Contested Histories

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International Centre for Ethnic Studies

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Hasini Haputhanthri is a Sri Lankan heritage management specialist and museologist with over fifteen years of experience reimagining the role of culture and heritage in post-conflict societies. Her work explores how museums, memory practices, and heritage spaces can foster civic dialogue, social inclusion, and ethical engagement with the past, particularly in contexts marked by conflict and displacement. Trained in Sociology at Delhi University, Asian Studies at Lund University, and Museum Anthropology and Oral History at Columbia University, Hasini bridges rigorous academic insight with hands-on heritage practice. Her publications include 'Museums, Memory and Identity Politics in Sri Lanka', 'Archive of Memory' and 'Shared Sanctities'. She continues to study art and architectural history with a focus on exploring shared roots.

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To the memory of

Prof. Senake Bandaranayake,

Dr. Sudharshan Seneviratne,

and Dr. Malathi de Alwis,

who changed the way I look at heritage,

and through it, the world itself.

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Introduction

That Unforgettable Trip

Abhayagiriya monastic complex, Anuradhapura

I have cherished childhood memories of a family trip to Anuradhapura. Like many Sinhala-Buddhists in Southern Sri Lanka, we got together with a few family friends and neighbours, booked a circuit bungalow through a government contact, hired a TATA bus, secured our luggage, provisions, and cauldrons of dhal and seeni sambol on its hood rack with enormous ropes, and embarked on a '*vandanava*' (pilgrimage). Although we made many memorable stops by unknown rivers and streams along the way, Anuradhapura, with its impressive array of ancient stupas and tanks, overshadowed them all. The serene surprise of the Samadhi statue

amidst the leafy grove of Mahamewna, the colossal stillness of Abhayagiriya stupa, and the evening light on the waters of Basawakkulama reservoir left lasting impressions. We had no historian among us to recount finer details and we did not need one. Most adults in our group identified with the sites we visited, knew who built what and what happened where, and took turns to share these stories with the children. I also recall the circuit bungalow where we stayed near Kuttam Pokuna, the twin ponds. We explored the scrub jungle in its backyard and discovered two perfectly chiselled guard stones and a partially buried moonstone! As an adult, I often wish to revisit and relocate those ruins. The thought of those guard stones out there, unprotected and vulnerable to smuggling, troubles me.

I may not have grasped the full significance of this experience then, but in hindsight, it is clear. Without memory, without history, one has no identity. This formative incident is one of the earliest moments where I felt a connection to something beyond and bigger than myself; something that is not mine to take home as an individual, but that I care about nonetheless; something that defines who I am: our heritage. The term 'our heritage' - in Sinhala '*ape urumaya*' - indicates that heritage is collectively owned by a group of people who share a common history. Here, the collective comprises urban Sinhalese Buddhists from Southern Sri Lanka.

In this book, I wish to explore how heritage affects our social discourses in contemporary Sri Lanka. Given that our island is home to diverse communities, how do we relate to heritage individually, communally and collectively? We come across heritage every day, at every turn on this island, and some of them bear complicated histories, are often marked by violence and signify painful memories to some communities while not to others. By exploring five sites with contesting interpretations and claims, I try to develop an idea of inclusive heritage management for a collective future.

Unpacking 'Heritage'

Although strongly associated with history, art history and archaeology, heritage is different from these academic disciplines; it is shaped by mythology, ideology, local pride, and also, marketing (Winter, 2015). It is easy to forget that our ways of seeing are often influenced and framed by others, be they our grandmothers telling us tales, our history teachers in school, or media channels staging a spectacle at a sacred site close to an upcoming election. Though heritage is associated with terms such as intangible and tangible cultural heritage, it transcends such easy categorizations. Theoretical interpretations could be limited in describing the dynamic relationship between people and their heritage. I found it more useful to

understand it in everyday common-sense terms, as expressed in Michael Oakeshott's idea of the 'practical past'.

The idea of the practical past involves the ordinary people and their version of the past received through lived experience. These could be stories, objects and displays, representations and engagements, spectacular locations and events, memories and commemorations, and the preparation of places for cultural purposes and consumption (White, 2014; Waterton, 2015). In this book, I work with this understanding of heritage.

The relationship with 'our' heritage is one of strong emotion, which in modern times has led to it being associated with other phenomena characterized by strong emotions. Implied in the term 'our' is a sense of belonging to a particular group that inevitably excludes others: Tim Winter's paper, 'Heritage and Nationalism: An Unbreachable Couple?' examines the relationship between cultural heritage and nationalism. The paper provides historical examples to illustrate the impact of heritage on cultural nationalisms. For instance, the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple highlights the role of heritage in shaping national narratives. The discussion on heritage and nationalism is not unique to Sri Lanka and one can find many parallels in the region and beyond. What is also noticeable is the unbreachable connection of heritage sites with religion. All over the world, thousands of heritage sites are religious spaces, linked to continued worship that connects the present ritually with the past. Hence, the concept of 'living heritage'. This means that the past is inseparable from the present.

Another associated concept that easily comes up when discussing heritage is that of conservation. This urgent need, (I recall the sensation I experienced about those unprotected guard stones and ruins in the jungle, for instance) dominates most conversations on heritage. Again, it is not the technical processes of conservation, but the very human idea of it. There is something about heritage that immediately triggers a fear of loss and insecurity, making us feel protective and defensive. It feels too valuable to lose, implying underlying connections to ownership, belonging, and purpose, both at individual and collective levels. For instance, historical tales tell us how, especially in times of war, heritage sites become prime locations of destruction and erasure. This highlights the predicament of heritage in conflict and how it transforms the meanings and significance to different parties. Thus, heritage signifies sentiments beyond connection, continuity, belonging, pride and love. It may come to represent disconnect, defeat, loss, pain and suffering. More often than not, heritage embodies both positive and negative connotations simultaneously.

From Conservation to Management

I propose to advance this discussion on conservation to 'heritage management'. Heritage management refers to the processes involved in the identification, protection, preservation and promotion of cultural and historical sites and assets, in a way that is meaningful to the diverse communities associated with them. It is closely tied to sustainable development, as it seeks to balance the conservation of heritage with the needs of present communities. The modern approach to heritage management is multifaceted and transcends the technicalities of conservation to address an array of social, cultural, economic and other contextual issues. It requires collaboration between stakeholders, including local communities, governments, and international organizations like UNESCO, which oversees the World Heritage Convention (Carbone et al., 2020).

The approach to heritage management can be subject to cultural and national variations. For example, in the South Asian context, where a rich diversity of religious, cultural and architectural heritage exists, the management of heritage takes on unique complexities. The five case studies documented in this book highlight the politics of heritage in a post-colonial and post-civil-war context in Sri Lanka, in which there are multiple claims to ownership and identification. Compared to heritage sites in other South Asian countries, which face challenges like rapid urbanization and environmental degradation, the sites documented in this book underscore the need to contextualize these issues within national politics that often instrumentalize heritage.

There is a growing need to include local communities in heritage management efforts. Studies have shown that when communities are actively involved in the management and promotion of their cultural assets, these heritage sites are better preserved and more sustainable in the long term (Smith, 1994). This is particularly important in Sri Lanka, where many heritage sites are closely tied to religious and cultural practices of local populations.

Expanding the discussion to focus on inclusion is essential, particularly when addressing community engagement. This shift involves moving from a mindset rooted in insecurity and exclusion to one centred on understanding and empathy.

Heritage in the Plural Form

I follow a Facebook group called the Serendib Culture Club, a space dedicated to "recording, preserving and perpetuating traditional Sri Lankan Muslim Culture," where I recently came across writer Assif Hussein's childhood memories of a heritage site I had never heard of during my childhood. I only became aware of this site in the last decade or so due to the immense controversy it generated, widely discussed on social media.

"In our childhood days, our friends would often talk of a mystical place known as Jailani, an abode of the saints and a haunt of the jinn. We were told that the place was covered in thick jungle and that a special prayer had to be recited to guard oneself from the attacks of wild beasts. Those who did not do so, we were told, were doomed to meet an untimely death," recounts Hussein, going on to describe his visit to the site much later in life. In his articles, Hussein acknowledges the site – popular today as Daftar Jailani/Kuragala – as a place with many layers of history. It was once a cave complex sheltering Buddhist monks and later emerged as an important pilgrimage site for the Muslim community in the island and beyond.

Hussein approaches his heritage site through personal recollections and the collective knowledge of his community, much as I do with Anuradhapura. The drama that unfolded at Kuragala/Daftar Jailani stemmed from prioritizing one community's version of the past over others and focusing only on one layer of truth and erasing others. In the decade since the end of the war, disputes over diverse groups' understanding, relationships and memories of heritage sites have become a primary way in which violence continues. We may claim the war has ended, but we, the Sinhalese majority, exclude and marginalize numerical minorities by continuing to dominate and claim exclusively the heritage that can be shared.

From Shared Sanctities to Contested Histories

In a former publication titled *Shared Sanctities*, I explored several heritage sites in Sri Lanka, tracing their multiple historical layers, the confluence of cultures and religious traditions, and myriad art and architectural details that blend to create rich polyphonic spaces. The island is full of shared heritage sites such as Kataragama and Adams Peak, embellished in legend and lore, with long-established traditions of shared rituals and festivities. Then, how come we cannot share Kuragala/Daftar Jailani? What fuels the need to highlight and feed into a dominant narrative that eliminates others?

In such a skewed context, how do we approach heritage conservation where there are multiple layers of history? Which layer(s) do we highlight/conserve? And at the cost of what? How can we share heritage? How do we accommodate multiple narratives within a single site? How do we approach heritage situated in an area that has undergone recent violence and tragedy? These questions emerged repeatedly during the research phase on contested heritage.

While *Shared Sanctities* covered well-known heritage sites, the locations discussed here are engulfed in controversy. Unlike the familiar sites in Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy, these sites were unknown to most Sinhala-Buddhists, including myself. They burst into the heritage scene post-war, making headlines, attracting celebrities and politicians, and becoming entangled in court cases and legal battles. These sites are characterized by confusing and competing narratives and claims. The social media battles, ranging from disputes over historical provenance to outright hate speech against minority communities, call for action and reflection.

A Note on Methodology and Limitations

The central premise of this investigation is that heritage sites contribute to a profound awareness and historical consciousness, shaping how communities perceive each other. The five sites examined were selected based on their relevance to ongoing tensions among identity groups. These sites have multiple interpretations, some with no consensus on their history despite strong emotional significance to communities. This has led to confrontations and disagreements between communities, government authorities, and political and ideological groups. However, these sites also hold the potential for coexistence, as observed in places like Kataragama. They play a vital role in shaping contemporary political life, influencing historical and ideological narratives and profoundly impacting public opinion.

The five selected sites are:

1. Dakkhina Stupa/ Elara Memorial, Anuradhapura District
2. Kadurugoda Vihara/ Kandarodai, Jaffna District
3. Kuragala/ Daftar Jailani, Kalthota, Ratnapura District
4. Kurundi Vihara/ Kurunthimalai, Mullaitivu District
5. Muhudu Maha Vihara, Ampara District

Three of the sites, namely Kurundi, Kuragala and Muhudu Maha Vihara are more politicized and have received more public attention than Kandarodai and Dakkhina Stupa. The aim was to document the multiple narratives around sites as a starting point. Some of the questions explored about each site were:

- What does the site look like in the present? (field documentation)
- What are the dominant and alternative narratives? (desk study, study of social media content on YouTube and Facebook)
- What do subject experts and politicians say? (individual interviews, media interviews, news reports, published research)
- What do local communities around those contested sites have to say? (field interviews)

During the field visits, a site coordinator facilitated connections with local communities and arranged interviews with residents in the surrounding areas.

These interviews, conducted in Sinhala and Tamil, often involved sensitive topics, leading many interviewees to request anonymity, which I have honoured.

A set of interviews were conducted with historians, archaeologists, journalists and a social media monitoring group. In some cases, it was possible to interview archaeologists who were directly involved in excavating the heritage site. These intellectuals came from the Universities of Colombo, Jaffna, Peradeniya, Moratuwa and Kelaniya and represented a variety of viewpoints. They also represented different ethnic, religious and ideological affiliations. Although the Department of Archaeology was contacted, due to the sensitivity around some of the sites, an interview could not be organized with high-ranking officials. It was possible to access some internal experiences and reflections of the Department officials through some of the recorded online presentations in the public domain about initial archaeological surveys in the North and East after the war. In total, the research draws on twenty-four interviews conducted during the research phase.

A desk study surveyed already published literature on these sites. These included academic publications, archaeological survey reports, journalistic articles printed in newspapers, internet articles, 'official' websites of some heritage sites, and popular history books such as printed material available at the site and coffee table publications. Some social media discussions were traced to understand how these heritage sites were interpreted by the public. These channels were Facebook, YouTube and, to a lesser degree, Twitter/X.

The primary limitation of the study stems from constraints in time and resources, which prevented multiple visits to the sites. Although interviews with residents near the sites were conducted, it became evident that more time spent on field interviews was essential to fully grasp the impact of these heritage sites on the surrounding communities. These local voices were conspicuously absent from the media discourse dominated by politicians, Buddhist monks, popular historians and pop stars. For example, pop artist Iraj featured Kuragala on his YouTube discussion channel, where he interviewed the chief monk of the Kuragala temple. Each site highlighted in this study demonstrated a significant need for further research, documentation, conservation and public awareness.

The topic's inherent challenge lies in its politicization and polarization into ideological camps. Some interviewees openly declared their ideological allegiances, which helped contextualize their ideas. Efforts were made to listen to all ethnic groups and ideological perspectives. It was challenging to summarize and

contextualize the diverse viewpoints, narratives, opinions, legends, beliefs and historical records.

Some sites were elusive. For instance, the exact location of the Tomb of Elara could not be established, as even locals were unsure of its place. Some had heard of it but were unaware of its exact location, as it is not featured in the popular pilgrim route in Anuradhapura. Based on speculations that the Dakkhina Stupa might be the Tomb of Elara, this site was photo-documented. Other sites were comparatively easier to identify and were documented between December 2023 and March 2024.

Maintaining rigour and relying on evidence was a challenge. The archaeological dimension demanded evidence, while the anthropological and political dimensions often overshadowed its validity. The extensive narratives spanning pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial and post-war periods made fact-checking a massive challenge. To address this, a historiographical method was adopted to record different perspectives and debates. Overarching observations are recorded at the end of the five essays on the sites.

The researchers involved in documenting, coordinating, translating and interpreting interviews, including myself, are all Sri Lankans. The field research and site coordination team included two Sinhalese, a Tamil and a Muslim.

In presenting the rich, complex and, at times, incomplete material gathered, I chose to retain a journalistic style. How heritage sites are interpreted matters. Providing multiple narratives - beyond the dominant one - acknowledges diverse histories and perspectives. For example, local communities' input on interpreting such sites is as insightful as the expert opinion of an archaeologist. I have presented these as 'Stories of Place and Memory' under each article. The articles are framed to provide an overview of the sites, their contestations, multiple perspectives, and the significance they hold for communities, to further a dialogue on issues affecting Sri Lanka today.

Thus, it is best to consider these articles as work in progress. Even as work in progress, considering them together triggered an important set of reflections, which have been documented in a concluding chapter.

I have tried to approach the sites as I approached them in *Shared Sanctities* – not as mere case studies of contemporary political turmoil, but as sites of great presence, beauty and serenity.

