
"Conservation of Cultural Heritage and International Assistance in Asian Countries"

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The Cultural Triangle of Sri Lanka: Research and Conservation

Senake BANDARANAYAKE

The Dry Zone civilization

Sri Lanka's historical civilization, which has its origins in the major wave of global development that takes place in the middle and later centuries of the 1st millennium BC, is principally located in the large undulating plain of the northern half of the island, with extensions into the narrower plains and valleys of the south and east. Geographers refer to this area of Sri Lanka as its 'Dry Zone,' to distinguish it from the wetter regions of the southwest and the central mountains. An area of extensive dry tropical forests, its climate is in fact marked by heavy seasonal rains during the winter monsoon from November to January. This climatic regime, with its undulating terrain and relatively rich soils, made this area especially suitable for the development of a major network of village reservoirs or 'tanks' and colossal manmade lakes and canals. These are considered by historians of science to be some of the most remarkable feats of hydraulic engineering in the premodern world.

The high productivity of this agrarian system supported a large population and a supply of food, wealth, labour and management skills that made possible the construction of a number of major monumental complexes, mainly urban and port centres and varying types of Buddhist monasteries.

Archaeological landscape

The skeletal remains of several ancient cities and literally hundreds of Buddhist monastic complexes form the most dramatic and visible elements of the Dry Zone region. Some idea of the scale and character of this archaeological landscape may be gained from the fact that this area has between 2,000 and 3,000 monumental sites, containing between 50,000 and 75,000 individual structures, and more than a 'guess-timated' 200,000 settlement sites, belonging to the **Early and Middle Historic periods (3rd Century BCE to 13th Century CE)**.

A major concentration of such sites are found in and around the ancient cities of **Anuradhapura, Sigiriya and Polonnaruva**, where archaeologists have been working for the last one hundred years. These cities have now been inscribed on the World Heritage List, along with the city of **Kandy**, which dates from a much later period (the 17th to 19th century) and was the capital of Sri Lanka's last historical kingdom, with its core region in the central highlands.

The '**Cultural Triangle**' takes its name from the triangular zone formed by linking **Anuradhapura, Polonnaruva and Kandy**. This is a major sixteen-year program jointly sponsored by the Sri Lankan government and UNESCO, forming an unique experiment in heritage management in a developing country, on a scale similar to previous UNESCO campaigns such as Abu Simbel, Venice or Borobudur. The principle difference between the Cultural Triangle and many other such UNESCO programs is that the present project has been conceived of, initiated and implemented by Sri Lankan archaeologists and architectural conservators and is very much a modern expression of a traditional Sri Lankan concern with the preservation and restoration of ancient monuments and sites.

The Triangle is divided into six sub-projects covering major sites associated with significant periods of Sri Lankan history, as follows: