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Excavations at the World Heritage City at Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka

Anura Manatunga

The ruined city of Polonnaruwa is marked by an array of monuments scattered along a strip of land, on the east shore of a large reservoir known as Parākrama Samudra, or the Sea of Parākrama (Fig. 1). Polonnaruwa is a unique archaeological site in Sri Lanka as it represents both Buddhist and Hindu monuments in a grand scale and relatively good condition of preservation (Figs. 2 and 3). There are religious monuments such as the *stūpas*, image houses, monks' cells, and secular monuments such as palaces, council chambers and summer palaces (Fig. 4). Most of these monuments are brick buildings but there are also a considerable number of stone buildings.

Polonnaruwa was the capital city of Sri Lanka for about two hundred fifty years from the late 10th century AD to the mid-13th century AD. Prior to that, Polonnaruwa was used as an alternative center of administration by kings of Anuradhapura who settled there periodically since 7th century AD. The Cola (Chola) invaders, who terminated the long standing Anuradhapura kingdom at the end of the 10th century AD, chose Polonnaruwa as their capital city and ruled the conquered parts of the Island from Polonnaruwa for about 75 years.

After expelling the Colas from Polonnaruwa, King Vijayabāhu I (1055-1110 AD) was crowned at the ancient capital of Anuradhapura, but at the end of rituals and ceremonies, he selected Polonnaruwa as his capital, and thus formed the second kingdom of Sri Lanka centered at Polonnaruwa. This was the kingdom where Parākramabāhu the Great and well-known King Niśśāṅkamalla ruled and it was one of the most prosperous kingdoms in South Asia in the 12th century AD.

Polonnaruwa was usurped by another invader, Kāliṅga Māgha in 1215, who ruled the Island for 22 years. This resulted in the end of the Polonnaruwa Kingdom, as well as the great hydraulic civilization of the Siṃhalese in the Rajarata region of the Island. Several attempts were made to restore the city of Polonnaruwa in the late 13th century by successive kings of the Dambadeniya Kingdom, but these attempts were doomed to failure. The city was gradually abandoned and encroached on by thick rain forests and forgotten for centuries.

A British military officer, M.H. Fagan, first noticed the ruined city of Polonnaruwa in 1819 while he was traveling from one

camp to another through the jungle track with the guidance of some locals. Thereafter, another military officer, Major Jonathan Forbes of the 73rd Highlanders Regiment, visited the site in 1832 and gave the first comprehensive account of the ruins of the site in his book *Eleven years in Ceylon*, published in 1840. This was followed by several other antiquarians to Polonnaruwa in the later half of the 19th century, when the city was still amidst a forest.

Excavations at Polonnaruwa were initiated in 1885 by Dullewe Nilame, the native government agent of the district, with the guidance of S.M. Barrows, a noted antiquarian at that time,