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Dakkhina Stupa, Anuradhapura

In Search of a Tomb: Dakkhina Stupa/Elara Memorial Anuradhapura

Along the way to the much-venerated 'Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi', the sacred peepul tree in Anuradhapura, a nearly forgotten stupa lies in deep slumber amidst well-manicured lawns. Devotees who visit the more celebrated sacred sites treat Dakkhina stupa as an afterthought. The site feels forlorn but peaceful. The ancient brick structure retains the signature bell-like shape with moss-covered bricks commonly found in Buddhist architecture. A handful of workers from the Department of Archaeology battle with the elements as a troop of monkeys watch on languidly.

Few scholars will remember that this tranquil site once sparked a prolonged academic debate over its identity. Some argued that the stupa commemorated a legendary Sinhala king, while others claimed it honoured a historic Tamil ruler - rivals entwined in an epic battle. It is a tale of war and peace, retold and revoked by the Sinhala-Buddhist majority through an array of rich cultural depictions. The Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist narrative claims that the Dakkhina stupa is the burial site of King Dutugemunu's remains. The more popular Tamil interpretation espouses that the stupa consecrates the remains of King Elara – a respected Tamil leader who ruled Anuradhapura in a just and effective manner. While some scholars offer different narratives that further complicate perspectives, the two narratives remain connected to the ethnic tension between the Sinhalese-Buddhist claim and the Tamil claim to the island and its territory. In the narratives of communities and popular media, there is space available to explore both possibilities. Both Sinhalese and Tamil pilgrims used to venerate Dakkhina stupa/Tomb of Elara, but in recent years, the site has lost a large part of its popularity.

Sacred Geography

Anuradhapura is an ancient capital of Sri Lanka and the sacred heart of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Mahavamsa and Poojavaliya, two historical classics written in the fifth and thirteenth centuries CE, describe Anuradhapura as a place visited by the Buddha himself. The Bodhi tree, a sapling from the very tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment in Bodh Gaya India, remains the pinnacle of '*atamasthana*' (the eight sacred sites) every Buddhist pilgrim must visit once in a lifetime. This ancient route, referenced in classical chronicles, has evolved, with each account presenting a slightly different list of the locations where the Buddha is said to have visited during his three renowned journeys to the island. There has even been an 'Atamasthana Committee' of 1871, mentioned in colonial documentation. The current list of eight sacred sites, however, seems to have evolved from the work of Walisinghe Harischandra (1876–1913), a figurehead of Buddhist revivalism and, more significantly, the pioneer in restoring Buddhist heritage in Anuradhapura. His book *The Sacred City of Anuradhapura*, with its famous section called 'The Journey to Anuradhapura and the Best Way to See the Shrines and Ruins' (pages 105-130, second edition), guides the never-ending flow of pilgrims to the city.

It is in this sacred geography, drawn by Harischandra, that we must situate our forlorn moss-covered stupa.

Seeds of Controversy

The controversy surrounding the site is linked to the contentious identities in modern Sri Lanka which have roots in the island's religious and cultural past. The two ethno-religious groups – Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus - differ in their interpretation of historical texts and archaeological evidence, producing competing narratives serving conflicting ethno-nationalist positions.

In the nineteenth century, this particular ruin in question was called the Tomb of Elara (also referred to as Elala, deriv. Ellalan), the most well-known Tamil king of the island. Most colonial administrators have referred to the site as such, following folklore and rituals at the time. Both Sinhala and Tamil communities, though they could not pinpoint the exact location, are familiar with the name 'Elara Sohona/Tomb of Elara' even today.

In 1946, archaeologist Senarath Paranavithana identified the site as Dakkhina stupa, rejecting the widespread belief of the 'Elara Sohona'. He proposed that the stupa was once known as the 'Tissa Maha Cetiya' and that it consecrates, in fact, the remains of King Elara's rival, the revered warrior King Dutugemunu. Over the years, some Tamil scholars and politicians have disputed this claim.

In 1981, the Jaffna Archaeological Society published a detailed account by Tamil scholar James Rutnam which contested the claims of the Sinhalese archaeologist Senarath Paranavithana. Though the site has attracted less public attention compared to other heritage sites in recent years, one finds occasional flashes on the media: for instance, in 2016, Tamil politician Douglas Devananda requested the government to further explore the tomb of Elara and take action to preserve it as such ("Jaffna District MP Wants Elara Tomb Located and Preserved", Sunday Times, 22.07.2016). Devananda called out the government's plan to restore the palace of Dutugemunu and asked that the same attention be given to restoring the Tomb of Elara. Importantly, he drew attention to the public opinion on the Dutugemunu–Elara war, which, according to him, was misunderstood as a communal conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils.

Information panels by Department of Archaeology at the site follow Paranavithana's thesis. There is no mention of the alternative explanations.

The Great War

The dispute surrounding Dakkhina Stupa, or the Tomb of Elara, sheds light on Sri Lanka's modern heritage politics, which is intricately tied to diverse interpretations of the island's ancient history. Though reducing history to a few select events is fraught with oversimplification, the legendary battle between King Dutugemunu and King Elara dominates the public imagination, emerging as one of the most frequently invoked episodes in contemporary political discourse.

For the majority Sinhala community, this tale of valour and conquest serves as a cherished narrative of ancient warfare, political rivalry and territorial claims. Though popular opinion tends to represent this as a communal conflict, as mentioned by Devananda, contemporary historians refute such simplistic parallels between ancient political rivalries and modern ethno-religious categories. Still, in the arena of modern politics, the reductive version prevails. For instance, the last battle of Vijithapura, traditionally dated to 161-162 BCE and a climactic moment in Dutugemunu's campaign, has often been invoked in the discourse on Sri Lanka's recent conflicts. After the civil war ended in 2009, General Sarath Fonseka, who led the Sri Lankan army to victory, likened pivotal battles of the modern era to this ancient clash.

In the popular Sinhalese version of events, Dutugemunu is the ultimate hero and Elara his opponent. Historian Nirmal Dewasiri analyzes some of the popular depictions of the Elara-Dutugemunu war in his paper 'History after the War: Historical Consciousness in the Collective Sinhala-Buddhist psyche in Post War Sri Lanka' (2013). He argues that, "in Sinhala-Buddhist ideology, the Dutugemunu-Elara war could be considered the ultimate reference point for just-war ideology and the articulation and re-articulation of this story, therefore, is closely linked to the justification of the war against Tamil militants."

The cultural resonance of this war extends beyond historical analysis, shaping the public imagination through a rich tapestry of retellings. It has produced a plethora of cultural depictions, including television series, films, dramas, novels, art and an array of public murals. Historical artist Prasanna Jayakody's painting 'The Fall of Elara', possibly signifying the defeat of the LTTE to the Sinhala majority, became a reference image in the street art campaign during the run-up to the presidential election of 2019, won by Gotabhaya Rajapaksa.

The competing claims over Dakkhina Stupa/Tomb of Elara should be understood in the context of polarized ideologies and cultural narratives.

Remembering Maharaja Gemunu

In Anuradhapura, Dutugemunu is memorialized by the great stupa he built, Ruwanweli Seya, the most visited pilgrim site in the sacred city, and not by Dakkhina Stupa, which Paranavithana identifies as his mausoleum. Today, an image house next to the great stupa depicts the Battle of Vijithapura, though what acts as a personified monument per se for the devotees is the statue of Dutugemunu in front of the stupa.

The Mahavamsa gives a detailed and dramatic account of Dutugemunu's demise: in this oft-repeated tale, the king died facing the stupa. As it was unfinished at the time of his death, his brother covered the great stupa in white cloth and feigned completion. Dutugemunu died joyously, with heavenly charioteers waiting to take him to Thusitha – the best of the seven heavens. It mentions the place where his body was cremated as Raja Malaka. Paranavithana connects this historical description to the location of Dakkhina Stupa, but no Buddhist pilgrim visiting Anuradhapura today turns away from Ruwanweli Seya to visit Dakkhina Stupa to remember their hero-king.

Mural depiction on the wall of Panadura Balika Girls School by a group of artists follow the painting by famed historical painter Prasanna Jayakody's 'Fall of Elara' during the 2019 presidential campaign of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa.

Competing Narratives

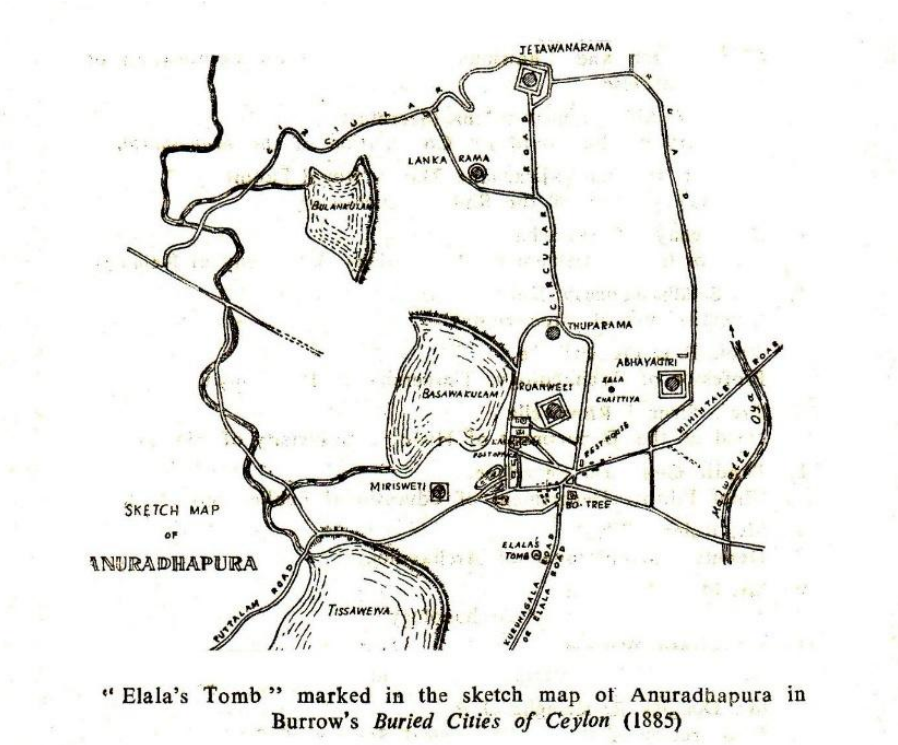
Much of the tracing of textual clues to this mystery is documented in James Rutnam's work. According to him, popular narratives about the site begin with the earlier belief, mentioned in colonial documentation, that this stupa consecrates the remains of King Elara. Legend and historic chronicles, including the Mahavamsa, relate not just a violent account of war but a tale of two just and respected rulers. King Elara, notwithstanding his ascent to the island's throne following an invasion, ruled the Anuradhapura kingdom justly and with integrity. He agreed to end the war in a duel with Dutugemunu to prevent further bloodshed. The tale relates how King Dutugemunu, in the prime of his youth and strength, won the duel, bringing an end to his much older opponent's reign and life. It is said that the young king truly respected and honoured his slain rival, conducted proper funeral rites, and built an elaborate tomb in his honour. He later decreed that anyone who passes the tomb should pay their respects to King Elara.

Early references to the Tomb of Elara appear in the Mahavamsa. The chronicles describe the final duel between the two warring leaders and goes on to say, "On the spot where his body has fallen, he burned it with the catafalque and there did he build a monument and ordain worship." King Dutugemunu is said to have later erected a pillar with the inscription, "Let no man, prince, or peasant, in future pass this way riding in palanquin or litter with beating of drums" (Rutnam, 1981).

In their book titled, *Eleven Years in Ceylon* (1840), George Turnour and Jonathan Forbes describe the whereabouts of the Tomb of Elara. "The ruined tomb of an infidel is now looked upon by many Buddhist pilgrims as the remnant of a sacred edifice, although twenty centuries have elapsed since the death of Elara. I do not believe that the injunctions of his conqueror have ever been disregarded by a native. In 1818 Pilima Talawa, the head of the oldest Kandyan family, when attempting to escape, after the suppression of the rebellion in which he had been engaged, alighted from his litter, although weary and almost incapable of exertion; and not knowing the precise spot, walked on until assured that he had passed far beyond this ancient memorial" (Rutnam, 1981).

S.M. Burrows, who was an archaeological surveyor between 1884 and 1886, mentions Dakkhina stupa/Tomb of Elara in his 1885 book, *Buried Cities of Ceylon*. "The site is marked by a conical mound of earth, nor was the generous monument less lasting; as in 1816 (sic) Pilima Talawe, the head of the leading Kandyan clan was escaping through Anuradhapura after the unsuccessful attempt at insurrection, he alighted from his litter, weary as he was, and walked on until he was well past the

venerable memorial." The book presents a map of Anuradhapura, which recognized the present day Dakkhina stupa site as the Elara Tomb (Rutnam, 1981).



Sketch depicting Elara's tomb. From colonial administrator S M Burrows' 'Buried Cities of Ceylon' (1885)

The popular narrative of the Tomb of Elara, with a long-held royal and ritual decree to offer due reverence upheld through time and its identification with the current site can be traced to these colonial accounts.

Later, in 1896, British archaeologist H.C.P Bell speculated the possibility of the stupa being built by Kanittha Tissa (A. D. 165-193) in the cluster of monasteries in Dakshinarama as chronicled in the Dipavamsa. However, later he concludes that Elara's body was cremated and his remains consecrated in a tomb where he fell, near the southern gate of the city of Anuradhapura as chronicled in the Mahavamsa. He summarizes that this site would be in the neighbourhood of the Dakshina Vihara constructed by the warrior Uttiya half a century later in the reign of Wattagamani Abhaya (Mahavamsa XXXIII: 90) (Dipavamsa XIX: 19) (Rutnam, 1981).

Paranavithana, hailed by many as the Father of Sri Lankan Archaeology, certainly departed from these colonial musings. He became the Commissioner of Archaeology in 1940 and in 1946 started the excavation of 'Elara Sohona' continuing

until 1949. His observations on the site appear in an article titled 'The Dakkhina Thupa of Anuradhapura: The Tomb of Duttagamini' in Paranavithana's book *Glimpses of Ceylon's past*. His observations, based on archaeological evidence, offer the interpretation that the stupa was built over the cremation site of King Dutugemunu, the complete opposite of the belief that the tomb is Elara's. Popular media and internet sources claim that Paranavithana's discovery of a slab inscription also revealed that, at one point, the stupa was referred to as the Tissa Maha Cetiya, following the information made available by the Department of Archaeology at the site.

Beyond the colonial archaeologists and their local successors, there are other stories about the site. One such account is found in a book titled *Historical Guide to Anuradhapura's Ruins* (1939) by a prominent lawyer and author Hubert Weerasooriya: "When Anuradhapura was being excavated, all the Indian conservancy coolies and other Tamil labourers settled down in this part of the city, and owing to a lack of better facilities began to use this jungle-covered mound for purposes far from religious. To stop this sacrilege, an intelligent Buddhist spread the rumour that it was the very tomb of their renowned king Elara that they were desecrating. This news soon got around, and the dirty practice quickly came to an end. But though it attained its purpose the misnomer remained." (Weerasooriya, 1939).

A handful of other scholars and archaeologists have attempted to criticize Paranavithana's interpretation of the site. Former Assistant Archaeological Commissioner, R. H. de Silva, published his own analysis and criticism of Paranavithana's findings in the Ceylon Observer Sunday Morning edition of 24 March 1957. Similarly, Rutnam challenges Paranavithana's claims, advocating for a more rigorous examination of the evidence and additional research to provide a clearer understanding of Elara's tomb and its historic and regional context. He argues that Elara's tomb is not only an archaeological site but also a symbol of the cultural and political history of the region. Rutnam underscores the importance of the tomb in the collective memory and identity of the Tamil and Sinhalese communities.

