Waiting to be Unearthed

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The image house with its modern statuary

The Sankapala Raja Maha Viharaya in Pallebedda awaits the attention of archaeologists and historians, which it very richly deserves.

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The Buddha statue stands tall by the bodhi tree

Pallebedda, on the Ratnapura- Embilipitiya main road, is where the lushness of Ratnapura breaks off to give way to the aridity of the south. The sky here is cerulean, and the air clear.

Out of nowhere, to the left of the road, a low, white wall in the classic Kandyan style begins, and runs for a long way. A wide stone archway interrupts it in the middle. This is the entrance to the Sankapala Raja Maha Viharaya.

The word *'sanka'* means 'conch shell', and this rings a bell because originally all the land around the Sankhapala temple belonged to the Giant Pussadeva of the 2nd century BC, who, apart from being a great warrior, was known for his prowess in blowing the conch shell. Evidence for this legend is to be found on a rock: an ancient, rudimentary engraving of a conch shell.

King Dutugemunu gave giant Pussadeva 12,000 acres of land in Pallebedda in recognition of the warrior's sevices to his country. At a later stage, the warrior donated all the land to the Buddhist clergy, and himself took the robes. It is said that all the treasures he possessed, among these the conch he blew to herald battles, are today hidden within a rock above the temple.

The Thera Pussadeva, as he was called upon taking orders, was so distraught by memories of a youth spent in battle and bloodshed that he found it easy to perceive the Dhamma. He meditated and became an arahant, attaining the supreme bliss of Nirvana and ending the cycle of rebirth.

The biggest treasures of Sankapala lie underground

The pilgrim to Sankapala, first comes across a pool of shade cast by a bodhi tree. It is a giant specimen, its many hands spreading sinuously over a major part of the temple, providing deep shade.

The temple is arranged vertically, with the bodhi tree on one of the lower levels, the *vihara,* or image house, on a higher level and a stupa in the middle of a courtyard at the highest point. Though Sankapala enjoyed much importance during the Anuradhapura period (4th century BC to 11th century AD), it was to fall into decline later in history.

It was during the kingdom of Kandy that Pussadeva's 12,000 acres were gifted to another monk, Karatota Dhammarama, by KandyKing Rajadhi Rajasinghe (1782-1798). Imprisoned by the king under suspicion of having liaisons with the enemy Dutch, Dhammarama wrote a poem during his incarceration. It was such a

brilliant work that the king, himself a poet, was impressed enough to release the monk and award him the land to boot.

Fourteen rock caves are scattered around Sankapala. One cave, out of the fourteen, is occupied by the shrine to God Kataragama. There is an eerie feeling prevailing over the shrine of the god, its walls hung with images of silent, staring divinities, while the image house walls are divided into red, horizontal columns, along which, in classic two-dimensional images, unroll stories from Buddhist lore and legend. Behind a façade of lurid modern statues, showy new architecture and gaudy prayer flags is hidden the real heritage of Sankapala. Among the beautiful antiquities still in the temple's possession are a small Buddha statue made of gold, the deed given to Karatota Dhammarama in 1786 and an *ola* leaf book jacket of finely carved ivory.

But the greatest treasures of Sankapala remain underground, waiting to be dug up. But, like the casual visitor on his way to the shrine of Kataragama, the archaeologist too gives the place only a cursory glance, probably because it springs up in the middle of nowhere. One determined monument however is said to stand above ground, far from the temple, as testimony to the faded glory of Sankapala, in the shape of a stupa.

As the villagers will tell you, this monument was built over the remains of the Arhant Pussadeva. It is but the tip of the iceberg: for there is no doubt that some digging around will yield, to the archaeologist and the historian alike, a wealth of material which, apart from its intrinsic value, will be the building blocks to reconstruct the lost legend of Sankapala.