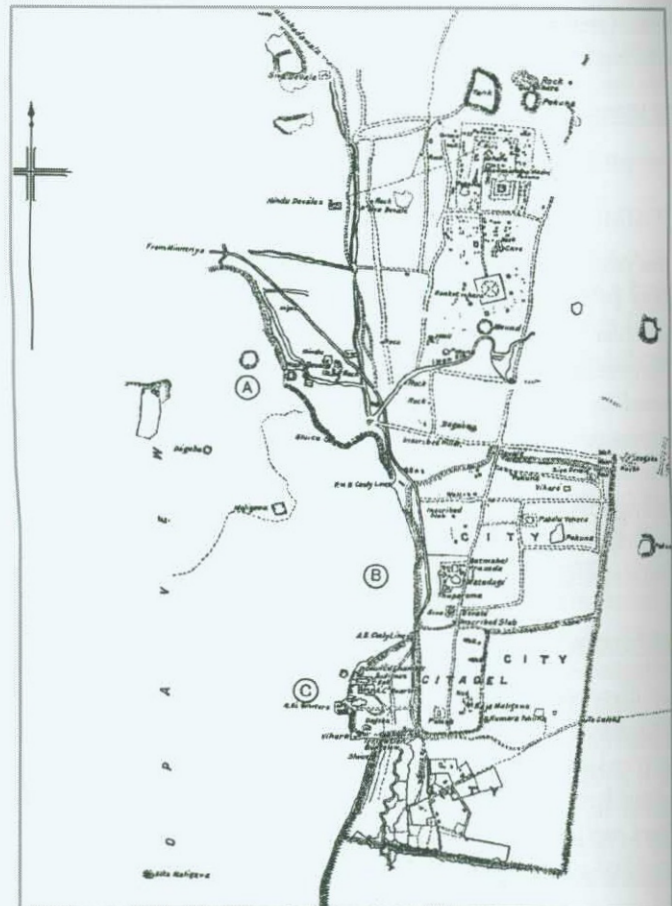


Fig. 1 A map of the ruined city of Polonnaruwa. Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of Ceylon

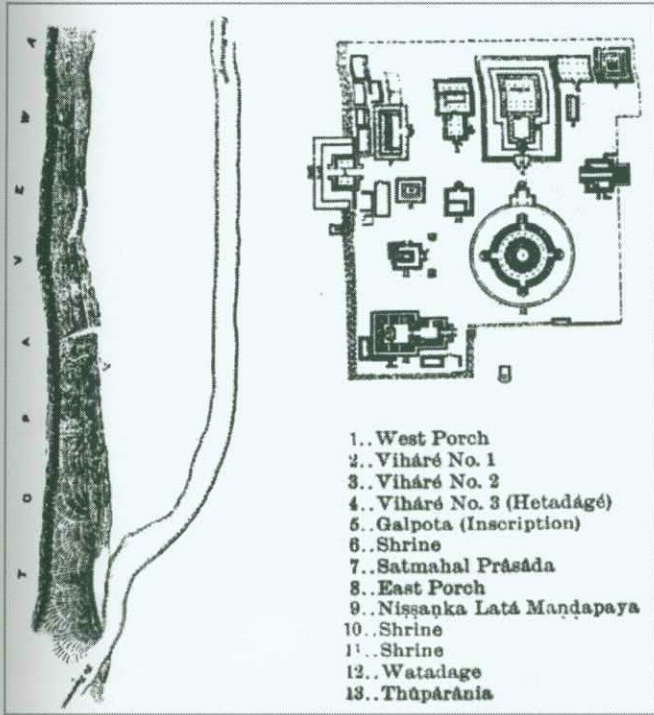


Fig. 2 Ruins of Buddhist monuments at Polonnaruwa.
Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of Ceylon

under the orders of the British governor A.H. Gordon. These excavations lasted for two terms from 1885-1886 and the results were published as a government sessional paper.

These initial excavations mainly consisted of clearing the jungle and removal of debris from some of the monuments. The main attractions were the monuments at the Sacred Quadrangle; however the Watadāgē, the most attractive building in the quadrangle was not touched (Fig. 5). Removal of debris at the Tivanka Image House and the Naipena Vehera was partially done. Both Rankoth Vehera (Fig. 6) and the Kiri Vehera (Fig. 7) were thoroughly cleared of timber and the basal terraces of these *stūpas* were weeded. The summer palace and a few Buddhist and Hindu shrines that were not specifically named, were also cleared during these two seasons.

Thereafter, no excavation works were carried out at Polonnaruwa for about fifteen years. Throughout this period, the exposed brick monuments were laid bare without any substantial measure to protect them from destruction. In 1888, action was taken to copy the wall paintings of the Tivanka Image House, by employing Alex Murray, the provincial engineer, who was already credited for his work of copying the Sigiriya frescoes.