Stories of Place and Memory

Today, the site is located within the confines of Anuradhapura's '*pooja nagaraya*' the historic and sacred district of the city dedicated to pilgrimage, away from any community neighbourhoods. This was not always the case. In 1993, the Tamil community who resided in the vicinity were resettled to the nearby villages of Neeraviya or Devanampiyatissa Pura through the Gam Udawa programme, conducted by the Government of Sri Lanka under former President R. Premadasa's guidance. The Gam Udawa programme, along with other post-colonial government relocation initiatives, has faced criticism for its role in population redistribution and its impact on ethnic dynamics, seen as shaping demographic patterns for political advantage.

Rajani (pseudonym), one of the relocated Tamil residents, says that she remembers the time when they lived near Dakkhina stupa/Tomb of Elara. She says that when she was younger and living near the site, Tamil pilgrims from Jaffna and other parts of the island used to visit Dakkhina stupa/Tomb of Elara and made offerings and conducted ceremonies. Today, she and her family are well-settled in their new home.

Sisira (pseudonym), a Sinhalese resident in Neeraviya, says that he remembers some people being relocated in the 1990s. Traditionally, his family has viewed the site as the 'Elara Sohona', and he is familiar with the folktales about and historical interpretations of how King Dutugemunu built a stupa to honour King Elara.

Residents in Anuradhapura hardly concern themselves with the identity politics surrounding the site. The commonly held perception amongst community members, Sinhala or Tamil, is that the site is the location of 'Elara Sohona,' the Tomb of Elara, a story passed down to the present generation by their parents and grandparents, a story that encapsulates respect and remorse for a fallen king.

Beyond Two Ancient Rivals

Not all Tamil historians subscribe to identifying the site as Elara's Tomb. A unique interpretation of the site surfaced in an article dated 24 July 2016, in the aftermath of the Tamil MP Devananda's request at the parliament. The article in 'The New Indian Express' cites Sri Lankan Tamil historian S. Pathmanathan as commenting that, "There is no evidence of Elara's tomb anywhere. If the massive pile of burnt

bricks near Anuradhapura is being touted as Elara's tomb, it is because nobody can read the inscription on it, which is in the Tamil Brahmi script." Pathmanathan is open to speculation. According to him, the structure could either have been a Hindu or a Buddhist temple, most probably a Buddhist temple, of the second century CE in which the Nagas (a Tamil-speaking people) ruled Anuradhapura. The Tamil Brahmi script inscription at the site signals that a Naga king built the structure. He suggests that, "The Nagas, who were animists, had, over time, converted either to Hinduism or Buddhism, and constructed shrines dedicated to these religions. Many of these shrines would carry an inscription saying '*Mani Naga*'" (Balachandran, 'What's Touted as Tamil King Elara's Tomb Is a Fable, Says Historian', 2016).

Pathmanathan's refreshing insight is more important than the identification of the site as Elara's or Dutugemunu's tomb. He complicates the modern understanding of ethno-religious categories as uninterrupted extensions of history. He offers an entirely different composition of people in ancient Sri Lanka, which is not a popular perspective, as it does not easily translate into how Sri Lankans understand themselves today.

Similarly, not all Sinhalese historians and archaeologists claim the site to be the tomb of Dutugemunu. Sinhalese archaeologist and artist Jagath Weerasinghe argues that, while historical chronicles may relate that King Dutugemunu built a stupa in honour of his fallen rival King Elara, the evidence is insufficient to establish the exact location. Consequently, the issue extends beyond the realm of archaeology. Weerasinghe suggests interpreting this matter through the lens of contemporary nationalist politics, emphasizing how Sinhala nationalist movements selectively use archaeological evidence to support their narrative of Sinhala-Buddhist identity in ancient Sri Lanka. This view highlights the influence of modern political agendas in shaping narratives about heritage sites, rather than relying on archaeological or historical research. Such a phenomenon can be observed across all groups contesting the identity of a site, especially in the context of the ethnic divisions that have shaped the country's history.

Finally, the story we can piece together reveals a landscape of inconclusive evidence intricately tied to the island's contemporary political dynamics. While further archaeological surveys hold promise, a more impactful approach may lie in adopting a heritage management strategy that addresses the current socio-political realities of a nation recovering from decades of conflict.

Reimagining Anuradhapura

The controversy surrounding the Dakkhina Stupa/Elara Tomb is confined to the political ideological groups and scholarly circles in Sri Lanka. Parallelly, communities that had a closer relationship with the site have been resettled and distanced from the site. Former rituals at the site have been abandoned, their memories slowly fading. Pilgrims arriving in busloads today hardly notice the site and speed past it to visit Sandahiru Seya. The newest stupa, the second largest in the island, is built to surpass all other stupas except the one that Dutugemunu built over two thousand years ago. Completed in 2021 by the soldiers of the Sri Lankan army under the patronage of the Rajapaksa government, Sandahiru Seya commemorates the fallen war heroes in the last battle against the LTTE. The symbolism is unmistakable. Though the Tomb of Elara/Dutugemunu may be forgotten, the legacy of the Great War looms large in the public imagination and will continue to shape the heritage and political landscape of the island.

The debates surrounding the Dakkhina Stupa or Tomb of Elara, as well as more recent manifestations of new stupas like Sandahiru Seya gain clarity when viewed through the lens of scholars Elizabeth Nissan and Pradeep Jeganathan, who illustrate how heritage, identity and nationalism reshape Anuradhapura's historical narrative. Both scholars reveal how Anuradhapura's history has been politicized: its stupas and temples transformed into symbols of Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony, fuelling nationalist ideologies and sidelining Tamil and Muslim histories. The city's modern story is as much about power and politics as it is about archaeology, exposing how heritage can both unite and divide.

Nissan examines how Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists have selectively emphasized Anuradhapura's Buddhist past to craft an image of unbroken Sinhala-Buddhist civilization, erasing the city's multi-ethnic heritage. By sidelining non-Sinhala contributions, this curated memory reinforces a cohesive but exclusionary narrative, using archaeological monuments to bolster political and cultural dominance.

Jeganathan highlights the colonial roots of this narrative, where British archaeology focused on the city's Buddhist identity, laying a foundation for post-colonial nationalist reinterpretations. He critiques the monolithic narratives that ignore Anuradhapura's rich diversity that has been shaped by centuries of interactions among ethnic and religious groups.

Nissan and Jeganathan reveal that the 'creation' of Anuradhapura's historical narrative is a deeply political process, shaped by both colonial legacies and contemporary nationalist agendas. By examining how history is constructed and used, they highlight the need for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Sri Lanka's past, particularly in the context of the country's continuing ethnic tensions.

Increasingly, scholars call for more poly-vocal interpretations of Anuradhapura's past, one that embraces its complexity and challenges the narratives that deepen Sri Lanka's ethnic divides. The forgotten Tomb of Elara or Dutugemunu quietly underscores the need to reimagine the ancient civilization of Anuradhapura for a modern, inclusive island.

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The Dilemma of Names and Narratives: Kandarodai/Kadurugoda Viharaya Jaffna

Cluster of small stupas at Kandarodai/Kadurugoda.

For those familiar with the immensity of Buddhist stupas in Anuradhapura towering hundreds of feet, Kandarodai – also known as Kadurugoda – comes as a surprise. These are the 'baby' stupas, twenty of them! Lodged on a grass meadow fringed with palmyra trees, these odd, semi-spherical structures of weathered-black limestone remind one of '*kom pittu*,' the small domes made with sand-filled coconut shells turned upside down by children at play. The largest of the stupas measures only seven meters in diameter. It is safe to claim that nothing else known on this island is quite like this. (Beyond Sri Lanka, several sites in South and Southeast Asia have similar configurations. Borobudur in central Java, for instance, has equally weathered-black semi-spherical Buddhist structures – the largest Buddhist temple

complex in the world. But Kandarodai has yet to be fully excavated and restored and so it cannot be compared on scale to Borobudur. It comes to mind, nonetheless.)

Borobudur, Central Java, a key Hindu-Buddhist site in Southeast Asia.

The site has a lot going on. The twenty stupas we see today were reconstructed by the Department of Archaeology in the second half of the twentieth century based on the original circular foundations made of stone, of which there are over sixty. It is possible that there are more. A metal fence separates the site from the surrounding neighbourhood, while a wire mesh marks the distinction between the stupas and the unexcavated terrain surrounding the site. When I visited the site in December 2023, the area was caught up in a spate of rapid transformation: a young peepul tree framed a compact image house for the Buddha. Going by the smell of fresh paint, the image house was recently built.

The site is an enduring mystery, even with the most basic of facts. That is to frame it positively. It is a hotbed of contestation and a boxing ring for historical outbidding and ethno-religious claims, like who came to the island first.

On most days, however, the atmosphere is quiet except for the flurry of a few goats and chickens feasting on the grass. On some holidays, pilgrims flock to Kandarodai. Nothing had prepared them for this – Buddhist stupas in a Hindu hinterland. The Sri Lanka Army are the state-appointed guardians now, overseeing the security and preservation of the site; their faces are still marked with the strain of a war that ended not so long ago.

The Quandary of Names

Image house built at Kadurugoda, Photographed by Chamindra Warusawitharane, December 2023.

The site boasts various names, spelled in numerous ways: Kandarodai is the Tamil name for the village and the site of the small stupas. It is also spelt as "Kantharodai" or "Kantarodai" or "Kanterodai." Another form is Kadiramalai, which can easily be confused with Kudiramalai, a fascinating historical site identified in the Northwestern shoreline of the island in the Wilpattu region. Several historical literary texts mention Kandarodai / Kadurugoda, including the Mahavamsa and Nampotha, which were written in Sinhala in the fifth and eleventh centuries CE respectively, as well as the Jaffna chronicles of Yalpana Vaipava Malai, written by

Tamil poet Mayil Vaakaanar in 1736. Tamil historians claim that 'Kadiramalai' mentioned in literature from the post-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries *is* Kandarodai.

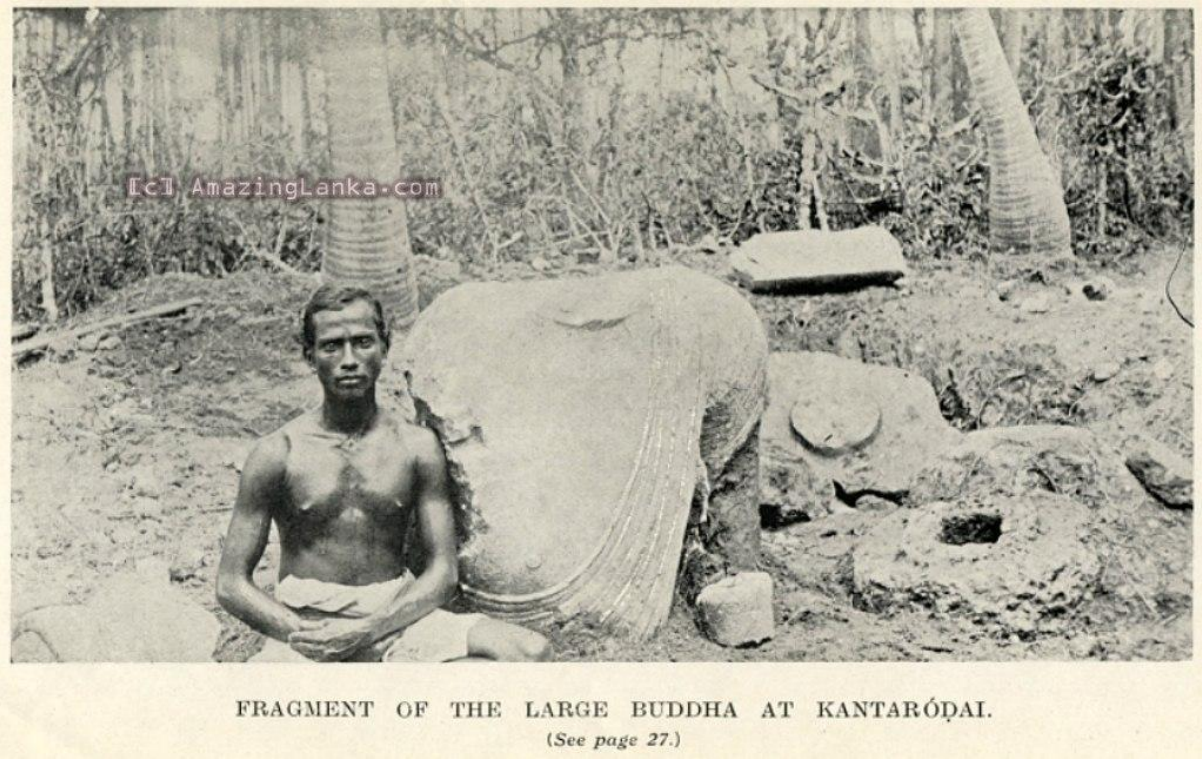
The modern Sinhala name Kadurugoda is sometimes mentioned as Kandurugoda. Some trace it back to the word, Kandavurugoda denoting a military encampment. In the chronicles foundational to the Sinhalese historical consciousness, both the Kudiramalai/Wilpattu region and the Jaffna peninsula are connected to the myth of arrival and the peopling of the island. In the Sinhalese imagination, Prince Vijaya, the first king of the Sinhalese, landed in the area with his compatriots, initiating monarchy and dynastic rule. A couple of centuries later, the sapling of the sacred peepul tree from Bodh Gaya under which Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment, now thriving in Anuradhapura for over two thousand years, was introduced to the island from a port in Jaffna.

Dambakola Patuna Temple, believed to be the port where Sangamitta landed, is a popular destination for tourists from the South. Source: Sri Lanka Travel Pages.

Names are not empty words. They signify stories the way a partially buried ruin embodies stories. At Kandarodai/Kadurugoda, controversy begins with the name. Picking a name is picking a side. Both terms Kandarodai and Kadurugoda will be used throughout this article.

Early Excavations

Kandarodai or Kadurugoda is an archaeological site about 3.2 square kilometres located approximately 9km north of Jaffna city and 2km west of Chunnakam. It is a former war zone, a Tamil and Hindu majority area with a few Christian residents.



FRAGMENT OF THE LARGE BUDDHA AT KANTARÓḌAI.
(See page 27.)

Published photograph from "Nagadipa and the Buddhist Remains of Jaffna" by P. E. Pieris, D.Litt., in the Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland, Vol. 26, No. 70, Part I (1917). Published by the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka (RASSL).

Sri Lankan civil servant and historian Sir Paul E. Peiris first excavated the site in 1917. The excavation revealed punch-marked silver coins, square or oblong early copper coins from the pre-Christian centuries, and Roman and Pandayan coins. Discovering the foundations of the small stupas led Peiris to identify the site as Buddhist, which was in line with the colonial framework and thinking about ruined cities at the time.

