

Ancient Buddhist Sites of Sri Lanka

**Anuradhapura
Mihintale**

The sacred city of Anuradhapura, the first capital of Sri Lanka, was founded in 437 BC by King Pandukabhaya. As early as the third century BC its fame had spread to the Roman-Hellenistic world of the Mediterranean and by the first century AD its rulers had established trade routes and diplomatic relations with China. Evidence of these trade links with both the east and west can be seen in the number of foreign artifacts uncovered at the site.

The city's proximity to India resulted in its eventual adoption of Buddhism. According to written records, in the third century BC the missionary Mahinda, son of the North-Indian emperor Asoka, brought the teachings of Buddha to Anuradhapura, which has influenced Buddhism in Sri Lanka ever since.

Anuradhapura remained the royal seat of more than 119 successive Sinhalese kings for over 1,400 years and was the cultural and religious capital of the country. Several magnificent *dagobas*, monasteries, temples, ponds, and irrigation tanks were constructed during these centuries, bearing testimony to a technically advanced civilization. According to historical chronicles such as the *Mahavamsa* - the Sinhala Buddhist document written by monks - the city utilized sophisticated urban planning techniques. Individual precincts were established for hunters, as well as heretics and foreigners. There were hospitals and hostels, and separate cemeteries for high and low castes. The *Mahavamsa* also gives us a complete, unbroken record of the rise and fall of the Sinhalese Kingdom. Trade, coupled with advanced irrigation systems resulting in successful rice cultivation and production, led to the initial rise of the city. At its peak the city was home to half a million inhabitants.

Throughout its 1,400-year history the Sinhalese rulers of Anuradhapura were regularly challenged by the Hindu Tamils, and on a number of occasions the Tamils were able to usurp power for at most a few decades. It wasn't until the tenth century that the Tamils succeeded in their bid for power. Under the reign of Rajaraja the Great (AD 985-1018) of the Chola empire, Tamil forces were finally able to sack Anuradhapura, leaving the city in ruins and relocating the capital.

Present day Anuradhapura is merely a shadow of its former self. Many of the monuments are in a sad state of decay, having been partially destroyed by the thick, surrounding jungle, which has wreaked havoc on foundations and walls, as well as the encroachment of modern settlements and farming land. As many of the buildings were built of wood and clay, few have survived intact, or at all. The site is now haphazardly littered with stone pillars, remains of walls from palaces, monasteries and temples, and the only structures that have survived in relatively good condition - the *dagobas*.

Anuradhapura, situated on the banks of the river Malwatu Oya, 205 kilometers north of Colombo, was made a World Heritage Site in 1982.

The present day city of Anuradhapura is dominated by four great *dagobas* (also called *stupas*). A dagoba is a solid dome of earth and brick built over a Buddhist relic, which could be the Buddha's bodily remains or articles used by him, such as an alms bowl or other objects of veneration. Dagobas come in various sizes, usually built on a pedestal with a spire on top crowned with a pinnacle. The earliest dagobas had a stone or wooden roof on top of the dome in place of the spire.

The first dagoba built in Anuradhapura, and the oldest in Sri Lanka, is the **Thuparama**. It was built during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa (3rd century BC) to enshrine the Buddha's right collarbone - a gift from the Emperor Asoka. Originally the dagoba was much smaller in size but was extensively renovated and rebuilt over the centuries, most recently in 1862. The graceful monolithic pillars that surround the dagoba once supported a circular wooden roof.

Thera Mahinda himself introduced Theravada Buddhism and also chetiya worship to Ceylon. At his request King Devanampiyatissa built Thuparamaya in which was enshrined the collarbone of the Buddha and is considered as the first dagoba built in Ceylon, after the introduction of Buddhism. This chetiya was built in the shape of a heap of paddy. This dagoba was destroyed from time to time. During the reign of King Agbo II it was completely destroyed and the King restored it. What we have today is the construction of the dagoba, done in 1862 AD. As it is today, after several renovations, in the course of the centuries, the monument has a diameter of 59 ft, at the base. The dome is 11 feet and 4 inches in height from the ground, 164 ½ in diameter. The compound is paved with granite and there are 2 rows of stone pillars round the dagoba. During the early period vatadage was built round the dagoba.