The Archaeological Survey Department was established in 1890 under the stewardship of

H.C.P. Bell, a Civil Servant and a reputed antiquarian, so as to conduct archaeological activities more systematically and regularly. Though he started his excavations at Anuradhapura in 1890 and at Sigiriya in 1895, he could not pay attention to Polonnaruwa until 1900, as there were no adequate human resources at the Department. In 1896, however, he visited Polonnaruwa as a part of his annual circuit tour to explore archaeological sites and the Topographical Survey Department prepared a survey map of the ruined city in 1897.

Bell, the Archaeological Commissioner was the only staff officer of the Department of Archaeological Survey during the first decade of its history. As a result of repeated requests from Bell, an Assistant Commissioner, C.E. Dashwood was appointed to the Department in 1900. With Dashwood's assistance, Bell could commence excavations at Polonnaruwa simultaneously with those taking place at Anuradhapura and Sigiriya. Bell stationed himself at the new site and the work of Anuradhapura was assigned to Dashwood, while conservation work at Sigiriya was conducted by D.A.L. Perera, an able draughtsman of the Department, under the overall supervision of Bell.

The site where Bell started his excavation in 1900 at Polonnaruwa was referred to as the Promontory because the landmass projected towards the Parākrama Samudra. Among the monuments at the Promontory, a pillared building that was already known as the Council Chamber of King Niṣṣaṅkamalla, was completely excavated and studied in detail. A few yards south of the Council Chamber, Bell discovered a large building that he described as the Audience Hall. Apart from these two buildings, an unidentified structure that Bell surmised as a mausoleum, a pillared building near the bund of the reservoir, and some brick works associated with structures connected with a large pond at the promontory were subjected to

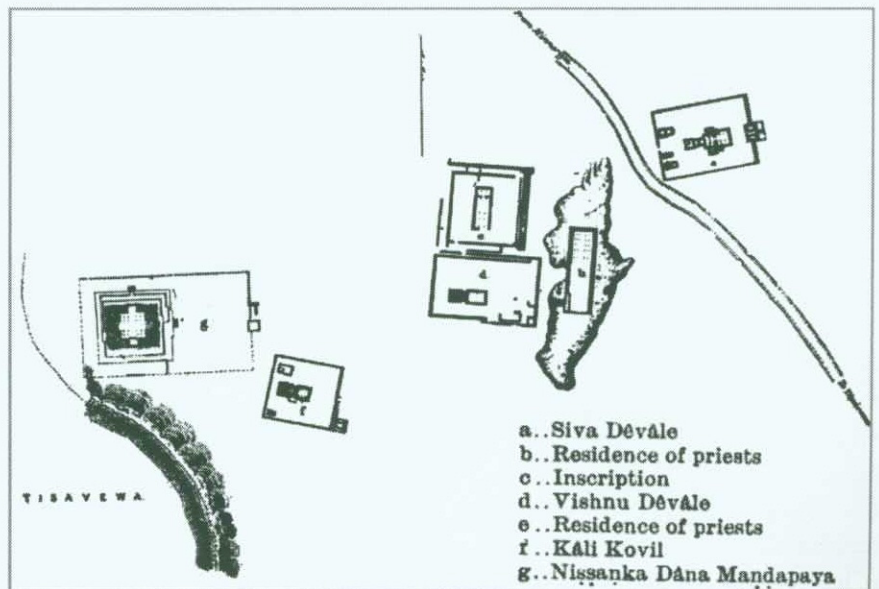


Fig. 3 Ruins of Hindu monuments at Polonnaruwa.
Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of Ceylon