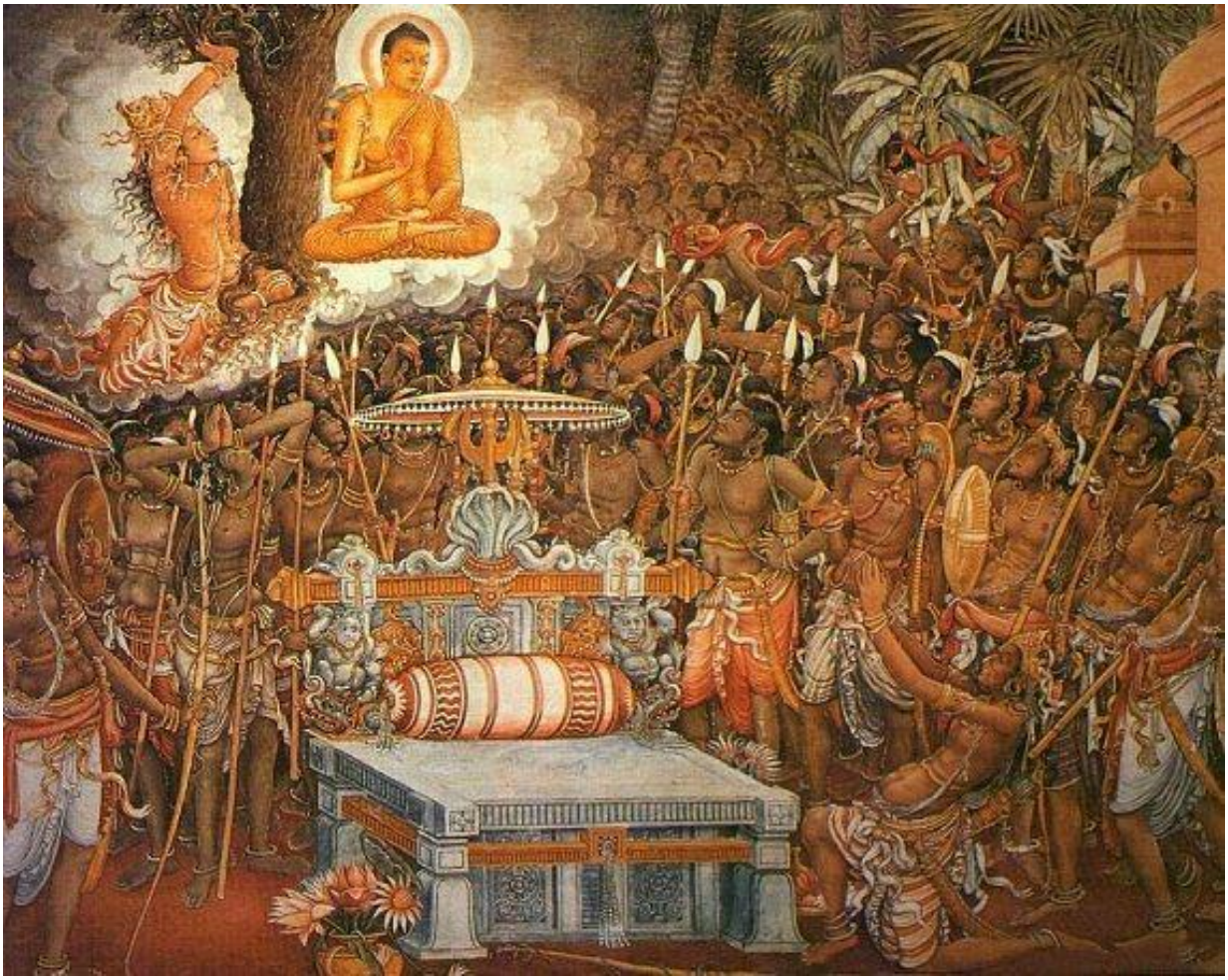
Since 1917, the site has been excavated several times with the participation of Sinhala, Tamil and foreign experts: In 1965, the Museum of Jaffna and the Department of Archaeology excavated Kandarodai. In 1971, Vimala Begley, with a team from the University of Pennsylvania Museum, uncovered pottery indicating

ties to India's Arikamedu site, dating the settlement to 1300 BCE and linking it to a Megalithic culture. In 2011, Nimal Perera from the University of Moratuwa and P. Pushparathnam from the University of Jaffna excavated and collected radiocarbon samples revealing insights into ancient agricultural practices. In 2018, a multidisciplinary team including the Central Cultural Fund, the University of Sydney and several other local universities dated the site to 400-100 BCE, linking it to Anuradhapura's Early Historic Period and its mixed economy.

Scholars from various backgrounds agree on one point. They concur that the site was once an important trade hub where sophisticated settlements thrived, maintaining religious and cultural ties with other parts of the world. The site's location close to the seasonal river Valukkai Aru ensured it was well connected to the region beyond and protected from invasions in the early centuries. It is not hard to imagine how this strategic position created a safe site for early settlers, with access to maritime routes via the Palk Strait, rendering it a major trade hub at the southern tip of India.

Competing Narratives

Despite the archaeological evidence of the nature of settlement at the site, two divergent narratives emerge concerning its ethno-religious identity, catering to two oppositional ideological stances. Popular historians and heritage activists repeat and rearticulate these two narratives. Two significant publications that set the tone for these diverging narratives were published between 2002 and 2015: Ven. Ellawala Medhananda's *The Sinhala Buddhist Heritage in The East and North of Shri Lanka* and Siva Thiagarajah's *Kantarodai Civilization of Ancient Jaffna 500 BCE—800 CE*. In 'Contested Histories, Multi-Religious Space and Conflict: A Case Study of Kantarodai in Northern Sri Lanka,' Elizabeth J. Harris discusses contrasting perspectives the two books offer, pointing out how they reflect the contested nature of heritage and history at Kandarodai, with each author using the site to support competing nationalist narratives.



A famous mural by Solias Mendis (1897–1975) at Kelaniya Temple, depicting the Buddha's second visit to the island, to Nagadipa, to settle a dispute between two chieftains of the Naga tribe, an event usually celebrated on Duruthu full moon Poya day in January. Photograph source unknown.

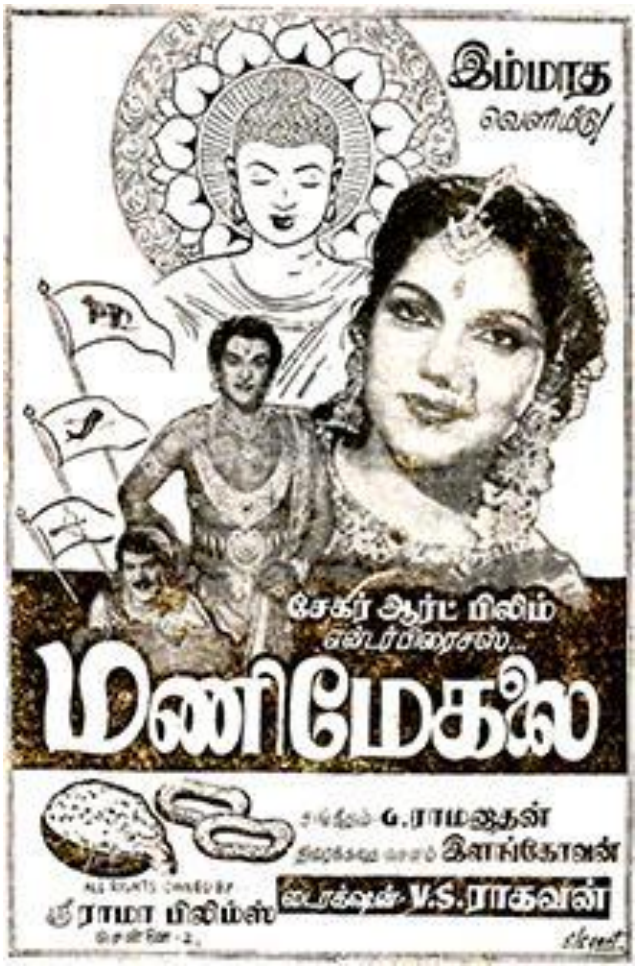
The Sinhala nationalist narrative rests on the belief that Sinhala-Buddhists are Aryan from North India and were one-time rulers of the whole island of Sri Lanka; the Tamils in Sri Lanka descend from invaders, although some arrived as traders, as articulated by Ven. Medhananda. Based on accounts from the Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa, most Sinhala-Buddhists believe that the Buddha visited the island thrice, establishing a strong religious symbolism to sites associated with these visits. Harris documented the information panel at Kadurugoda in 2012, which mentioned Buddha's visit to the island of Nagadeepa to settle a local dispute and indicated Kandarodai as a place where he rested after mediating the conflict. After the end of the civil war in 2009, Sinhala nationalists, led by figures such as Ven. Medhananda, quickly cast Kadurugoda as evidence of Buddhist heritage and Sinhalese supremacy in the North. Upon seeing Kandarodai it is easy to convince a Sinhalese tourist that the North was historically Buddhist. The crucial aspect of this narrative is the simple

merging of Buddhist and Sinhalese identities into one immutable category. The Buddhist, and therefore Sinhala provenance of Kadurugoda, counters the belief of traditional homeland among the Tamil Hindu majority living in the region today.

The opposing Tamil narrative is complex but sophisticated in comparison. It claims that the small stupas depict the amalgamation of Buddhism and Megalithic culture, proposing a link between Buddhist and Tamil identities. Burial practices were a central and highly significant aspect of Megalithic cultures worldwide, particularly in South India and Sri Lanka. Circular arrangements or mounds of stones covering a burial chamber were a known form of funerary practice associated with the Iron Age (circa 1200 BCE to 300 BCE) in the region. Sites like Adichanallur, Brahmagiri, and Maski in India, and Ibbankatuwa and Pomparippu in Sri Lanka, reveal extensive burial practices of Iron Age cultures. These burials are often associated with early Dravidian-speaking populations and are important for understanding the prehistory of these regions. Given their size, the stupas at Kandarodai could be considered burial mounds of monks, monuments or reliquaries, similar to clusters of small stupas found in South Indian Buddhist centres such as Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda.

These early Buddhist centres emerged in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala from the third century BCE onwards, as Buddhism spread to South India and beyond. Several South Indian dynasties, such as the Satavahanas (230 BCE–220 CE) and, more famously, the Pallavas (275–897 CE), supported Buddhism.

Similar to Ven. Medhananda referring to the Vamsa literature, Thiagarajah draws from the Tamil Buddhist poetic epics such as Silappadikaram (second century CE) and Manimekalai (third century CE) from Tamil Nadu to develop an explanation for Kandarodai. He connects the capital of Naga king Valai Vanan as mentioned in creative literature to Kandarodai. Manimekalai mentions the wealthy Naga Nadu who ruled a prosperous settlement rich in Tamil Buddhist tradition in chapters fourteen and twenty-four, according to Thiagarajah.



Poster of the Tamil film 'Manimekalai' (1959), based on the classic Buddhist epic 'Manimekalai' from the Sangam period in South India (300 BCE – 300 CE). Source: Internet Archive.

All these are flagged as evidence of Tamil Buddhism's presence in the region, a potent counterattack on the Sinhala-Buddhist compound.

Over the years, the two narratives have continued to shape the discursive landscape relevant to Kandarodai and other comparable sites, influencing the public psyche. Various scholars, journalists and interested individuals have continued to add to the two diverging narratives.

Other Perspectives

Politics can eclipse reason. In the case of Kandarodai/Kadurugoda, contemporary academic opinions vary based on the interpretation of data and, at times, lend support to two key perceptions and claims: the perception of the predominance of Sinhala-Buddhist heritage across modern-day Sri Lanka, encompassing the Jaffna peninsula, and the concept of the Tamil Buddhist heritage in the North with strong ties to the regional spread of Buddhism in the South Indian subcontinent.

Nimal de Silva from the University of Moratuwa asserts that Kandarodai is part of the Sinhala-Buddhist heritage, reflecting a continuous Sinhala-Buddhist civilization, with stupa structures supporting this claim. In an interview, he proposed reassessing the term '*Hela*,' a categorical name that usually denotes the Sinhalese, to include the Tamil. According to de Silva, '*Helayo*' refers to 'all inhabitants of the island'.

Krishnarajah from the University of Jaffna links the urbanization of Kandarodai to the rise of Buddhism and Tamil kingship in Jaffna, supported by the discovery of coins and the Tamil and Sinhala Brahmi inscriptions found at the site. In his view, urbanization occurred parallelly in three key regions – Anuradhapura, Kadiragamam/Kataragama and Kandarodai. He identifies Kandarodai as a key historical royal capital for the Tamils. It is unlikely that de Silva and Krishnarajah would agree on applying the term '*Hela*' to denote 'all inhabitants of the island'.

However, not all Sinhalese scholars have a uniform position supporting Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy. The Tamil scholars are equally divided. It may be useful to understand that they may be ideologically oppositional rather than ethnically oppositional: nationalist vs. non-nationalist rather than Sinhala vs. Tamil.

For instance, Jagath Weerasinghe from the University of Kelaniya suggests moving away from exclusive ethno-religious categories and contextualising Kandarodai in the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of South and Southeast Asia. Similar to many sites across South and Southeast Asia that have experienced the presence of both Buddhism and Hinduism, Kandarodai has yielded Buddha statues as well as images of Lakshmi and Krishna. In his view, the archaeological data does not support exclusionary ethnicizing of historical remains but points towards syncretism.

Historian Samal Hemachandra from the University of Colombo illustrates the need to explore the temporal layers of the site to gain insights into the ancient way of life in the area and the region. He believes each layer would reveal a different story, as history and the way of life of yesteryears often correlate little to present-day practices of ethnicity and religion.

The Local and the Regional

In his book *The Evolution of an Ethnic Identity: The Tamils in Sri Lanka C. 300 BCE to C. 1200 CE,* Karthigesu Indrapala offers valuable insights into the roots of contemporary ethnic tensions in the island and the historical context of Tamil nationalism. It examines the historical development of Tamil identity in the island over a millennium, analyzing how it was formed, transformed, changed and continued. In his discussions, Indrapala highlights the archaeological findings at Kandarodai and uses the site as an example of the complex interactions between Tamil and Buddhist cultures in the early history of the Jaffna Peninsula. The site is significant for understanding the Buddhist heritage of the region, which predates the later dominance of Hinduism and the establishment of a Tamil identity in the area.

Indrapala's analysis focuses on how sites like Kandarodai illustrate the diversity of cultural and religious influences in early Sri Lankan history. While he acknowledges the Buddhist heritage of the site, he also situates it within the larger framework of Tamil history, showing how such sites are part of the shared cultural heritage of the region. This is a more useful perspective in understanding such sites with multiple layers of history, instead of headbutting nationalist narratives.

Another approach is to recognize that Kadurugoda is not merely a religious space. Archaeological findings have illustrated that the site was once a significant and influential urban settlement with trade links to the rest of the world. The socio-political conflict surrounding the site draws attention away from the larger context of temporal and spatial historical elements which is undeniably more fascinating than the debate over labels such as Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil Buddhist.

Realm of the Majority

The popular version of the site's history is constantly evolving. Pilgrims from Southern Sri Lanka believe that the small stupas contain the relics of sixty enlightened Buddhist monks who passed away from food poisoning. Whether the poisoning of the monks, who are believed to have initially accompanied Arahant Sanghamitta, was intentional or an accident is unclear. A documentary aired by ITN (Independent Television Network) history segment 'Urumaya Soya' (In Search of Heritage) claims that the enlightened monks resided in what is today referred to as the Punkudutivu island. The documentary reverts to the narrative of the Sinhala-Buddhist heritage in Jaffna, stating that the Mahavamsa chronicles how King Devanampiyatissa commissioned three temples to be built in Jaffna. According to the documentary, Kandarodai/Kadurugoda was called 'Prachinaramya'. It claims that much later, the Tamil King Cankili/Sankili II (1617-1619) destroyed many of the stupas during his short reign, an atrocity continued by the Portuguese after their conquest of Jaffna. In the same vein, the documentary goes on to mourn the loss of a large part of the seven-acre historical site to the alleged attacks and encroachment of Tamil nationalists and the LTTE during the ethnic conflict. The documentary ends by hailing two military personnel who sacrificed their lives at Kandarodai during the conflict to protect the sacred ground.

It is clear to see these narratives speak to the Southern Sinhala majority in an idiom that gained popularity in the aftermath of the war riding on the euphoria of Sinhalese victory.

Stories of Place and Memory

Popular Hindu iconography of the sacred bull, Nandi peeks from behind a sign by the Department of Archaeology banning entry or cultivation of land in the archaeological reservation. Photographed by Chamindra Warusawitharane, December 2023.

