

Traces of a hidden Kingdom

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The Kotte Musuem is a house that once belonged to E W Perera

In Kotte, buried beneath the deceptive activity of that town's city life is a quiet history that dates back to the 15th Century. A modest tribute to this rich past can easily go unnoticed. But, if you happen to wander into the Kotte museum, you might find yourself attuned to the region's glory days, and even find traces of a kingdom that still lingers in the shadows of busy urban life.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Mahesh Bandara

The Kotte museum along the Borella-Pita Kotte Road is easy enough to find. You might even wonder how you ever overlooked it. The museum is a house or the '*ihala wala*wa' that once belonged to politician and lawyer E W Perera, who was dubbed as the 'Lion of Kotte' for his fortitude during World War I. The museum is thus named E W Perera Memorial Kotte Archaeological Museum and opened its doors to the public in 1992.

That there are many little artefacts, ceramic ware, flags, trinkets and clothes, showcased across there in five rooms is no surprise, and in fact simply scratches the surface of what lies behind Kotte's façade. Kotte was established as a kingdom of Sri Lanka that flourished for over 200 years.

While many of the artefacts have been recovered from various sites the museum also lists several archaeological ruins of Kotte that can be visited today. Of interest is the Kotte Flag which bears a symbolic lion similar to that of the national flag, although bearing a whip instead of a sword. Towards the interior rooms of the museum there are other regional flags of significance that hint at the culture and society of the community that inhabited the regions.

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At the entrance of the museum is a map depicting the old kingdom complete with its fortifications of which there remain only sparse sections today. The fort was believed to have been built to protect the kingdom from invasions and it evolved from a citadel to a capital city following the abandonment of the Gampola Kingdom. Incidentally the region earned its name Kotte from the Sinhala word '*kotuwa*' that stands for fortress. Kotte was eventually established as a kingdom with the official anointment of King Parakramabahu VI.

Together with the many trinkets on display—such as bead necklaces, a silver hair pin, sculptured bangles of both plastic and silver, and a metal arm bracelet—there are other unconventional antiques as well. Among these are native clothing such as *Pata Kabaya* and a '*Somana*' cloth, as well as a floral print, a silver wine glass, and entire sets of attire costumes of colonial influence. These costumes of colonial influence are the lace edged, long sleeved jackets and bodices worn by women. There is a series of swords of various sizes, and ammunition, on display with little or no information beyond details of its site of discovery. Among these are a Sinhalese *Kastane* sword featuring an ivory lion hilt.

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Other interesting exhibits include a coin collection. Coin moulds recovered from Alakeshwara—one of the archaeological sites in the vicinity —and a variety of coins that were once in use have also been salvaged. Primarily there are three varieties, *Thamba Massa* or copper coins, *Silver Agatu Massa* and *Panama*. *Agatu Massa* was fashioned out of four inch pieces of long silver wire polished to final form as an elongated and twisted shape.

Among other antiques of archaeological interest is a collection of pottery recovered from the *Dalada Medura* site of Kotte. All of these displays piece together clues and hints that convey an image and point to a kingdom that once ruled the entire island.