Thuparama



Sandakada Pahana (The Moonstone)

The elaborate moonstone is a distinctive element of ancient sculpture in the island. These semi-circular slabs of granite or gneiss acquired increasingly complex bands of decorations over the years. They range from the near abstract tongues of fire and bands of creeper vines - to symbolic interpretations of the four perils of life

The latter consists of the elephant, a symbol of birth, the bull indicative of decay; the lion, representing disease and the geese, a symbol of death. Some also have a band of geese, which represents the distinction between good, and evil. To some, the moon-stone is symbolic of transcending worldly temptations and achieving nibbana. At the heart of many moonstones is a lotus petal.





The most impressive of the dagobas in Anuradhapura, if only for its enormous size, is the **Ruvanweli**. Built by King Dutugemunu who ruled the country in 2nd century BC, the structure now measures 55 metres in height, although originally it may have reached almost twice that height. The structure is supported by the so-called "Elephant Wall" - a ring of carved elephants, of which a few originals remain.

After defeating the Tamil King Elara, King Dutugemunu became the lord of entire Sri Lanka. Having achieved his ambition he became a benefactor of Buddhism and erected many religious buildings. Among them Ruwanvelisaya is the best known. This is also known as the Mahathupa. Swarnamali Chaitya and Rathnamali Dagaba. On the four sides of the compound are the parapet walls with its figures of elephants and has been made to appear as though it was supported by the elephants. There are 1900 figures of elephants on the wall consisting of 475 on each side. Therefore it is known as the elephant compound. The pinnacle of Ruwanvelisaya is 24 ft, in height. The crest gem on the pinnacle is a gift from Burma. Ruvanvalisaya is situated a few yards away from Lovamahapaya.



Ruwanveliseya or Mahathupa





The largest of the dagobas at Anuradhapura is the **Jetavana**. When it was constructed, by King Mahasena in the 3rd century AD, it reached a height of 120 metres, making it the third highest building in the world at that time, and the tallest dagoba in the world. It stands on a large concrete base, the foundations of which go 12 meters deep into the ground. The Jetavana Dagoba was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and its superstructure is currently undergoing restoration.

A part of a sash (belt tied by the Buddha is believed to be enshrined here). This stupa belongs to the Sagalika sect. The compound of the stupa is 8 acres. Each side of the stupa is 576 feet. The 4 flights of steps at the four sides are each 28 feet long.



Jetavana Dagoba







Jetavana Gedige (the doorway to the shrine)











The **Abhayagiri Dagoba** is the second largest monument of its kind in Sri Lanka, built by King Vattagamani Abhaya (103 -102 BC) adjacent to a footpath allegedly used by Buddha. When it was constructed the monument stood almost 110 metres high with a diameter of 95 metres, although now its height is only 75 metres. The dagoba was both repaired and enlarged by later kings. Around the Abhayagiri Dagoba stood a monastery complex with a community of about 5000 monks. The exterior is adorned with elephant reliefs and to the north of the building stands a stone slab with the imprint of what is believed to be the Buddha's footprint. Inside, the dagoba houses a sacred tooth relic of the Buddha plus Buddhist scriptures inscribed in gold.

Shortly after the construction, the monks of the Mahavihara took disciplinary action against one of the bhikkhus of the Abhayagiri Vihara, for violating a rule of the vinaya. Thereafter the bhikkhus of the Abhayagiri Vihara founded a separate sect. King Valagamba's reign is marked by this important event - the first schism in Buddhism in Ceylon. Most learned bhikkhus lived in Abhayagiri Vihara. It consisted of a large library. It is recorded that during the reigns of King Voharakatissa and King Gothabhaya this library was destroyed and the heretical monks driven away. King Parakramabahu renovated Abhayagiri Vihara, to a height said to have been 140 cubits. In the year 1875, Abhayagiri Vihara which had a diameter of 307 feet at its base, stood to a height of 231 feet. The relics of the Buddha are said to have been enshrined in a figure of a bull made out of thick gold.



Abhayagiri Dagoba

A key-shaped pond near Abhayagiri Stupa. The assembly hall can be seen at the back.



The most sacred spot in all of Anuradhapura is the site of the **Sri Maha Bodhi**, or the sacred Bo tree. The right branch of the Bo tree under which prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment in North India was brought to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BC by Princess Sanghamitta, daughter of Emperor Asoka and sister of the saint Mahinda.

King Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BC) planted the branch in Anuradhapura and it has been venerated as a sacred site and pilgrimage destination ever since. It is the oldest historically documented tree in the world, and now stands upon a special platform, a *bodhigara*, encircled by a gold plated railing.