Many residents who still call the neighbourhood of the Kandarodai site home have done so for generations. They remember when the site was an abandoned, open space for children to explore. 55-year-old Sivathamby (pseudonym), a resident near Kandarodai, remembers playing at the site as a young child, scrambling over the stone structures in the evening light. He reminiscences about the 1960s, when the Department of Archaeology employees visited the site for restoration work. According to his memory, a restoration team of around ten people worked with a single manual worker on the site.

The local sentiment surrounding Kadurugoda varies slightly depending on individual life experiences and views. Most residents were blissfully unaware of political and academic controversies surrounding the site. However, they worried about the state's lack of communication and transparency about the site.

Another resident, Sudhakaran (pseudonym) remembers the widespread protests when former President Mahinda Rajapaksa visited Navattikuli and Urkavattathurai. The heavy presence of armed personnel deterred protestors from coming to Kandarodai. Sudhakaran says that he refused to sell the family land near the

Kandarodai site, but a temple allegedly bought a similar plot of land through a businessperson. He remains worried about how any expansions to the site would impact his family's future in the area.

Durga (pseudonym), whose family experienced significant hardships during and after the war, expresses a sense of despair about their future in the area. They explain that the trauma they had to endure persists as the conflict surrounding the site exacerbates their wounds.

Another resident in the area, Laxman (pseudonym) believes that most of the Kandarodai land belonged to a single family, namely former MP Dharmalingam Siddarthan's family, and that they later sold it to the state. He remembers a group of monks and some authorities claiming that the land belonged to the state. Laxman, however, disagrees, saying that most of the families have been living in the area for generations. He speaks of the public protests after the war to solidify their claim to live in the area.

The overall sentiment of residents near the Kadurugoda site is one of mistrust, uncertainty and fear. They live with the constant presence of the military and pilgrims who seem to have taken over the site and feel as if they are sidelined in their own story.

Heritage after War

The presence of the military continues to be a point of contention as the division between the locals in the area and the state-appointed guards widens. Sinhala tourists from the South flock to the site, transforming it into a living heritage site, introducing contemporary rituals of Buddhist practice oblivious to the life around the site. The residents in the area observe from a distance, disconnected. It is easy to see resentment brewing beneath the surface of a fragile peace.

Poster advocating co-existence along the boundary fence of the Kandarodai/Kadurugoda archeological complex. Photographed by Chamindra Warusawitharane, December 2023.

The Kadurugoda/Kandarodai archaeological site reflects complex post-war challenges in managing heritage. An archaeological or conservation practice that does not recognize the pain and suffering of the region's recent years will alienate the community to which the heritage belongs. Community tensions must be addressed to facilitate respectful archaeological exploration that values the area's residents. Monolingual information panels that ethnicize the site's history, catering only to one group of people, should be replaced by narratives that focus on its multi-layered past and celebrate the nuances. An enriching exploration of a site's history requires sensitivity to the dynamics and biases of the present, an approach that creates an open dialogue, addresses local concerns and fosters more inclusive and peaceful methods of heritage management.

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Main Stupa of Kurundi Vihara, Mullaitivu.

Ariel view of the main Stupa of Kurundi Vihara.

A Lesson in History: The Kurundi Vihara/Kurundi Malai Mullaitivu

The silent woodland punctuated with birdcall, the soulful lake rippled by the wind, the stirring shadows on the orange dirt road that follows through to the ruins – nothing about the magically subdued environment of Kurundi Malai betrays the lurid noise it made in the national media. Contestations have not been as histrionic elsewhere as it has been at Kurundi Vihara; it was made the kingpin of the cluster of contested sites by a cast of Buddhist monks, members of parliament, archaeologists, social media activists and even the country's president, all playing pivotal roles in a long-drawn-out drama.

All the more reason to capture the essence of Kurundi on an ordinary day. It is a modest site with barely excavated ruins in various stages of decay and hasty restoration scattered across a hillock forgotten by the world. Located about thirty-six kilometres from the hinterland town of Thannimurippu of Mullaitivu District, getting to Kurundi Malai is an arduous journey along a dirt road. Telltale signs of torn branches and fresh dung along the way indicate that elephants use the road more than humans. The road weaves its way through the scrub jungle, past patches of paddy fields and a few makeshift shelters erected by farmers to rest and recuperate away from the sweltering sun.

The left corner of the turn to the site displays a rain-torn banner with an image of circular-shaped remains of a Buddhist stupa, directing visitors to the Kurundumale archaeological reserve. On the right is a Shiva lingam adorned with a garland of flowers. The dirt road seems deserted except for the occasional man on a motorcycle chugging off to the paddy fields further down.

You leave the road behind and take the slow ascent towards the hill through the woods, at times holding on to branches and roots of the trees. A team of soldiers from the Sri Lanka Army have built a temporary shelter opposite the serene lake

right before the entrance to manage the site and take down information about visitors to Kurundi Vihara.

As you enter the archaeological site, a half-built brick stupa, clearly a recent restoration, commands attention. Stone platforms with shallow holes engraved to hold offerings of flowers adorn the foot of the stupa. Further away, closer to the woodland, a cracked, carved moonstone points to the entrance to a collection of intricately carved pillars, a headless and limbless statue carved out of marble, and remains of an ancient foundation. The ruins seem nothing out of the ordinary. The site is larger and careful excavation is needed before passing claims and judgments about it. Had one come looking for something more, guided by the media spectacle, Kurundumale Vihara is almost an anticlimax.

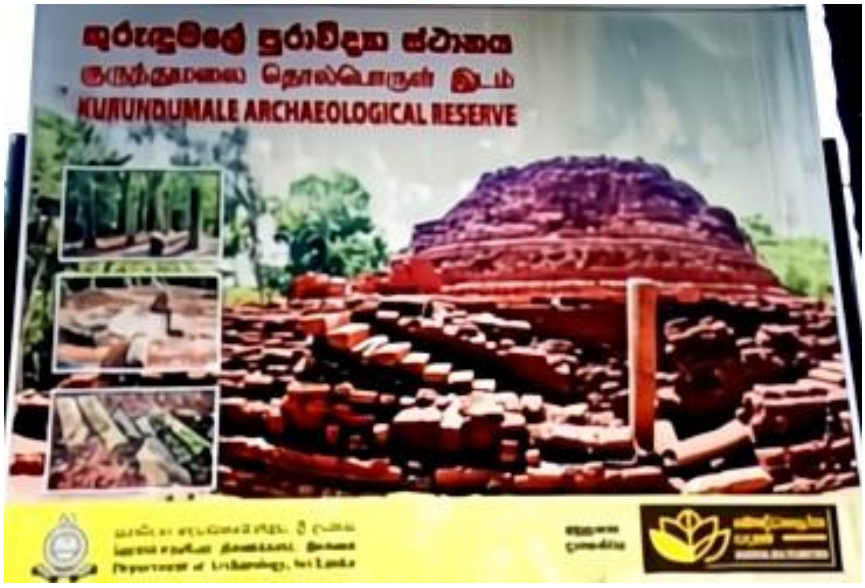
Stone pillars with weathered carvings discovered at the site.

Remains of a moonstone.

Guardians of History

Kurundi, like many contested heritage sites in Sri Lanka, is known by various names reflecting its layered history: Kurundi Malai, Kurunthoor, Kuruntan-Ur, Kurundi Vihara, Kurudavasoka Vihara, Piyankallu, and Piyangala are among the most commonly used. Constructed in the tradition of '*Pabbata Vihara*' - Buddhist monasteries situated on elevated terrain - the site is perched on a hilltop surrounded by dense jungle and a lake, isolated from nearby villages. Currently, the area is sparsely inhabited, except for farmers tending to the paddy fields beyond the lake and local wildlife. The Sri Lanka Army, stationed near the site, protects the location and oversees visitors, strongly advocating for its Sinhala-Buddhist heritage.

In our conversations, the soldiers explained that a group of Tamil nationalist sympathizers had vandalized the site, removed stone pillars and built a Hindu shrine at the site. They believe this group looted the historic site, taking valuable treasures, popularly referred to in Sinhalese as '*Nidhana*'. The soldiers also witnessed an incident when two opposing groups – Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists and Tamil nationalists - held religious ceremonies on the same day. "Our people held a '*Pirith*' chanting, and they held a '*Pooja*'," said the soldiers. Describing an encounter with a group of Tamil youth who visited the site, the soldiers explained that the Tamil youth had said that "these ruins belong to the Buddhist culture and not ours."



Board set up by Department of Archeology and the Bauddhaloka Foundation.

A Media Maelstrom

Ruins at the site.

Pilgrims from the South who make the arduous journey to the ancient site hardly ever interact with residents in the area and look to Sinhala mass media for the site's story. As usual, these accounts draw from the Mahavamsa and the ideology of Sinhala-Buddhist heritage.

In this version, King Khallātanāga (109-104 BCE) first commissioned building the Buddhist monastery called 'Kurunda Pasaka.' Some media narratives refer to the site as 'Kurundashoka Viharaya'. The widely held belief is that the site is one of the places Gautama Buddha visited during his second trip to the island. Media accounts also refer to the now-lost Kurundi Attakatha, allegedly written in Kurundi Vihara. Attakatha refers to commentarial literature that explains and elaborates on the primary texts of the Theravada Buddhist canon, such as the Tripitaka.

The narrative weaves a complex and rich story, borrowing alternately from historical and archaeological sources, popular beliefs and recent events. The gist is that Kurundi was once the site of a large and sophisticated monastery where Buddhist monks resided and pursued their religious studies, which was destroyed by the Tamils during the war. The attempts to restore the site are seen as rightfully

claiming and preserving Buddhist heritage in the former war-affected regions of the island.

Popular narratives about Kurundi once again underscore the stark divide between the Sinhala and Tamil nationalist perspectives. The site has generated abundant literature, including a comprehensive publication with illustrations – *Kurundi Vihara Vansaya* by Ambanwala and Weerawardana. In an interview, Weerawardana declared at the outset that their work was done from a Sinhalese nationalist viewpoint. Most literature available in Sinhala falls into this category. Despite the admitted bias, these documents offer valuable information about Kurundi. For instance, some valuable community perspectives were recorded in *Kurundi Vihara Vansaya* (pages 250 – 253). The interviews capture the popular concerns among the residents, including the memories of visiting the site to worship at an Adishivan Aiyanair Kovil and fears of losing their land due to the government processes.

Tamil national heritage claims about Kurundi aim to establish that the site was also a Hindu temple in the traditional Tamil homeland. The Tamil narrative does not deny the Buddhist nature of the monastery but seeks to recognize it as a place of community worship.

In addition to publications, social media is filled with video footage and news coverage of the site, further fuelling the opposing camps.

Historical and Archaeological References

A more nuanced and critical article is, 'Mapping the Kurundi Discourse of Politics of Culture (and Expediency)' by Dissanayake and Gamage. The historical and archaeological records pertaining to Kurundi can be broadly categorized into three groups: ancient Vamsa literature, colonial documentation and post-colonial survey reports and gazettes. Each offers a distinct lens through which the site's complex heritage can be understood.

Ancient Sources

The earliest historical records of Kurundi are rooted in Sri Lanka's Vamsa literature, particularly the Mahavamsa and Culavamsa. These texts attribute significant developments at Kurundi to various monarchs. King Khallātanāga (109–104 BCE) is credited with its establishment, while Kings Aggabodhi I (675–608 BCE) and Wijayabahu I (1070–110 CE) are noted for their patronage of the site. The

Culavamsa also presents an intriguing narrative of a Javanese king, adding an international dimension to Kurundi's history, which warrants further exploration.

Colonial Literature

The colonial rediscovery of Kurundi in the nineteenth century offers another layer to its historical narrative. From 1886 onwards, figures like irrigation engineer Henry Parker, Northern Province Government Agent J. Penry Lewis, and archaeologist H.C.P. Bell documented the site. However, discrepancies remain about whether they referred to the same location identified as Kurundi today. Despite such uncertainties, these colonial accounts share a common perspective reflective of their time: they characterized Kurundi as predominantly "Buddhistic", emphasizing that Buddhist ruins predated Tamil influences and citing local beliefs that the Buddha himself visited the site.

Post-colonial Records

Post-colonial scholarship has expanded on these earlier accounts, delving deeper into Kurundi's archaeological and historical significance. In 1933, Gazette No. 7981 under the Antiquities Ordinance designated seventy-eight acres around the Kurundi Vihara as a protected archaeological site. Scholars like Senarath Paranavithana (1933, 1949), M.H. Sirisoma (1972–1986), and Cyril Mathew (1983) made further contributions to understanding the site's heritage.

C.W. Nicholas, in his seminal work *Historical Topography of Ancient and Medieval Ceylon* (1963), identified Kurundi as the location of a Buddhist scholarly institute ('*Pirivena'*) known as Kurunda Chullaka. His accounts suggest that the area was overtaken by Tamil invaders during the reign of King Parakramabahu II (1236–1271 CE), a perspective that has since been widely cited.

More recently, at a 2023 conference on the Buddhist Heritage of Kurundi organized by the Bauddhaloka Foundation, archaeologist Vasana Premachandra highlighted the extensive contributions of earlier scholars and the challenges of preserving the site's legacy amidst ongoing debates.

Archaeological Findings and Significance

The physical remains at Kurundi reveal its rich historical and cultural layers. Ambanwala and Weerawardana, in their book *Kurundi Vihara Vansaya*, argue that the site's origins may trace back to the second or even the first phase of the Anuradhapura civilization. Architectural elements suggest affinities with the

Abhayagiri Vihara tradition, and the stupa's construction in '*kabook*' (laterite) is considered unique for the island.

Excavations have uncovered stone inscriptions, pillars, terracotta tiles, coins from the Polonnaruwa and colonial periods, as well as partially preserved images of seated and standing Buddhas. Notably, fragments of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva statues, along with sacred objects like a *Vajra* and *Chakra*, indicate Mahayana and Tantric Buddhist practices. Beyond its religious significance, evidence of iron production in the surrounding area suggests Kurundi was also an industrial hub.

The Chronology of a Conflict

The recent conflict over the Kurundi Malai site can be studied in several phases: the civil war period, post-war surveys and the intensification of tensions.

Civil war period (1983-2009)

With the start of the armed conflict between the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and the Sri Lanka Army, Kurundi, like many other sites in the North and East, became inaccessible to Southern Sri Lanka for over three decades. Religious worship at the site was limited to a small neighbouring Hindu community, who continued their rituals at the site.

Post-war surveys and reconstruction (2009-2020)

With the end of the 2009 war, people from the South journeyed to the previously inaccessible areas in the Northeast, resuming their worship at religious heritage sites.

In 2010, the Department of Archaeology received a grant from UNDP to survey the archaeological heritage of the North, according to Ms. Vasana Premachandra, an officer at the Department of Archaeology. In a recorded presentation at Kurundaloka (Light of Kurundi) Symposium 2023, available on YouTube, she describes the field surveys with great emotion, as these had to be conducted on terrain with uncleared landmines with the support of the Sri Lanka Army. She echoes the urgency and purpose felt by the Southern Sinhalese majority to restore the heritage sites in the North which have been neglected for decades due to the war. It is worth noting that Ms. Premachandra and other officers who joined this expedition risked their lives in uncleared minefields. Their solidarity with the Sri Lanka Army personnel is expressed through gratitude on several occasions.