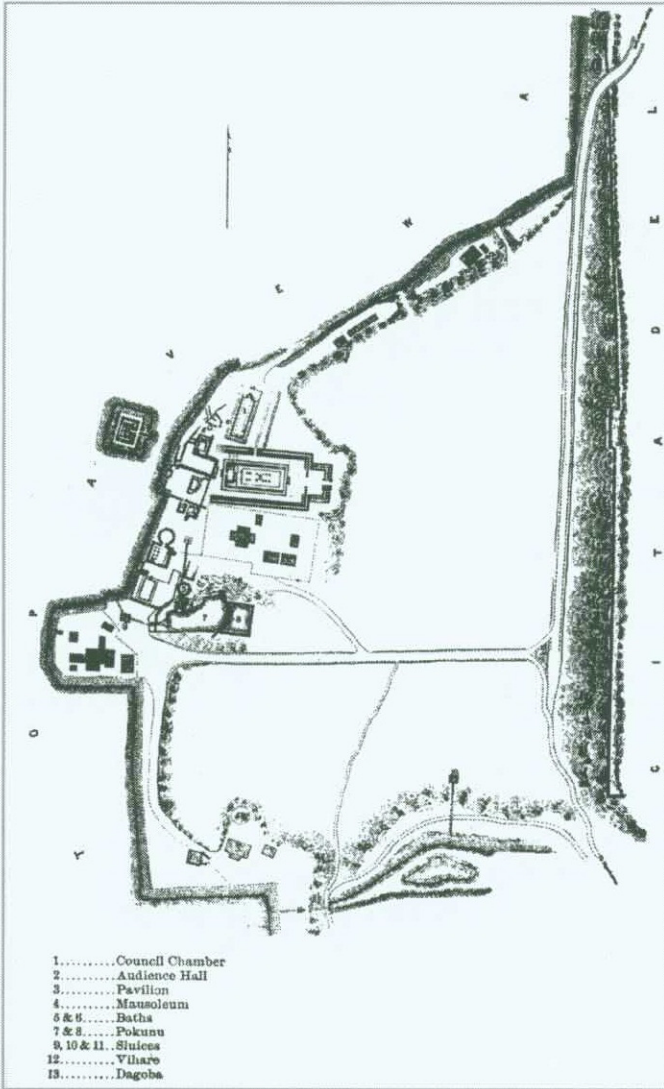


Fig. 4 Secular monuments at Polonnaruva.
 Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of Ceylon

excavation in 1900-1901. A pavilion made on a mound like an islet in the Parākrama Samudra near its bank at the Council Chamber was also excavated in that season and subsequently referred to as the Island Pavilion.

At the end of 1901 and during 1902, Bell excavated another group of monuments that lay about half a mile north of the Promontory. There were three Hindu shrines consecrated to Śiva, Viṣṇu and Durgā. In plan and architectural detail these shrines display little to differentiate from one another because each of the three consist of a *maṇḍapa*, a vestibule and an inner sanctum, except the main shrine of the Śiva, which possess additional rooms. Besides, there were at least three more buildings, which were not connected to the Hindu shrines. With the help of an inscription, one of the three buildings was identified as the Niśsaṅka Dāna Vinōda Maṇḍapaya, but it was not excavated.

In 1903, Bell started his excavation at the Quadrangle where the sacred Tooth Relic was housed during the Polonnaruva period and was a site of major attraction. He cleared the debris of all dilapidated buildings such as the Watadāgē, Thūpārāmaya (Fig. 8), Niśsaṅka Latā Maṇḍapaya (Fig. 9), Hātadāgē, Atadāgē and Sathmahal Prāsada (Fig. 10) as well as a few other buildings at the Quadrangle.

During this period, the Archaeological Survey Department was engaged only in excavations and research; conservation or preservation of monuments was not under its purview. The Public Works Department, which was the main construction agency of the government, was assigned the task of conserving or restoring some selected monuments. As there were no archaeologists or specialists in conservation at the PWD, its mediation to monuments was somewhat of a distraction. The urgent need of conservation of brick buildings at Polonnaruva and the necessity of doing it according to archaeological principles and methods were urged by Bell, and at last the government gave necessary permission for conservation of monuments through the Archaeological Survey Department. As a result of this Bell was engaged in a massive conservation project at Polonnaruva from 1905 onwards. The monuments at the Quadrangle and other monuments that he cleared of debris were conserved during the following years.

