

Archaeological heritage: damage and illegal trade in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Archaeological elements can be determined as a phenomena with archaeological value. While the Antiquities Amendment (1998) adds legal interpretation to this. Numerous architectural remains even extending to small pebbles can be classified as archaeological remains.

There is a unique collection of archaeological remains and the ancient kings safeguarded them irrespective of their religion, race and other social matters. According to epigraphical sources and chronicles the ancient kings appointed various officers to maintain and restore them. One such incident was the erection of shrines to the Sangha, maintaining and restoration in, the Chullavagga. The aim of this paper is to discuss damages and nature of illegal trade in Sri Lanka.

Archaeological Heritage

There are about 250,000 archaeological sites scattered all over the Island. Once ancient rulers attain their political power they erected, maintained and restored the old shrines as a rule and ethic in the old social order.

One important factor of the ancient rulers' working agenda was to repair the old shrines erected by their predecessors. Not just Sinhalese kings, but the Tamil kings also maintained the heritage according to the *Mahavamsa* (*Mahavamsa* 1996, Chapter 21, Gatha 22).

But during the long history it was due to various invasions, struggles and natural depreciation that countless destruction happen to the archaeological remains. To maintain Dhamma in the society from the earliest times, various types of stupas and *Bodhigaras* erected are now in a ruined form. These are the worst affected phenomena due to struggles. But even under such tragic circumstances there is a considerable amount of archaeological remains still in Sri Lanka today.

Key Words: Archaeological Heritage, Destruction, Documentation

The impact of foreign rule, from 1500-1948 was very heavy. During the Portuguese, Dutch and British periods, they exploited ola leaves, tusk carvings and numerous valuable items. It was during these periods that the private collectors took these valuables into their possession; a very adverse trend.

During this period of foreign rule they ruined the places of worship and as a result the old paintings were also disfigured. Furthermore, due to various civil disorders, struggles, negligence, poor restoration, purposeful destruction, insect damage, natural disasters, climate factors, and innumerable other reasons helped in the destruction of the archaeological remains. In addition to this, in recent times the North-Eastern Civil War as well as the Tsunami of 2004 have caused further damage. The most recent destructive factors are stealing, illegal exploitation and the antique trade in the artefacts.

Illegal trade

Social values of the present commercial based society cannot protect the history of a country or their national heritage. They always value them as commercial item. This leads to a increase in black-market trade in artefacts (Gunawardhana 2005, 95). According to the reports available in the last decade, buyers and sellers lead an important role on the illegal trade. The next stage is that traders send the items to foreign markets. Buddha statues, coins, ola leaves, necklaces, pebbles, paintings and other items important to the Sri Lankan identity reach foreign traders through a Sri Lankan agent. According to Anurada Seneviratne, more Sri Lankan archaeological remains have been traded with Britain than any other European country. Most of these items were taken illegally from Sri Lanka during the last century. The highlighted items were ola leaves belonging to the Kandyan era, coins, Buddha statues, carvings and Tara statues (Gunawardhana 2005, 92).

The removal of items of national heritage and other archaeological artefacts from their original place is now a despicable trade.

This situation is aggravated by the legal principles of the country. Also the Cultural Property Act (1993), No.73, section 19 itself allows the marketing of these articles. According to the Act, after examination by the archaeological commissioner a valid licence can be issued to market cultural items (Gunawardhana 2005, 92). Under the coverage of this section of the Act, which allows the illicit trader to expand his

activities with legal coverage. Also this allowed them to expand the exportation of archaeological remains.

According to recent media reports, archaeological remains belonging to the Kandyan era were banned by Sri Lanka Customs Department before their attempted export. As the above mentioned act itself gives legal foundation to the illicit trade and to the various people involved in it. The media reports that there are members of defence forces, politicians (including those involved in the field of archaeology), high ranking members of society, psychologists and monks involved in the illicit trade.

The illicit trade was recorded in the media, the annual report of the department and various research papers. A monk led the role of illicit trade of the 200kg gold statue in Danture Raja Maha Vihara, Kadugannawa. Another incident was the trade of valuable antiques from Divulkadawana, Medirigiriya area, being traded by a monk, a psychologist and a district registrar. A retired Archaeological Department officer was also involved in trading of antiques from Anuradhapura area, and was taken into police custody. The artists doing renovation on the Talahinna Raja Maha Vihara, Ibbankatuwa, stole valuable wooden statues. According to media reports women are also engaging in this as well. According to Gunawardhana (2005), it is reported that valuable antiques were being looted from the Thimbrigolle area in Puttlam District by four women. The ultimate target of this is foreign trade, which results in the destruction of the countries valuables (fig.1).

It was noted that the stealing of Buddha statues was the prime objective of the illicit trade and unauthorised excavations at various sites. Coins, Buddha statues, and monuments are found scattered across sites. No systematic documentation



fig.1: Natural of the Destruction of cultural heritage diagram

(Gunawardhana 2005, 91)

It was noted that the stealing of Buddha statues was the prime objective of the illicit trade and unauthorised excavations at various sites. Coins, Buddha statues, and monuments are found scattered across sites. No systematic documentation regarding these items has been made in addition the items that were not recorded have now been stolen. The worst effected sites are stupas, bodhigaras, and inscriptions. One such example was an inscription that was damaged by heavy hammering, in Suriyapara Village in the Kantalai area, close to a ruined dagoba. The contents of this inscription was a code of ethics regarding anti-social elements of then society. Another example is Nillakgama Bodhigara. Here an inscription providing a continuous history of a country, was vandalised and suffered heavy damage as a result.

Conclusion

It was reported that the stealing of archaeological remains has increased during the last few years. It was also revealed that the highest number of such incidents was reported from the Kurunegala, Hambantota, Monaragala and Anuradhapura districts (a report of this is in a table form annex here with within years 1998-2002). As the archaeological sites of the above districts were in dense forests, in a poor state of repair, are less publicly visible, and without any security system to prevent stealing from the sites. All these above mentioned reasons: stealing, unauthorised unearthing and other forms of destruction; cause the depletion of archaeological reserves.

References

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