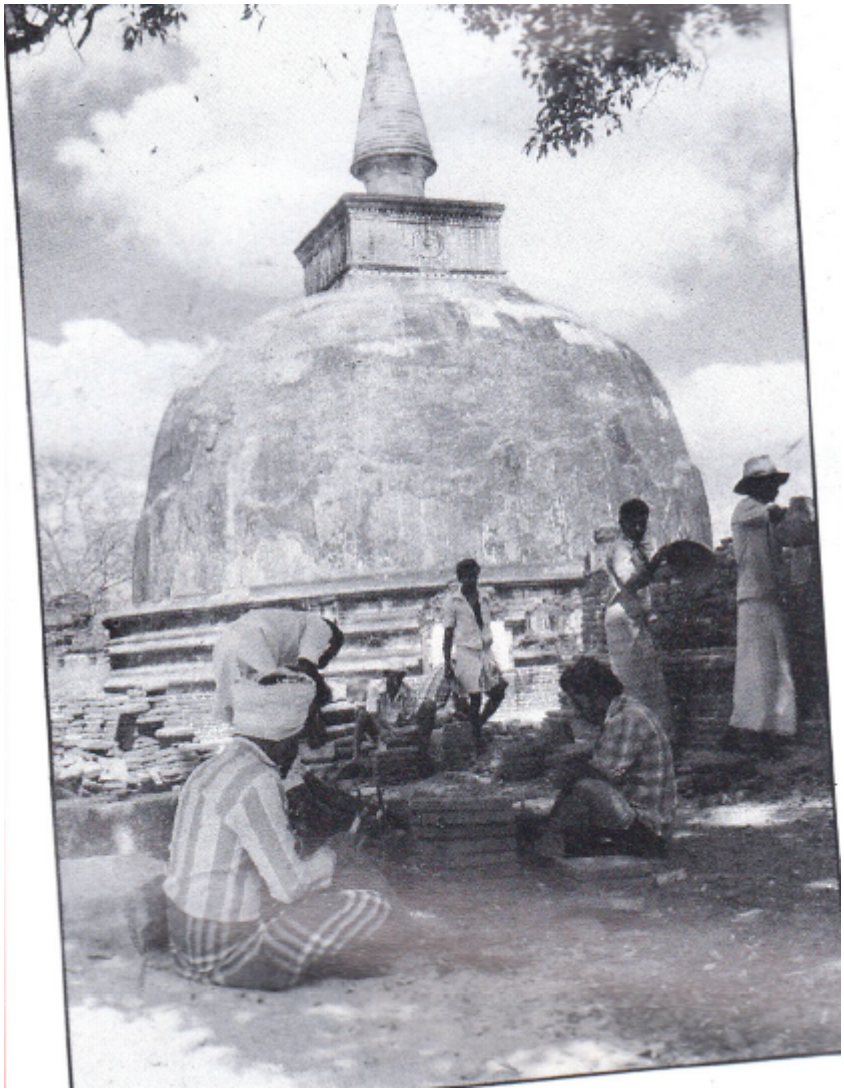
Triangle of Ancient Culture

Posted on

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In an undertaking which would amount to more than 1.1 billion Sri Lankan rupees when completed, the UNESCO – Sri Lanka Cultural Triangle Project, the largest UNESCO-assisted archaeological project in the world, is attempting to investigate, preserve and present to the public six sites which form a ‘core’ of Lanka’s historical heritage. These sites have provided the backdrop to the most dramatic moments in

the island’s recorded history spanning more than 2,500 years. The ‘Cultural Triangle’ runs six projects in Sri Lanka as compared to the single such project UNESCO usually provides patronage for in any country. They include:

ABHAYAGIRIYA VIHARA COMPLEX: At Anuradhapura, with the world’s second tallest stupa dating back to the 1st Century B.C., in its day housed around 5,000 monks making it one of the largest Buddhist monasteries in the world.

SIGIRIYA (5th Century): Asia’s oldest extant water gardens providing an example of a planned city belonging to the middle Anuradhapura period. It also provides insights into the painting and the literature of the period.