There were no excavations conducted in 1904 either at Polonnaruva or anywhere in the Island, apparently as Bell was engaged in writing reports on his previous excavations on Government request. In 1905, Bell extended his work to the citadel of Polonnaruva and excavated the pillared building that was misnamed as the Palace, or “*Rājamāligāwa*”. This building was later identified as the *Rājavaiśyabhūjaṅga Maṇḍapaya* and is now believed to be the council chamber of



Fig. 5 Watadāgē.
 Courtesy: The Cultural Triangle Project, Sri Lanka



Fig. 6 Rankoth Vehera.

Courtesy: The Cultural Triangle Project, Sri Lanka

King Parākramabāhu the Great. This is similar to that of the King Niśsaṅkamalla, but more elegant in plan although the sculptures are smaller in size.

Potgul Vehera, the southernmost site at Polonnaruva, was excavated in 1906. It was a monastery with a peculiar plan where a building with a circular room was found at the center of the highest terrace that was surrounded by four small *stūpas*. Some yards northward of this building in Potgul Vehera, an elegantly carved statue about 2.13 m high, depicting an elderly person holding an ola book in his two palms, is carved out of a rock. Neither the statue nor the circular building has been identified with certainty till today and they remain subject to various conjectures.

Apart from Potgul Vehera, Bell started to excavate the premises of Śiva Devālē No.2 in 1906 (Fig. 11). This was built entirely of dressed stones, but was in a ruined condition. Inscriptions found in this shrine revealed that it was built during the time of the Cola occupation and was referred to as Vānavamādēvī Īsvaran to commemorate the mother of King Rājendra, wife of King Rājarāja. As a result of this excavation, a large number of bronze images of Hindu deities were discovered from the shrine and its surrounding area. After the excavations, the shrine was conserved in 1908.

In the following year (1907), Bell excavated Śiva Devālē No.1 that was hitherto misnamed “Daladā Māligāwa” or the Temple of the Tooth Relic. This shrine was also made of dressed stones, but larger in size and in a relatively good

state of preservation. Excavations at three more Hindu shrines, small in size and grouped as an isolated cluster, were started in the same year and completed in the following year.

Excavations at the Gal Vihārē premises also began in 1907. It was a minor excavation compared to most of the other monuments, as the stone statues at the monastery were already visible above the ground and only the basal parts of the statues were covered by fallen debris of brick-built image houses. The colossal Buddha statues at Gal Vihārē are well known for their elegance. In Bell's words (ASCAR 1907: 7), Gal Vihārē “... stands unrivalled as its special features, the most impressive antiques par excellent to be seen in the Island of Ceylon, and possibly not rivaled throughout the continent of India.”

Bell excavated three more small Hindu shrines in 1908. A small *stūpa* on the bund of the reservoir and a part of Pabalu Vehera were also excavated that year. Clearance at the Tivanka Image House, which was misnamed “Demala Mahā Sāya”, commenced in 1909 and continued as a part of

massive conservation work of the building until the retirement of Bell in 1912.

In 1910, Bell commenced work in the area of Kiri Vehera, Laṅkatilaka and Baddaseema Prāsada that later came to be known as the Ālāhana Parivena Complex (Fig. 12). Apart from clearing and conserving the known buildings, he discovered several other buildings within this area during the following years.

In 1910-1911, Bell again paid his attention to the citadel area. He excavated a large mound where some brick walls were visible and known to the locals as “Hirage” (lit. “The Prison”),



Fig. 7 Kiri Vehera.

Courtesy: The Cultural Triangle Project, Sri Lanka



Fig. 8 Thūpārāmaya Temple.
Courtesy: The Cultural Triangle Project, Sri Lanka

but found to be a multistoried palace of the citadel, most probably the one built by King Parākramabāhu the Great (Fig. 13). The pond known as the Kumāra Pokuna or the Prince's Pond, situated immediately outside the citadel wall, was also excavated during his last years as the Archaeological Commissioner.