What is not mentioned is the context of the humanitarian crisis ensuing from the last stage of the war and the suffering experienced by the people of the North in IDP camps. The mapping of Sinhala-Buddhist archaeological heritage seemed to have taken precedence. These investigations, backed by Buddhist establishments and foundations such as the Bauddhaloka Foundation, vociferously advocated for the restoration and protection of Buddhist heritage in the North and East. This incident illustrates the nexus of the Sri Lanka Army, Department of Archaeology and Buddhist clergy backed by financial support from various bodies, and the nature of their engagement at the heritage sites in the North. By August 2013, the area around Kurundi was again declared a protected archaeological site, creating further friction with neighbouring communities. This incident presents many lessons to learn on heritage management in the aftermath of war and an ongoing humanitarian crisis, and how ideological projects often contradict the needs of local communities, where the pain and suffering of the region's recent history is disregarded to resurrect ancient historic claims.

Hindu ritual site at Kurundi.

Intensification of tensions (2020-2024)

In 2020, Ven. Medhananda was appointed by the then president Gotabhaya Rajapaksa to the Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province. The Task Force faced criticism from other groups for not including the Tamil and Muslim communities living in the North and East regions of the island. The Department of Archaeology started re-establishing the boundaries of Kurundi in 2020 with the support of the Department of Survey. A team from the Vavuniya Regional Archaeology Office surveyed the Kurundi Lake soon after, identifying artifacts and ruins beyond the initially designated archaeological reserve. This led to the decision by the Archaeology Department to take over 270 acres of land surrounding the Kurundi site. The string of events, viewed by the Tamil parties as an insensitive, aggressive and organized land grab backed by the government and Buddhist establishment, led them to protest and file a case at the Mullaitivu Magistrate Courts, asking especially for the arbitrary restoration work at the site to be halted. In mid-2023, rulings on land ownership and restoration rights were issued. The issue sparked public debate, with Buddhist nationalist groups calling for the protection of the vihara, while Tamil groups continued to argue that the site must respect the multi-ethnic, multi-religious history of the region.

The clash came to a head on 12 June 2023, when the stupa conservation work (which began in 2021) neared completion and a celebratory religious event was organized to enshrine relics said to be from Gautama Buddha inside the stupa. On the day of the enshrining, a group of people, including members of parliament of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), protested at the event, stating that the site was also home to an ancient Hindu temple. The protestors demanded that the case filed with the Mullaitivu Magistrate Courts against restoration work at the site should continue until resolution.

The present Chief Incumbent of the Kurundi Vihara, Ven. Galgamuwe Santhabodhi Thero, commented to the media that the magistrate court had ordered the removal of new constructions. The Thero later revealed to a reporter from Ada Derana TV channel that they completed the enshrining of the relics on 17 March 2023, notwithstanding the dissent.

Are You Trying to Teach Me History?

Ruins at Kurundi.

In a controversial televised interview in June 2023, President Ranil Wickramasinghe, who replaced President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa who was ousted in a people's protest, questioned the request of the Director General of the Department of Archaeology to acquire 270 acres for the Kurundi temple. President Wickramasinghe referred to Kurundi as a Tamil Buddhist site and challenged the need for land in Kurundi that was larger than the combined expanse of Mahavihara, Jetavanarama and Abhayagiriya in Anuradhapura. Tamil members of parliament took the opportunity to highlight the land grabbing by Buddhist monks in the Northeast in the name of archaeological preservation. For instance, MP SR Rasamanickam mentioned the case of Thiriyaya Temple in Trincomalee District, where he claimed the Department of Archaeology had taken over three thousand acres. He explained that the Department had now lost control over the land to the incumbent monk Ven. Panamure Thilakavansa, who proposed to lease the land to the former inhabitants for their livelihoods.

This incident, which ended in President Wickramasinghe slamming the officers of the Department of Archaeology saying, "Are you trying to teach me history? Or

do you want me to teach you?", triggered widespread discussions and the ire of hardline Sinhalese Buddhist groups. Following the interview, Ven. Medhananda wrote to the president requesting that the lands near Kurundi Vihara should not be 'haphazardly' distributed to the public as some of these lands still had ruins of Buddhist monasteries. The official response from the president recorded that no such decision had been made.

In September 2023, the Mullaitivu Magistrate Justice, T. Saravanarajah, who issued the judgment to halt the restoration work at Kurundi, resigned from his post, citing threats to his life and work-related stress. Several media channels, including the BBC Sinhala service, reported that Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekara, Minister of Public Security, had visited Kurundi while Justice Saravanarajah was conducting a site visit and later complained in parliament against the magistrate. Lawyers in the Northeast staged two hartal campaigns protesting the statements made by MP Weerasekara, while the Sinhala nationalist groups dismissed it as another Tamil person using the situation 'to seek asylum in a rich Western country'.

As of 2024, the Kurundi Vihara controversy remains unresolved, with ongoing tensions between Sinhalese Buddhist groups and Tamil political leaders. The presence of the Army signals the site's troubled and much-contested present-day saga.

Resolving Conflict

The Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs Ministry proposed a three-part solution to the contestation, as detailed in a parliamentary statement on 27 September 2023. The proposal includes allocating three acres outside the Kurundi reserve for both a Buddhist and a Hindu temple, conducting a new site survey by an expert committee, and issuing gazettes on identified archaeological sites.

While the proposals seem pragmatic, addressing the deeper issues of ethno-religious identity remains challenging.

A Different Story

The Culavamsa records the fascinating episode of an invasion by Javanese King Chandrabanu (1230–1262 CE), who came to claim the relics of the Buddha. The story of Chandrabanu, a fervent Buddhist king whose life's mission seemed to have been the possession of the Tooth Relic, is mostly forgotten – there have been no novels written, no movies made. Yet, the event is a significant subplot in the history of the Northern regions of the island.

Chandrabanu came from the Kingdom of Tambralinga, one of the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Austronesia in the Middle Ages. Tambralinga would have covered modern-day Southern Thailand, the Malay Peninsula and Java. The Culavamsa records that this invading king recruited Sihalas in Padi, Kurundi and other districts to fight the Sinhala king, namely Parakramabahu II of Dambadeniya. Chandrabanu lost the battle but retreated and settled in Jaffna, establishing an independent regime over the Jaffna Kingdom. He launched a second attack on the Southern regions of the island with a locally raised army in 1262, only to be overrun by another army from the North – the mighty Pandyans. He died in combat, passing the throne to his son, Javakanmaindan, who, in turn, yielded to the Pandyans. One could speculate if the famed Venetian traveller, Marco Polo visited the island in Javakanmaindan's time. Although Polo's accounts are not specific, he does mention a king named Sendamein, who Paranavithana identifies as Chandrabhanu or his son Javakanmaindan/Savakameindan.

By 1270s, the Pandyans installed one of their ministers, Kulasekara Cinkaiarian, who established the Araya Chakravarti dynasty that ruled Jaffna for the next three hundred years. Though the presence of the Javanese kings in Jaffna was brief, place names such as Chavakachcheri/Javakachcheri, meaning Javanese settlement, and Chavahakottai, Javanese fort, allude to an eventful history.

What are the takeaways of this intriguing anecdote, apart from the passing reference to Kurundi as an area for army recruits for Chandrabanu?

The undeniable insight is that the island was never an island unto itself. It was integrated in many ways into the larger South and Southeast Asian region, especially the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of the Middle Ages. The works of historians such as Nira Wickramasinghe and Sujit Sivasundaram support this perspective by situating Sri Lanka as a vibrant node in the heart of South and Southeast Asia, amidst vast historical currents that swept across the Indian Ocean. These scholars paint a picture of a Sri Lanka that is constantly in dialogue with its neighbours, shaped by

the tides of trade, conquest, migration and cultural exchange. Both emphasize how the island's history, culture and identity are deeply intertwined with the larger regional histories, and how these connections have fostered a complex tapestry of ethnic and religious syncretism.

In her work *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (2006), Wickramasinghe underscores the fluidity of identity in Sri Lanka, where boundaries between Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities were historically porous, and cultural exchange was a daily reality. She warns, however, that colonial and postcolonial histories have often sought to harden these fluid identities, erasing the syncretic past in favour of rigid ethnic and religious divisions.

In *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka, and the Bounds of an Indian Ocean Colony* (2013), Sivasundaram challenges the dominant frameworks of national history by examining Sri Lanka's history through the lens of its regional and maritime connections within the Indian Ocean. He argues that focusing on regional and transoceanic histories provides a richer understanding of the island's colonial and postcolonial transformations. The book delves into themes like the interplay between colonialism and local knowledge systems, the role of Indigenous communities and the fluid identities shaped by Sri Lanka's position in the Indian Ocean world, rather than being constrained by modern nationalist narratives.

These perspectives can inform how to approach heritage, especially in the aftermath of painful conflict, where healing and bridging divides are required above claiming exclusive ownership over territories. Both scholars offer a vision of Sri Lanka where historical syncretism, though challenged, still holds the key to understanding the island's complex identity. It offers us a different story from the past, a breathing space away from fixated ethno-religious binaries to reimagine a more harmonious future.

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Stupa at Kuragala.

Natural boulders at Kuragala Archaeological Reserve.

Fault Lines of Faith: Kuragala Raja Maha Vihara and Daftar Jailani Mosque Kuragala

Kuragala, meaning 'the hollow rock,' is anything but hollow. The sacred site, nestled in a sheltered ravine, brims with palpable spiritual energy and ancient secrets of truth seekers. Buddhist monks once meditated in the cool caves, while devout followers of Islam have consecrated the space with their prayers. Today, Kuragala is revered as Daftar Jailani by Tamil-speaking Sunni Muslims and as the Kuragala monastery by Sinhala-speaking Buddhists – a unique confluence of faiths.

The cliffs offer sweeping views of villages surrounded by lush rice fields, predominantly inhabited by Sinhala-Buddhists with a small Muslim community. Three imposing monoliths stand vigil over forest foliage, hamlets connected by winding roads and signs of life, with tranquil dignity. The misty landscape, marked by stone inscriptions and relics, echoes the spiritual pursuits of those who sought solace here. Located about twenty-two kilometres from Balangoda in the picturesque Sabaragamuwa Province, Kuragala remains a sacred meeting point of history, spirituality and natural beauty.

Today, a carved staircase designed to resemble a rock-cut counterpart leads pilgrims towards the monoliths. To the southwest of the site, there are five caves, now inaccessible, where Buddhist monks and Sufi mystics once meditated. As you ascend to the main entrance, a large statue of a gold and copper-tinged lion emerges and inscribed beneath it is the title 'Kuragala Rajamaha Viharaya.' Its fresh paint, slightly jarring against the ancient landscape, reminds us of a similar Buddha statue at the entrance of another ancient rock temple in Dambulla. These new images are the first signs of a conflict between past and present, nature and culture, and more. As pilgrims leave the staircase, they can choose between two diverging directions.

The new lion statue at Kuragala temple.

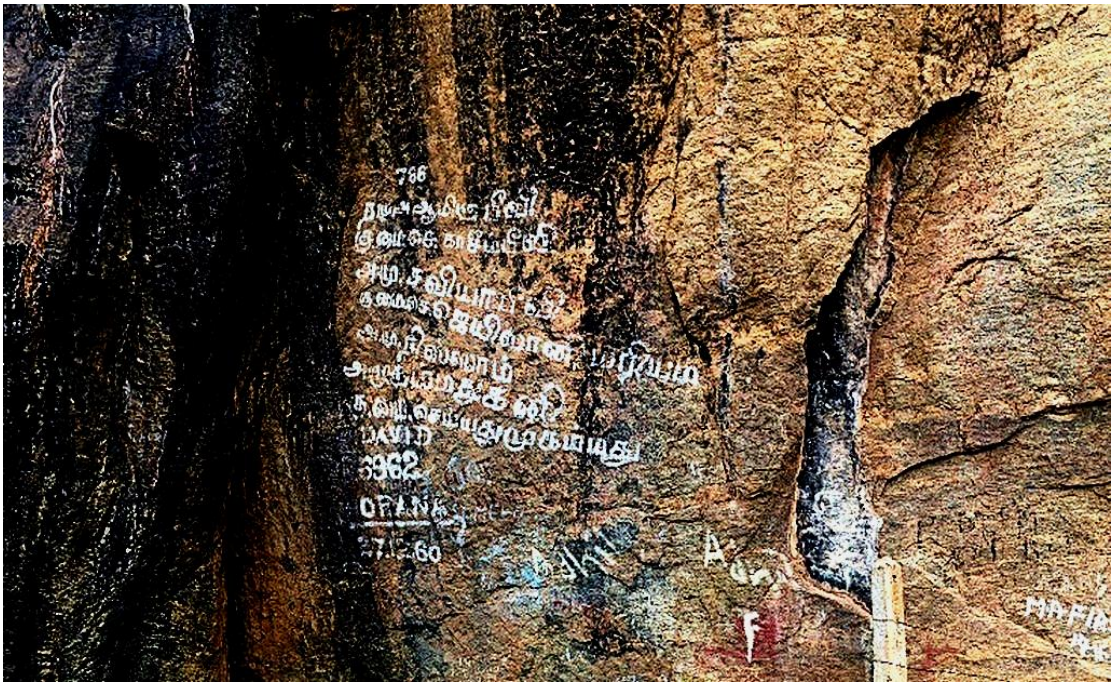
Sign board at Kuragala.

Shared Heritage

Separated by a vertical pole barrier, one path leads to the open-air mosque, sheltered beneath the third monolith. This mosque is nestled among the main rocky outcrop, near the cave to the south. Local Sinhala-speaking villagers call the rock face '*Hituwangala*' meaning 'standing rock', while the handful of Muslim villagers and a larger number of Muslim pilgrims call it the '*Kappal Malai*' meaning 'ship mountain.'

While the mosque is located on a main rock outcrop towards the south, along the southwest peaks, there are five caves. Most believe that these caves once sheltered Buddhist monks and Sufi mystics who meditated.

The other path leads pilgrims on a winding ascent scattered with symbols of Buddhist worship such as a peepul tree with a copper-painted fence, statues and imagery from the Buddhist tales, and the ruins of an ancient stupa built with bricks. Pilgrims who take this route ascend to the summit where they encounter a more modern stupa glistening white in the sunlight, a ringing bell complete with a pulling rope, and a larger-than-life statue of the much-revered local deity Saman seated on his signature white elephant. Beneath the third monolith, near the open-air mosque, archaeologists have secured an excavation site where they found evidence of pre-historic settlements.



Tamil graffiti.

During the annual Kandoori festival, held in honour of the Sufi mystic Abdul Qadir Jailani, Muslim pilgrims gather at Daftar Jailani to partake in elaborate festivities and enjoy traditional '*kidu*' (festival food). On public holidays and Poya days, the site welcomes curious and devout Buddhist pilgrims, creating a unique blend of religious observance and cultural exchange.

Islamic site of worship.

Multiple Fault Lines

The contestation over the ancient sacred site at Kuragala is multifaceted, transcending a simple communal conflict between Sinhala-Buddhist and Muslim communities. It represents a complex intersection of inter-religious (Buddhist vs. Muslim), intra-religious (Salafi vs. Sufi), class (custodians vs. local community), and majoritarian state vs. minority community dynamics. These overlapping issues create a layered and complex conflict, reflecting broader societal tensions and power struggles.

At the heart of the site is the Sufi tradition, which is central to the Daftar Jailani pilgrimage and festival. However, Salafi movements, following Wahabi interpretations of Islam, disapprove of venerating shrines like Daftar Jailani. Despite ideological differences, the local Muslim community does not oppose the pilgrims. The mosque's history is connected to the Aboosally family, with M L M Aboosally, a notable political figure, being a key patron. Legal disputes over the mosque date back to 1922. Several research studies have documented these events including, *Of Sacred Sites and Profane Politics: Tensions over Religious Sites and Ethnic Relations* (2015) published by the Secretariat for Muslims, 'Islamic and Buddhist Impacts on the Shrine at Daftar Jailani, Sri Lanka' (2016) by Dennis McGilvray and, *Kuragala: Religious and Ethnic Communities in a Contested Sacred Heritage Site in Sri Lanka* (2019) by Ven. M Deegalle.