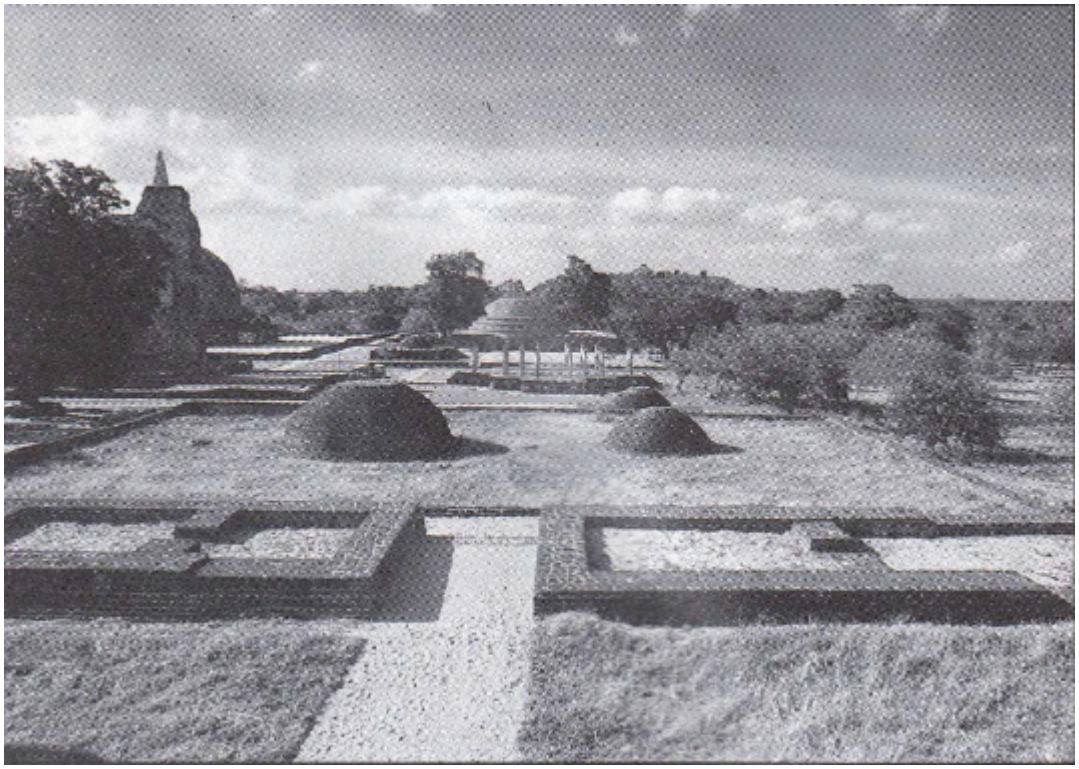
JETAVANA VIHARA COMPLEX: At Anuradhapura, the world’s tallest stupa. This site has provided the experts with the grandest array of objects excavated in the Cultural Triangle so far.

ALAHANA PARNENA (11 – 12th Century): At Polonnaruwa, an ancient university site with its own preserved hospital. The name translates roughly into ‘crematory monastery’.

DAMBULLA: The caves with the largest extent of painted interiors in the world with more than 20,000 square feet covering the walls and roof. Dambulla has a hisrory going back to the pre-Buddhist period.

KANDY: A city with some of its medieval buildings still in day-to-use. The last kingdom of the Lankans, it retains a degree of regality. The high point in cultural activity is the annual Esala Perahera in August which is a memorable bit of pageantry.

Many of these sites were less than a memory to Sri Lankans as the great civilizations had vanished under the advance of the jungle over their cities and irrigation systems which nurtured the population. Since their rediscovery by British archaeologists, the story of the classical period in the island’s history has been painstakingly reconstructed.



Alahana Pirivena (Polonnaruwa, 11th **&** *12th centuries): conserved monuments close to the Lankatilake and KiriVehera. (Ravi Jayasekera)*


Jaffna
Trincomalee
ANURADHAPURA
Mihintale
Sigiriya
POLONNARUWA
Batticaloa
KANDY
Colombo
Hambantota
Galle

Following the important discoveries made by the Westerners, the major part of the work today is carried out by Sri I.ankans, though many workers and experts still come from around the world. The UNESCO connection brings a number of foreign archaeologists each year to spend time in the Triangle, providing valuable material and intellectual inputs, together with students and research workers from many universities in Sri I.anka and abroad.

The Central Cultural Fund (CCF) was formed in 1980 to provide funds for the protection and development of cultural and religious monuments of Sri I.anka and to provide assistance to those working in related fields. Today the Central Cultural Fup.d is a permanent institution with the Cultural Triangle Project, which is expected to end in the early 1990s. The CCF will move into areas other than the Triangle formed by the cluster of the ancient cities of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy.

A fundamental part of the work of the UNESCO-Sri I.anka Cultural Triangle Project is conservation -both of monuments and objects, most of which are fragile and subject to decay on exposure. The structures which are exposed in the course of excavation are being conserved in accordance with the principles that are popular with ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, and today it is possible to see the results of these efforts at Jetavana and Abhayagiriya and Alahana Parivena, Sigiriya, Dambulla and Kandy.

In its excavations the Cultural Triangle experts have unearthed a mass of archaeological material which will take years to analyse and interpret. These range from exquisite stone sculptures, bronzes, ivories, sutras written on gold plates, jewellery and pottery. A number of finds, some of which are extremely delicate and subject to rapid deterioration, get immediate attention to stabilize them in the labs that have been established at the project sites. All these will finally go on display at the site museums that are planned.

Plans are also afoot to develop visitor reception facilities and son-et-lumiere or sound and light systems at the projects for enhanced attraction. Visitors are an important part of the Cultural Triangle, and their presence supports the work being carried out there. The main facilities provided for them are comfortable and conveniently located hotels.

The development of the Cultural Triangle, a term that has come into popular use in Sri I.anka, is a multifaceted project bringing together people, ideas· and disciplines

that are as varied as archaeology demands it to be.

UNESCO has recognized the work of the project and has named four of its locations- Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya and Kandy-on its prestigious World Heritage List. When this ambitious project is completed and visitor facilities are fully developed, it would present to the world a part of its heritage which would have otherwise been lost to the future.