Bell's retirement at the end of 1912, after 23 years of service, was the end of an era of Sri Lankan Archaeology. His pioneering work is yet to be critically evaluated, but can be compared with that of Alexander Cunningham in Indian Archaeology. So far as the configuration of archaeological landscape of Polonnaruva, Anuradhapura and Sigiriya is concerned, Bells' massive excavations are still recognized as the major contribution, although such large-scale projects are not advisable in the present context.

Bell's successor E.R. Ayrton was a well-trained and talented young man, but his untimely death in 1914 was a setback to Sri Lankan Archaeology. He continued Bell's unfinished conservation work at Polonnaruva but could not start any substantial excavation anywhere except at Anuradhapura. However, it is important that he has referred to some post-Polonnaruva settlements in the vicinity of the Naipena Vehera, a fact that no one took seriously before or after him.

Ayrton's death and the commencement of the First World War in 1914 brought Sri Lankan Archaeology to a standstill for about six years. The British government was not interested to fill the vacancy of Ayrton or allocate funds for archaeological research during this period. Therefore, most of the monuments unearthed and conserved by Bell were dilapidated and archaeological sites were again overtaken by jungle foliage. The condition of the Lañkatilaka

Image House was so serious by 1917 that Bell, though he had retired from the service, drew the attention of the government on the importance of taking immediate action to protect it.

The British Government appointed Captain A. M. Hocart as the Archaeological Commissioner in 1921. Though he had served in the Royal Army during the World War, he was a reputed anthropologist with a Cambridge Master's degree. He devoted most of his time to restore monuments, which were damaged during the previous years due to negligence. Brick buildings of Polonnaruva had been seriously affected; hence he had to pay a special attention to restore those monuments. Mr. W.M. Fernando, the most experienced officer at the Department at that time, and who had worked with Bell, was assigned to attend the monuments at Polonnaruva. Lañkatilaka Image House was the

priority because it was about to collapse. Kiri Vehera and Potgul Vehera were also restored in the first round of work in 1921-22.

In 1923, the restoration of the Tivanka Image House was completed and the work on the royal palace at the citadel commenced. Work at the Quadrangle began in 1924 and continued in the following years. Hocart could not undertake any new work at Polonnaruva, though he did so elsewhere and he retired from the service prematurely due to health problems in 1929.

In 1932, when Senarath Paranavitana was the acting Commissioner of Archaeology, excavations commenced at the southeastern quarter of the citadel where the council chamber of King Parākramabāhu I was located. It was discovered that the original location of the council chamber was somewhat different from the present location and the present building was



Fig. 9 Niśsañka Latā Maṇḍapaya.
Courtesy: The Cultural Triangle Project, Sri Lanka



Fig. 10 Sathmahal Prāsada.
Courtesy: The Cultural Triangle Project, Sri Lanka

a reconstruction of a later date using the materials of the older building. After more excavations in the vicinity of Kumāra Pokuna or the Prince's Pond, which was excavated by Bell in 1911, Paranavitana devoted himself to conserving the site.

A.H. Longhurst, who was the Superintendent of the Southern Circle of Indian Archaeological Survey under John Marshall, was appointed as the Archaeological Commissioner of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1935 and he retained the post till 1939. During this period, possibly due to his interest in South Indian architecture, Longhurst showed more attention to Polonnaruva where Hindu monuments were found and the influence of South Indian art and architecture was visible even in Buddhist monuments. He has replastered the walls of Thūpārāmaya, Laṅkatilaka and Tivanka image houses in the name of conservation. He also did some extensive repairs in Kiri Vehera, of which Hatarāskotuwa was "... badly decayed and partly fallen" (ASCAR 1935:20). Pabalu Vehera was completely excavated and the debris of Tivanka Image House was removed near the vestibule. Vāhalkadas and an image house of the Rankoth Vehera were unearthed. Paintings and sculptures at Gal Vihārē and Tivanka Image House were treated chemically for the first time during this period.