In the 1970s, a group of Buddhist monks, supported by Balangoda MP Mrs. Mallika Ratwatte - who was a political rival of Mr. Aboosally - challenged the Islamic claim to Kuragala. According to Mr. Aboosally, skilled diplomacy averted potential violence. In 1971, the Department of Archaeology began constructing a stupa on one of Kuragala's plateaus, asserting that it replaced a 2,000-year-old structure. The Aboosally family, however, claimed the stupa was built using modern materials from the Kankasanthurai cement factory. The ensuing tension led to the site being declared an Archaeological Reserve in 1971, with a cabinet order granting control of the Daftar Jailani mosque to a trust, provided no new constructions were erected.

Present Conflict

In the early 2000s, attendance at the Kandoori festival at Kuragala saw a decline. However, in 2015, the festival drew a significant crowd, spurred by the growing controversy and conflict surrounding the site, which had piqued the interest of the Muslim community. Between 2011 and 2013, in post-war Sri Lanka, hardline Sinhala-Buddhist groups, including Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Ravana Balaya (RB) and Sihala Ravaya (SR), made several attempts to storm the mosque. Mosque officials managed to negotiate with one group to halt their actions on one occasion, while another attack was thwarted by heavy rain. The rise of Sinhala-Buddhist hardline sentiments culminated in an intervention from the Ministry of Defence, led by the then Secretary of Defence, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. This resulted in the removal of structures around the mosque, such as shops, sleeping halls and bathroom facilities, which were deemed irregular.

Belltower at the Kuragala Temple

In 2015, a group led by Ravana Balaya stormed the site and vandalized the grave of a patron credited with financing the construction of buildings in the 1960s. Following rumours that Bodu Bala Sena intended to demolish the mosque, police were called to the site. Although BBS did not carry out the demolition, the tension

surrounding Kuragala remains a source of fear for the Muslim community in the area. In early 2022, the minaret, referred to in Sinhala as the '*Muslim Thorana*' was destroyed using heavy machinery to make way for a new project.

In 2021, Ven. Dhammarathana, a monk popularly known as Nelligala Hamuduruwo, initiated the 'Revival of Kuragala' project. It aimed to construct a complex of Buddhist structures. This included the 130-foot Asadisi Shakya Sugatha Maha Seya (stupa), a sermon hall, a monastery, a four-level residence for monks, a pavilion for a bodhi tree, and a statue of the local deity Saman. Although there were plans to host the state Vesak festival at Kuragala in 2022 to coincide with the completion of these structures, the event was cancelled due to political unrest and the economic crisis at the time. In 2023, the privately-owned Sirasa TV channel organized the 'Sirasa Namami Vesak Zone' at Kuragala, attracting participation from state officials and the Indian High Commissioner. These developments highlight a selective application of the Department of Archaeology's regulations that prohibit new constructions at archaeological reserves for minority communities but not the Sinhalese.

Media Coverage

Popular media narratives on Kuragala claim that regional leaders may have dedicated the cave complex to Buddhism as early as the third century BCE, even before the arrival of Arahant Mahinda, who is traditionally credited with establishing Buddhism as the state religion in ancient Sri Lanka. A documentary by Sirasa TV delves into Kuragala's history, highlighting the discovery of 8,000-year-old human skeletal remains and 16,000-year-old monolithic tools, suggesting the site's deep prehistoric roots.

The documentary claims that Kuragala, marked by Brahmi inscriptions and drip-ledged caves, served as temple spaces for Buddhist monks seeking refuge during periods of political turmoil in key cities like Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. It further connects Kuragala to King Devanampiyatissa, who is said to have planted a sacred Bo sapling near the site, symbolizing the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The documentary also features Ven. Dhammarathana, who speaks on the spiritual significance of Kuragala, linking the site to enlightened monks from the Anuradhapura era and emphasizing the prehistoric evidence as part of the site's narrative.

Ven. Dhammarathana's interpretation aligns with the documentary's portrayal of Kuragala as a link between the rich agricultural valley and the historic civilization below the monoliths. The rice fields, according to the narrative, played a crucial role in sustaining Buddhist monks during the Anuradhapura period, even in times of conflict. Travel articles and media speculations claim that Kuragala may have housed a Buddhist monastery between the third century BCE and the first century CE.

A review of the extensive YouTube content on Kuragala reveals a significant focus on Ven. Dhammarathana, who has become a prominent figure in discussions about the site. His appearances on popular talk shows, travel programmes, and political discussions hosted by celebrities like pop star Iraj and media personalities such as Chathura (from "Travel with Chathura") and Chamuditha (from "Truth with Chamuditha") have amplified his influence.

While some programmes do challenge Ven. Dhammarathan, with critical questions, such as whether it was necessary to build more temples in a country facing widespread hunger, he skilfully defends the construction of religious buildings. He argues that these projects have historically been tied to broader development, pointing out how recent constructions, despite their controversies, have stimulated tourism and economic growth in the area.

Sufi Imprint of Kuragala

Mosque of Kuragala, built beneath a large rock with inscriptions. Sketch by Jan Brandes, dated between 10 October and 30 December 1785. Source: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The narrative of Sufi Muslim heritage at Kuragala receives limited media coverage, particularly when compared to its Buddhist counterpart. There is no YouTube content on the subject, although some personal accounts are available on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and in documentation by custodians like the Aboosally family and scholars such as McGilvray. These sources suggest that the revered Sufi saint, Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, meditated in one of the rock caves at the Daftar Jilani site for twelve years before moving to Baghdad, where he gained prominence as a teacher and jurist. The site also reportedly hosted South Indian saint Shahul Hamid of Nagoor and the Prophet al-Khidr in the sixteenth century. Though Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani is buried in Baghdad, the Kuragala/Daftar Jilani mosque remains a significant site of veneration and his birthday is celebrated there during the Kandoori festival.

An early – and most beautiful – depiction of the Sufi site at Kuragala is housed in the Rijksmuseum. The painting, titled 'Islamitisch rotsheiligdom van Kuragala op Ceylon' by Jan Brandes, created in 1785, captures the serene and spiritually charged atmosphere of the Kuragala rock sanctuary. This delicate artwork offers a rare historical perspective, portraying the site as a revered Islamic shrine. It provides insight into the eighteenth-century European perception of Eastern religious sites, highlighting the unique architectural and natural features of Kuragala.

In the broader context of Kuragala's history, the painting serves as a visual document that aligns with narratives of the site as a long-standing spiritual centre celebrated by Muslim pilgrims and entwined with local folklore. The artwork complements contemporary descriptions of the site, reflecting both its spiritual importance and its role as a place of pilgrimage. The image generated a healthy discussion on social media about Kuragala, despite the dominating Sinhala-Buddhist rhetoric that the colonials often distorted the truth.

The earliest documented Muslim pilgrimages to Kuragala appear in British administrative reports, such as the Ceylon Administration Report (CAR) of 1919. While the report focuses on pilgrimages to Adam's Peak, it briefly mentions the "Kuragala Muhammadan Pilgrimage" (CAR 1919: I2). Subsequent reports continue to reference Muslim pilgrimages to the site, though terminology evolves over time. For example, the 1927 report refers to "Kūragala in Meda Korale" as a place frequented by Muslims.

Folklore underscores Kuragala/Daftar Jilani's historical significance within the Sufi Muslim tradition, but its modern resurgence as a spiritual hub began in the nineteenth century. Ratnapura government records indicate that in 1857, a

Mowlana from India took an interest in the site. In 1875, his nephew rediscovered the mosque with the assistance of Sinne Lebbe Cassim Lebbe, the Muslim leader of Balangoda. This led to the formal establishment of Daftar Jilani under the patronage of C.L.M. Marikkar Hajiyar, Sinne Lebbe's son. Hajiyar's son, M.L.M. Aboosally, later became the mosque's trustee while serving as a member of parliament from 1977 to 1994. Since his passing, his daughter Roshan Aboosally has continued as the mosque's trustee.

Archaeological Findings

The first major archaeological study of Kuragala, conducted in the 1930s by C.H. Collins, documented two cave shelters with second-century BCE Brahmi inscriptions near the present-day mosque. These inscriptions are part of the inventory by archaeologist Paranavithana. Some historians argue these inscriptions signify territorial claims by local chieftains, while others believe they indicate that the caves were offered to Buddhist monks for meditation during the rainy season. Arabic inscriptions along the mosque cave's ledge remain unanalyzed.

In 2013, archaeologist Nimal Perera led an excavation near the Kuragala cave complex, close to the Daftar Jailani mosque. According to a report by Saman Kumara Eregama, the excavation revealed evidence of human habitation at the site dating back over 15,000 years. Chronometric dating suggests settlements from the Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene periods. Artifacts unearthed include microlithic tools, tools made from animal bones, and beads. The excavation also uncovered human remains, with charcoal samples dating them to 6,950-7,170 years ago. This evidence further establishes Kuragala as a site of significant historical and archaeological interest.

Archaeologists are divided on the site's significance. Raj Somadeva argues that the Daftar Jailani mosque, built in 1920, does not qualify as an ancient monument under the Antiquities Ordinance of 1940, suggesting it could be removed.

Historian Nirmal Dewasiri highlights how archaeological explorations since the nineteenth century have supported a Sinhala-Buddhist narrative of historical sites, often overshadowing other identities. He asserts that, while Sinhala-Buddhist claims are strong and well-articulated, Muslim communities have refrained from challenging this dominant narrative.

Scholar of Religious Studies, Shobhana Xavier situates the remote Kuragala in the context of historical trade and pilgrim routes across the world. In *Memories of Sufi Saints in Sri Lanka,* a recorded conversation with sociologist Farzana Haniffa, Xavier indicates that, together with Adam's Peak and Kataragama, Daftar Jailani, Kuragala was an important stop in the pilgrim route that drew devotees to Serendib. Traders and travellers were drawn to the stories of paradise and Xavier points out the centrality of Sri Lanka to stories and characters in the Qur'an and Old Testament, such as Adam, and areas associated with him such as Adam's Peak and Adam's Bridge. All over the country, there are graves believed to be of Adam and Eve, other saints and mystics, such as the graves found in Kataragama. These suggest that alongside the narratives of Buddha visiting the island, there are other stories that hold significance to various communities.

Archaeologist Jagath Weerasinghe advocates for a heritage management approach, criticizing the narrow archaeological focus influenced by colonial-era laws like the Antiquities Ordinance. Weerasinghe believes this perspective limits understanding of the site's broader sociological and political history, emphasizing the need to consider diverse stakeholder interests. Overall, Kuragala signals the lack of commitment by authorities and dominant groups to shared heritage, which is an alternative and more inclusive approach to managing the day-to-day realities of such sites.

Stories of Place and Memory

The history of Kuragala remains contentious, but the recent tensions have profoundly affected the local community's livelihood. The Muslim community, particularly those who operate shops near Daftar Jailani, has faced significant challenges. These shops, which once thrived during the annual Kandoori festival, now struggle due to relocation and diminished foot traffic following the 'Revival of Kuragala' project. In contrast, Sinhalese-run shops along the main road, while benefiting from festival traffic, are not solely dependent on it. Sinhalese villagers, though sympathetic to their Muslim neighbours' plight, have welcomed the increased presence of Sinhala-Buddhist pilgrims throughout the year.

Irfan (pseudonym), a Muslim shopkeeper, recalls the hardships faced by pilgrims in the past, including threats from wild elephants, and believes in the site's sacred protection. He appreciates the leadership of the current Buddhist monk, who contributes positively to the community through donations.

Mufeeq (pseudonym), another local, remembers when pilgrim facilities were closer to the mosque but were moved due to state intervention. He notes that Muslim villagers now rarely interact with Daftar Jailani, choosing instead to attend a local mosque.

Rizwi (pseudonym), another shopkeeper, emphasizes that the Daftar Jailani mosque and festival are seen as privately managed affairs, with little involvement from the broader community.

Mushtaq (pseudonym), a micro-businessman, criticizes the land allocation for Buddhist structures and the limitations imposed on Muslim-owned businesses. He argues that the restrictions, including barricades and separate routes for Buddhist and Muslim pilgrims, exacerbate communal tensions and harm local businesses.

Mushtaq's concerns highlight the need for a heritage management approach that respects the site's complex social, political and religious context. Acknowledging and addressing the local community's concerns, while promoting peaceful coexistence, is crucial for resolving tensions and supporting the local economy in harmony with religious and historical activities.

The Path of the Mystics

Sites such as Kuragala contain a myriad of truths. They belong to diverse peoples and faiths. Despite the recent controversies, the site embodies a long history of sharing and coexistence between Buddhist monks and Sufi saints and carries the memory of those who came before them. Exclusive ethno-nationalistic approaches to 'preserving' a site with such multivocality is robbing our future generations of the knowledge of a richer history and a more harmonious way of being in the world. Committing to shared heritage, adopting ways of managing practicalities of daily coexistence, and allowing the space for different perspectives without eclipsing and erasing them with more dominant narratives are ways of being both Buddhist monks and Sufi mystics would have found peace with.

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Archaeological remains at Muhudu Maha Vihara

Layers of the Past: Muhudu Maha Viharaya Pottuvil

Pathway to Muhudu Maha Vihara

The air at Arugam Bay is thick with salt and the hum of exotic life ushered in by surfers from all four corners of the earth. The Indian Ocean breathes a steady stream of waves for them to ride from dawn to dusk. Parties echo through the night until the sun pops up from the eastern depths of the sea. Signs in Russian and Hebrew, chic studios run by French yoginis, cafes selling Italian Lavazza, blueberry muffins, and an array of fusion food with new names have mushroomed in the touristy neighbourhood. Salty Swamis is one such café, praised for their extensive vegan menu. The vibe spells Island Life for Digital Nomads.

Ten minutes away on a Tuk Tuk from Salty Swamis is a place with a different vibe. Swathes of sun-glazed dunes lead to a scattering of ancient stone pillars and a newly

built temple, known as the Muhudu Maha Viharaya. The site is on the beach of Pottuvil, a small town on the Eastern Coast of Sri Lanka in the Panama Division of Ampara District. The area echoes both recent turmoil and timeless legends of the past.

Legend has it that Muhudu Maha Viharaya marks the spot where Princess Vihara Maha Devi was carried ashore around the second century BCE. In an earlier version of the same legend, Kirinda, further south of Pottuvil, is identified as the landing place. The princess had cast herself into the sea in a selfless act to calm the ocean's wrath (likely during a tsunami, an interpretation that may have emerged after the island's experience with a tsunami in 2004) believed to be divine retribution for her royal father's wrong against an innocent Buddhist monk. Her bravery and grace so deeply moved King Kavantissa, the ruler of the region of Ruhuna, that he made her his queen. Together, they became the parents of Sri Lanka's revered hero, King Dutugemunu. It is widely believed that King Kavantissa built Muhudu Maha Viharaya to honour his courageous and noble consort, Vihara Maha Devi. Further inland, about fifteen kilometres away in Lahugala, another monastic site known as Magul Maha Viharaya is believed to be the place where their royal wedding was held.

Today, a sandy pathway lined with souvenir and snack stalls, and a row of concrete statues of robed monks painted bright orange, contrast with the ancient ruins of Muhudu Maha Viharaya. While archaeologists may debate its historical significance, the legend of Vihara Maha Devi undeniably shapes the site's modern identity, even though her statue is small and recently built. The stupa and other temple buildings are also of recent construction, with several still in various stages of completion. A billboard solicits donations from visitors – to protect Buddhist heritage on the East Coast and honour the heroine of ancient lore. Phone numbers of the monks in charge and bank details are given, should you be moved by the courage of a princess two thousand years later.