This incident took place a few months after the arrival of Mahinda Thera. Amidst much rejoicing and ceremony, this tree was planted at Maha Mevuna Uyana. It was planted on a high terrace about 21 feet above the ground and surrounded by railings and today it is one of the most sacred relics of the Buddhists in Ceylon. There are other bo-trees in close proximity to this sacred bo-tree. The parapet wall round the compound where the bo-tree is planted is about 700 ft. in length. This wall was constructed during the reign of King Kirthi Sri Rajasingha, to protect it from the wild elephants.



The Mahabodhi



The original sapling became the larger branch to the left (supported).





Nuns praying at the Mahabodhi



One of several other Bo trees planted around the Mahabodhi for support and protection.

The **Lovamahapaya** was built in the 2nd century BC by King Dutugemunu (161-137 BC), only to burn down 15 years later. Originally the building had nine stories, 1,000 rooms (which housed as many monks and attendants) and a roof of copper tiles. What remains are 1,600 stone pillars (40 rows, each row consisting of 40) all in close proximity, which once supported the building. One side of the building was 400 ft in length. As the roof was covered with tiles made of bronze, it was also known as the Brazen Palace.

It is situated between Ruvanveliseya and Sri Mahabodiya. In ancient times the building included the refectory and the uposathagara. (Uposatha house). There was also a simamalake where the sangha assembled on poya days to recite the formula of the confessional. It is believed that it took 6 years for the construction of the building. The building was completely destroyed during the reign of King Saddhatissa.

It had been reconstructed many times over the centuries, each time a little less grand. The last was in the 12 century. The existing structure is a small scale replica which serves as a museum.



Lovamahapaya or Lohaprasadaya (Brazen Mansion)

Samadhi Buddha

Samadhi - a state of inner communion with the object of contemplation - is one of the ultimate stages of Buddhist spiritual practice. To this day, whether local Sri Lankans or visiting dignitaries, supplicants place flowers at the base of the divinely beautiful Samadhi Buddha statue, situated amongst the extensive remains of the ancient religious city of Anuradhapura.

It is said to belong to the Abeygiriya period of the 3rd or 4th century of Sri Lanka's history. It is not known in whose period of rule it was sculptured but is thought to be one of four similar statues facing the North, South, East and West- this faces North.

The statue was found in 1888, with the nose damaged, at the very site in which it now sits. Raven Hart in his "Ceylon - History in Stone" says that the repaired nose is over sharp and overlarge. Perhaps the repair was carried out by an ordinary mason who had no idea of proportions or aesthetics. This is not unusual, as there are many such instances of poor quality repairs in this country of damaged statues, stone carvings and particularly restoration of ancient temple paintings.

The Statue is 7'3" in height, hewn from a single granite rock and said to have had two jewels for the eyes which are said to have gone missing in around 1914. The veracity of this is in question as the eyes are closed with no place for jewels. The canopy over the statue was constructed in 1959/60.

Jawaharlal Nehru admired it when he first saw the statue in 1931. A year later when he was in the Dehra Dun jail a friend in Ceylon sent him a picture which he had with him in his cell and " it became a precious companion" he said.

Benjamin Rawland in his book "Art and Architecture of India" describes the statue thus, "The perfect embodiment of the idea of Samadhi is conveyed through the very simplicity of conception; the perfect material equilibrium of the figure connotes the perfect mental state of the Sakyamuni through the massive stability of the triangular base formed by the inter locked legs mounted by the erect column body which supports the perfectly impassive mask like face."

The Samadhi statue is symbolic of the tranquility of mind, with no attraction or repulsion from the world outside to disturb.



The **Kuttam Pokuna**, or Twin Ponds, are two magnificent ponds exemplifying both artistic and architectural achievement in the field of hydraulic engineering. They are situated in close proximity to Abhayagiri Vihara. The garden which separates these 2 ponds is 18 ½ ft. The larger of this pair is 132 ft in length and 51 ft in breadth, while the smaller is 91 feet long, the breadth is the same. The depth of the smaller pond is 14 feet and the larger pond is 18 feet. The sides and the bottom of the ponds were faced with well cut granite slabs. Round the pond is a magnificent wall. Leading to the pond are a beautiful flight of steps on both sides, decorated with "punkalas" and scroll design. There were underground ducts bringing water into these ponds and others emptying them. A wall is built to enclose the ponds, and inside it is a small compound.



Kuttam Pokuna, or Twin Ponds

Mihintale