Since 1940, Sri Lankans have been heading the Archaeological Survey Department. Dr. Senarath Paranavitana, the most celebrated archaeologist of Sri Lanka, was permanently appointed to the post of Archaeological Commissioner in 1940 and held it till he retired in 1956. As most of the monuments at Polonnaruva and other key sites were already excavated and conserved, Paranavitana could

pay his attention to various other sites in the Island. However, he launched a massive excavation project to unearth monuments at the eastern terrace of Ālāhana Parivena at Polonnaruva and subsequently conserved them between 1940 and 1950. Further, he engaged himself in conserving the Prince's Pond and its associated buildings at the Promontory and partially conserved the dome of the Rankoth Vehera. He also made arrangements to engage the expertise of Mohammad Sana Ulla, a chemist of the Indian Archaeological Survey, for chemical treatment of paintings at the Tivanka Image house.

Despite minor conservations and maintenance activities, no substantial work was conducted at Polonnaruva in the 1950s. Some notable work was carried out again in the 1960s when Dr. C.E. Godakumbura was the Archaeological Commis-

sioner. His excavations at the Śiva Devālē No.5 and its surrounding area in 1960-61 yielded a hoard of bronze statues of Hindu deities, which marked the largest finding of Hindu relics ever in Sri Lanka. Conservation of the dome of the Rankoth Vehera was restarted in 1963 and continued in the following years. The largest excavation of the 60s was that of the northern entrance of the city and its surrounding area, which was carried out during the period 1963-69. The conservation of the council chamber of the King Niśśaṅkamalla was completed in 1964. As a part of this programme, the large lion statue in stone that belonged to this building was brought back from the Colombo Museum and installed in its originally position after about 90 years.

In 1970's while Dr. Raja De Silva was the Archaeological Commissioner, the attention of the Department was focused on



Fig. 11 Śiva Devālē No. 2.
Courtesy: The Cultural Triangle Project, Sri Lanka



Fig. 12 Ālāhana Parivena.
Courtesy: The Cultural Triangle Project, Sri Lanka

unearthing and conserving the walls of the citadel. The eastern part of the northern wall and the eastern wall with the steps lead to the Kumāra Pokuna were excavated and conserved during the 1970s. Conservations at the Rankoth Vehera continued from time to time throughout the period. Some conservations at the Potgul Vehera, and minor conservation and maintenance work on other monuments were also carried out during this period. A devastating cyclone in 1978 caused much damage to the monuments of Polonnaruva and some urgent restoration work was done during the following years.

1980 was a landmark year not only for Polonnaruva but also for Sri Lankan Archaeology in general. It marks the establishment

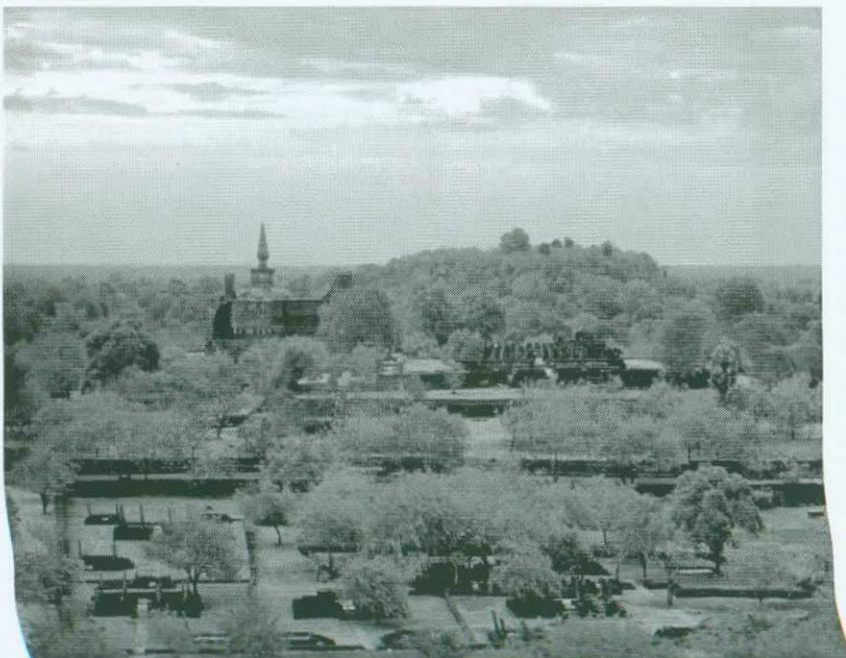


Fig. 13 Palace of Parākramabāhu.
Courtesy: The Cultural Triangle Project, Sri Lanka

