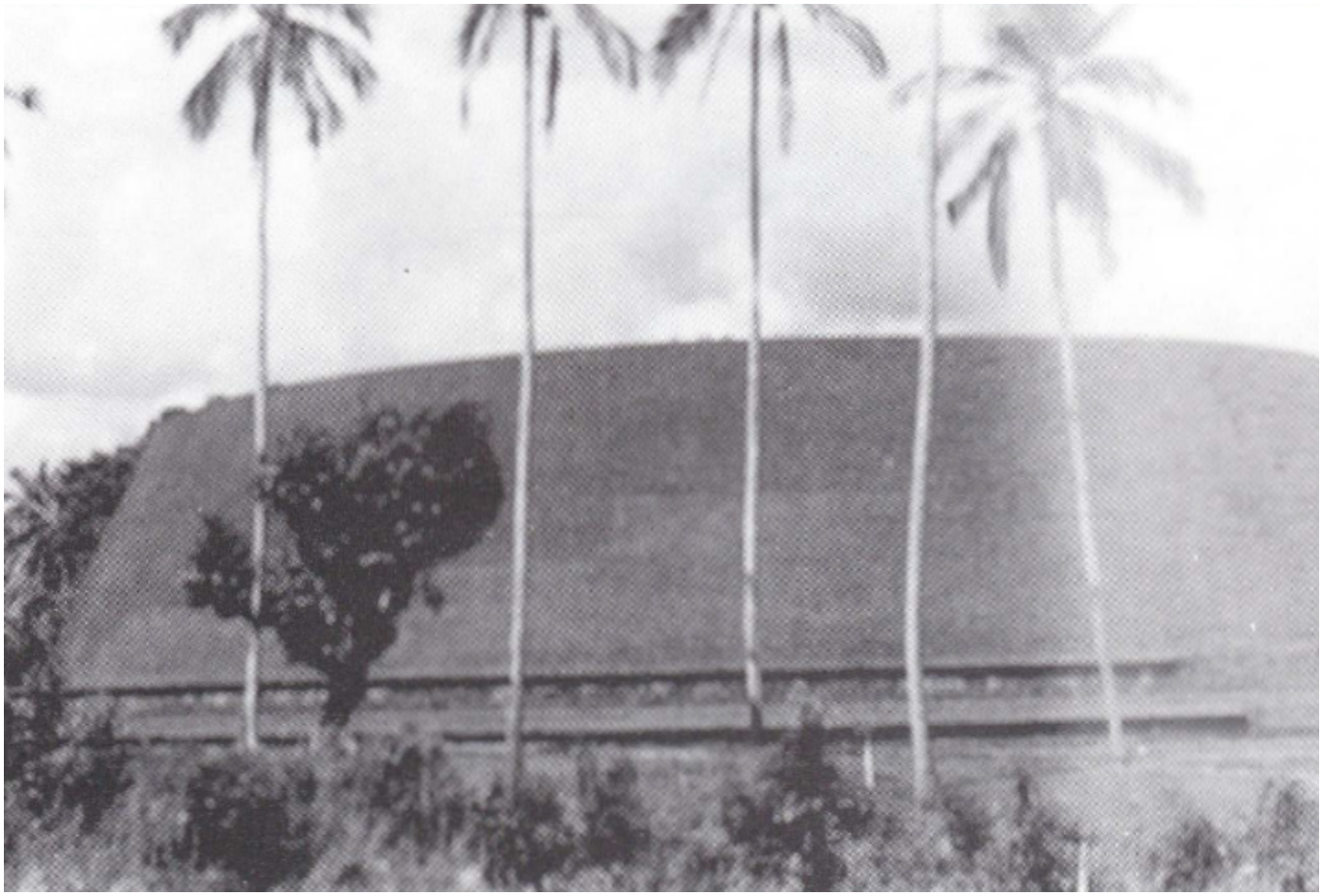
The dagaba or stupa is called the Suthighara Cetiya although it is better known as Kotavehera, or short dagaba, because it looks as though only half its projected hemispherical height has been completed. The height is only 18m while the truncated cone’s diameter is 61 m.

The architecture of the cetiya is similar to that of the Polonnaruwa period, with multi-shaped bricks being used in its construction. Excavations by the archaeological department have unearthed an astonishing array of relics stored in the chambers of the dagaba. Many of them are displayed in a museum at the site and include stone carvings, Buddha images, metal coins, clay vessels, bronze cobras, earthenware lamps, iron tridents, crystal reliquaries, a bronze mirror and gold rings.

There are also clay tobacco pipes, a knife with a blade, stylus for writing medical prescriptions, and even a pair of ivory spectacles with intricate carvings. One of the unique finds excavated at the cetiya (and now housed in the Colombo museum) is an elephant lamp on a suspending chain.

When the lamp is lit, oil oozes from the genital organ of the elephant to renew the wick of the lamp. Oil is stored in the body of the elephant and the flow of oil is controlled by air pressure. The secret behind how this automatic air pressure works is said to have baffled modern scientists. It is thought to be similar to the irrigation works and water control systems of ancient tanks in the North Central district. The technique is evidence of the skills of ancient Lankans in agricultural and technological development.

The reign of King Parakramabahu which lasted 33 years saw Sri Lanka become the granary of the east with surplus food being exported. Dr Paranawithana has confirmed by reading inscriptions found in Polonnaruwa that the king’s reign was a glorious period of our history.



The Suthigara Cetiya (short dagaba) or Kotavehera at Dedigama. 65 km from Colombo.