of the Cultural Triangle Programme with the support of the UNESCO, to conduct research in major archaeological sites which fall into a triangular area created by three key sites i.e. Anuradhapura, Polonnaruva and Kandy. A separate agency, the Central Cultural Fund was established to carry out archaeological activities; hence the monopoly enjoyed by the Archaeological Survey Department for 90 years ended in 1980.

Polonnaruva was proclaimed as a World Heritage City by the UNESCO in 1980 on the request of the government of Sri Lanka. It became one of the six sites which fell within the Cultural Triangle where research has been carried out mainly by university teachers and graduates in archaeology since 1980. The concept of the Cultural Triangle was mainly a brainchild of Dr. Roland Silva,

a former Assistant Commissioner of Archaeology, who became the first Director General of the Central Cultural Fund. Some time later, he was promoted to the post of the Archaeological Commissioner and held both the key positions simultaneously for several years. On his invitation, Prof. P.L. Prematilleke of the Archaeology Department of the University of Peradeniya undertook excavations at Polonnaruva as the Archaeological Director of the project at Polonnaruva.

The Polonnaruva project of the Central Cultural Fund has been known as the Ālāhana Parivena Project as most of the initial work were centered at Ālāhana Parivena where Kiri Vehera, Lañkatilaka and Baddaseema Prāsadaya are located. Excavations at the Cultural Triangle were relatively more scientific and systematic than the earlier excavations. Discovery of monuments was the aim of the previous excavations, but the new excavations paid more emphasis on the artifacts found in stratigraphic sequence as well as building plans.

The first excavations at the Cultural Triangle at the Ālāhana Parivena started at the western terraces of the monastery, which was not much disturbed by previous excavations. Five small *stūpas*, a twin *stūpa* mound, a Seemaghara, a refectory and a large pond have been excavated in this area in 1980-81. Monuments at the southern terraces were excavated from 1982 and the rewarding discovery was an ancient hospital found between Rankoth Vehera and Baddaseema Prāsadaya. Excavations at Demala Mahā Sāya, terraces of Rankoth Vehera, walls of Naipena Vehera and the northern city wall that was the

southern boundary of the Ālāhana Parivena, were excavated from 1983 to 1989.

The city wall and the moat were the main focus of the excavations in the 1990s. The Mānik Vehera complex, the Southern Mound, the Ancient Street and associated buildings were excavated from 1994 to 1999. The construction of the museum at Polonnaruwa in 1999, with the support of the government of the Netherlands, can be considered to be the culmination of the activities of the Cultural Triangle. Masterpieces unearthed from the excavations at the Cultural Triangle and those by the Archaeological Survey throughout the last century, have been exhibited elegantly in this museum. Apart from exhibition galleries, the museum also houses a research laboratory, a conservation laboratory, a reference library, a photographic unit, a bookshop and a refectory, which are all of international standard.

Large-scale excavations at Polonnaruwa have not been conducted since 1999. Minor excavations to remove the refills of previously excavated sites have been done with the view to restoring the monuments in those sites. Computerizing the analytic data on the artifacts unearthed in the past excavations has been given priority in recent years. An extensive exploration of the ancient city and its peripheral region is the major research activity of the Polonnaruwa Project at present. A few problem-oriented excavations will be conducted in future for understanding the historical trajectory of Polonnaruwa, which was not attempted in the previous excavations.

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