Information panels at Muhudu Maha Vihara

Archaeological remains at Muhudu Maha Vihara

For some, this connection to the past is a rallying call. Chandima (a pseudonym), on her second visit to Muhudu Maha Vihara in 2024, recalled how her aunt was moved to donate during their first visit around 2015. The chief monk had passionately described the site's struggles, particularly during the civil war when Muslim villagers allegedly encroached upon and damaged the Buddhist heritage site. This story stirred emotions and sparked a debate among Chandima's relatives. All felt a connection to the site and felt threatened by the changes, some were troubled by the changing landscape of the East Coast, where towns increasingly resemble the Middle East with rows of date palms lining the streets.

Others echo Chandima's experience. For instance, Adilah (a pseudonym), who visited Muhudu Maha Vihara with a group of friends from Colombo, remembered how the monks spoke of Muslim villagers and the destruction they allegedly caused. Adilah's religious identity was not obvious from her appearance, so the monk assumed her to be a Buddhist. Adilah was uncomfortable for the remainder of her trip.

Historical and Archaeological References

Muhudu Maha Viharaya is not explicitly detailed in major historical chronicles, such as the Mahavamsa or Culavamsa. While the Mahavamsa recounts the story of Vihara Maha Devi, it does not specifically identify today's Muhudu Maha Viharaya as the location of her landing or as the site of an ancient monastery. Similarly, tracing documentation of Muhudu Maha Viharaya during the British colonial period remains challenging. Given the extensive colonial surveys and archaeological explorations across Sri Lanka at the time, one might expect some mention of the site. Many colonial administrators meticulously recorded ancient ruins on the island's Northern, North Central and Eastern coasts through survey reports, personal correspondence, sketches and paintings. Yet, a substantial record of Muhudu Maha Viharaya is notably absent from these records.

The modern perception of the site draws from a rich repertoire of legends and folklore, imbuing the ruins with meaning and making the site a grand complex. Residents in the area affirm the archaeological importance of the site, which seemed to have gradually emerged post-independence. Some online sources suggest that in the 1950s, archaeologist Senarath Paranavithana identified Muhudu Maha Viharaya as a site of considerable historical importance. However, verifying these claims with precise references remains challenging. It was only in the 1960s that archaeological

research began to properly document the site, identifying key features such as stone pillars, parts of stupas and statues that had been buried under dunes. In 1965, a gazette designated a portion of the site as an archaeologically protected area.

A resident in the area describes how, in 1969, a private landowner outside the disputed seventy-two acres unearthed ancient archaeological artifacts during a private digging for construction purposes. Once the landowner notified the authorities, the Archaeological Department legally acquired the land that contained ancient ruins, after providing the landowners compensation. This 4-acre area of land later became part of the current temple grounds.

The most notable effort in documenting the site can be found in the works of Ven. Ellawala Medhananda from 1960 to 2010. The Buddhist monk cum archaeologist has been an influential figure in documenting Buddhist heritage in the Northeast regions affected by the civil war and the activities of the Department of Archaeology from post-independent to post-war Sri Lanka. His book, translated into English as *The Sinhala Buddhist Heritage in the East and North of Sri Lanka* (Dayawansa Jayakody, 2005), includes a set of maps prepared by Ven. Medhananda in which he recorded the sites explored in the Northeast. In Ampara District alone, he documents over twenty-two sites, some of which are not noted in the maps prepared by the Department of Archaeology. According to Ven. Medhananda's biographer, Kamalika Peiris, "Some of his writing had an immediate effect - Medhananda wrote an article on Muhudu Maha Vihara in Pottuvil to the Sinhala newspapers and thereafter the Archaeological Department took over the place."

Most notably, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed Ven. Ellawala Medhananda was appointed to the Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province. Established in May 2020, the task force consisted of eleven members. It was chaired by Retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne, who was also the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence. Other key members included prominent figures such as Ven. Panamure Thilakawansa Thero, the Chief Prelate for the North and East provinces, and military and civil officials with backgrounds in security, governance and heritage management. This Task Force faced criticism for its composition, with concerns raised about the predominance of Sinhala-Buddhist perspectives, lack of representation from Tamil and Muslim communities and the heavy involvement of military personnel. Critics argued that its focus and actions risked marginalizing minority narratives and overlooking the region's multicultural heritage.

The inconclusive picture that emerges about the site is that in the early centuries, Muhudu Maha Viharaya was likely an important Buddhist site during the

Anuradhapura Kingdom, serving as a monastery and religious centre. How the site is perceived today, however, has less to do with ancient chronicles or archaeological findings and more to do with legends and popular beliefs that align with the post-independent identity politics of the island.

An Art Historical Perspective

Due to the history of conflict in the region, Muhudu Maha Viharaya is yet to be properly excavated. Like other sites such as Deegavapi, which stirred much controversy, the attention the site received must be contextualized in popular politics and media. For instance, the site was prominently featured in the Deyata Kirula 2013 programme graced by the then-president Mahinda Rajapaksa, who declared open the newly carpeted access road to the Muhudu Maha Vihara.

In this setting, the study by Ven. Miriswatte Wimalagnana titled, 'Identification of Avalokiteshvara at Muhudu Maha Viharaya in the Buddha-Triad' stands out as a lonely but notable voice. His work concentrates on the most important feature that defines the ruins at the site: beyond the modern-day constructions at the Muhudu Maha Vihara, some stone pillars stand tall on the foundation of an image house. At its heart is a triad of limestone statues. Two are clad in what seem to be royal garments and accessories. They appear to be in conversation with a third figure with a pleated robe. Popular narratives in the media consider the two royal statues to be of Princess Devi and King Kavantissa, paying homage to Buddha. Little excavation work has been done here and many other artifacts remain buried under the sand.

Ven. Wimalagnana offers a careful alternative explanation that the sculptural remains could be that of "Avalokiteśvara, one of the earliest divine Bodhisattvas or Dhyānī Bodhisattvas in the Mahayana pantheon." He argues that the sculptures at Muhudu Maha Viharaya represent Mahayana Buddhist art, specifically identifying three stone statues as the Buddha and two forms of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva: the princely form and the ascetic form.

Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, is a significant figure in Mahayana Buddhism. A figure popular in Buddhist Art found on the island, the most iconic depiction of Avalokiteśvara was unearthed from Veheragala and is housed at the Colombo National Museum. A depiction of his female counterpart, Tara, allegedly from the East Coast, famously adorns the South Asia gallery at the British Museum.

Despite art historical stardom in the international arena and the extensive collections available for study across national and international museums, the figures have received scant public attention within Sri Lanka, probably because these artifacts do not align with the grand narrative of historical Theravada dominance on the island.

At Muhudu Maha Viharaya, Avalokiteśvara is depicted in two distinct forms. Firstly, there is the princely form representing Avalokiteśvara as a royal figure adorned with elaborate jewellery and a crown. This depiction emphasizes his role as a compassionate saviour who is accessible to all beings. Secondly, he is depicted in the ascetic form, in a meditative pose, symbolizing his deep spiritual practice and dedication to alleviating the suffering of all sentient beings.

Ven. Wimalagnana's approach supports the understanding of sites such as Muhudu Maha Viharaya in a regional context of South Asia, in keeping with art historical practices across time and space. The presence of Avalokiteśvara sculptures illustrates that the "Muhudu Maha Viharaya had been an ancient Mahayana monastic site of Sri Lanka." Such sites were found especially along the coast and near the navigable rivers because Avalokiteśvara was considered the protector of mariners.

The Contestation

The religious history of Muhudu Maha Viharaya is not heavily contested between different ethno-religious groups. It is widely accepted as a Buddhist site, while scholarly circles recognize its Mahayana roots. The real contention surrounding the site arises from land ownership issues, particularly the seventy-two acres allocated to the temple by the Department of Archaeology. The conflict is less about competing religious claims and more about a land dispute between local communities, state authorities like the Department of Archaeology, Buddhist clergy, and ethno-nationalist groups. The core issue involves allegations of encroachment on temple land (Buddhist) by residents (Muslim), who, in turn, assert that government authorities wrongfully took their land. This has escalated into ongoing legal battles.

Ven. Warakapola Indrasiri, the current Chief Incumbent of Muhudu Maha Viharaya, claims that encroachers have vandalized ancient ruins at the site ("Security Delegation Evaluates Encroachment Issues at Pottuvil Muhudu Maha Viharaya"). However, local Muslim residents refute this, citing a 1951 gazette that recognized

the land's archaeological significance, as identified by archaeologist Senarath Paranavithana. According to them, the gazette allocated thirty-three acres for village expansion, thirty acres as archaeological land, and nine acres as a coastal reservation. Additionally, a 1965 gazette issued during Charles Godakumbura's tenure as Commissioner of Archaeology declared Muhudu Maha Viharaya an archaeologically protected site, further emphasizing its cultural importance. Verifying these conflicting claims is challenging.

Pathway to the Muslim burial ground

The land allocation and gazette declarations for Muhudu Maha Viharaya continued beyond 1951 and 1965, but ethnic tensions surrounding the site intensified between 2018 and 2020. During this period, Buddhist monks from the temple complained that the original seventy-two acres, which they claimed contained artifacts and historical places of Buddhist worship, had been reduced to fourteen acres due to land grabs, illegal constructions, and land transfers (Nagahawatte). Despite the site's historical and religious significance, they alleged that the land had not been properly gazetted.

The monks further claimed that politicians had allocated much of the land to the local Muslim population to secure votes and accused top officials at the Department of Archaeology of complicity in these land provisions (Nagahawatte). In contrast, a

book by Ven. Thambugala Anandasiri Thera, published by Dayawansa Jayakody & Co. and Kamala Rajapaksa, asserts that around 50 years ago, the Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil communities in the area lived harmoniously, coexisting peacefully even with the wildlife in the region (Nagahawatte).

The land disputes escalated when the Department of Archaeology filed legal action against thirteen local residents, challenging their claims to land near the temple. The Supreme Court ruled in favour of the residents, citing gazettes, land surveys and Jayabhoomi deeds issued during the administration of former president Chandrika Bandaranaike. Ven. Warakapola Indrasiri later filed a civil lawsuit against the same residents, which remains ongoing.

Today, tensions between the temple, representing Sinhala-Buddhist interests and the local Muslim residents continue to simmer.

Media Coverage

TV news reports from August 2018 highlighted alleged vandalism at the ancient site, quoting Ven. Warakapola Indrasiri Thero. Later reports between 2018 and 2020 focused on his claims of land encroachment, prompting the government to deploy a Navy contingent to manage the escalating tensions (Nagahawatte).

Recently, media coverage of Muhudu Maha Viharaya has shifted from the site's disputes to its appeal as a travel destination. The site's natural beauty, coastal location and rich history have attracted the attention of travel writers. A 2022 article in the *Sunday Times* captures the cultural and scenic experience: "After paying homage to the past, you walk to the stupa (recently built by donors) and meander to the white beach...watch the sun sink into the dimming ocean. From there, you pass through a grove of cool Casuarina and reach the car park by nightfall. A visit to Muhudu Maha Vihara refreshes the soul with ancient legend, history, and mystery" (Senarath-Yapa).

In February 2024, Daily News reported the latest development, stating that Muhudu Maha Viharaya was among eleven temples designated as Sacred Sites in a Government Gazette issued that month ('Eleven Historical Shrines Designated as Sacred Sites').

Stories of Place and Memory

The beach adjoining the burial grounds.

The predominantly Muslim community living near the Muhudu Maha Viharaya site reports that ongoing land disputes are having a significant negative impact on their lives. A community elder in his seventies explains that his family has lived on the land for decades, having obtained Jayabhoomi land deeds during former President Chandrika Bandaranaike's administration. After securing these deeds, they began cultivating coconut trees. Now, just as they are about to benefit from years of demanding work, the Department of Archaeology's involvement is forcing them off the land. He adds that his sons-in-law blame him for giving them problematic lands as dowries (a cultural obligation that requires providing suitable properties for his daughters).

Another resident shares that the Buddhist monks at Muhudu Maha Viharaya had instructed the community to cease using a nearby sandy stretch as a burial ground, a long-standing practice.

A 45-year-old resident from the neighbouring Muslim community reflects on the past, stating that before the current chief monk took over, the Muslim community had supported the monks during the ethnic conflict and beyond. "We protected the archaeological site from the LTTE," he says, expressing dismay at the accusations against the Muslim community, which, he believes, are made to solicit donations from visiting pilgrims.

He and others in the area now live in fear, but with no desire or means to leave land they believe rightfully belongs to them, as their gazette notifications and Jayabhoomi deeds confirm.

Heritage Management in a Dynamic World

Historian Nirmal Dewasiri views the disputes over sites in the North and East as indicative of how Sinhala-Buddhist ideology emerged during the late British colonial period. He argues that the subsequent influence of Sinhala Buddhist leaders shaped archaeological interpretations in Sri Lanka, increasingly aligning them with the SinhalaBuddhist heritage narrative. In post-war Sri Lanka, this has led to a triumphalist assertion of Sinhala-Buddhist identity in regions inhabited by minority communities.

Archaeologist Jagath Weerasinghe emphasizes that racial discrimination intensifies conflicts over archaeological sites and advocates for a comprehensive approach to understanding the historical significance of these places. He points out that ethnic identity and racism play key roles in these conflicts. Weerasinghe contends that conventional historical interpretations and inadequate archaeological management worsen disputes at sites like Muhudu Maha Viharaya. However, he notes that transparent dialogue and respectful engagement with communities have effectively addressed similar challenges at other sites. He cites Ibbankatuwa and Seruwawila as successful case studies that could serve as models for resolving issues at Muhudu Maha Viharaya.

Exploring a viable solution to the issue, a local resident suggests that the government should manage Muhudu Maha Viharaya as a heritage and archaeological site to boost tourism and revenue while ensuring that residents can live peacefully and with respect on their land.

His wishes seemed to have materialized just a short tuk-tuk ride away at Arugam Bay, where tourism thrives, generating significant income. However, a recent

incident involving a travel warning issued by the American Embassy in Sri Lanka in October 2024 and ensuing debates brought to light a new challenge for the local communities to tackle: settler tourism.

The article 'Settler Tourism and the Threat of Terror' by Praveen Tilakaratne and Tamara Fernando examines the intersection of tourism development and security policies, particularly in contested regions like the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. The authors argue that these policies often prioritize economic interests and settler expansion over the needs and rights of local communities, framing local resistance as threats to national security. This dynamic exacerbates tensions and undermines the inclusivity necessary for sustainable heritage management.

In conclusion, inclusive heritage management must recognize that conflicts are not static; they evolve with shifting narratives in local, national and international contexts. It is essential to acknowledge power dynamics and how colonial narratives, often disguised in modern forms, continue to marginalize and dispossess local communities. Prioritizing the participation of these communities is crucial, as is recognizing their historical and cultural connections to contested sites while addressing emerging challenges.

To effectively navigate these issues, we must reconcile economic development and identity politics with the preservation of cultural heritage. By fostering meaningful engagement, balancing the multiple interests of various stakeholders and rejecting exclusionary narratives, heritage management can serve as a tool for reconciliation rather than conflict, promoting shared stewardship of cultural landmarks. This vision emphasizes the need for policies that protect not only heritage but also the rights and dignity of those who live in its shadow, ensuring a more equitable and harmonious future.

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Rethinking Heritage

Beyond the five case studies explored in this research, numerous heritage sites across Sri Lanka have become focal points of controversy in recent years, revealing a discernible pattern documented by several scholars. Sites such as Deegavapi and Thiriyaya are situated in the Northeast, where historically multi-ethnic communities inhabit landscapes ravaged by decades of civil war. Other sites, like Kuragala, Devanagala and Dambulla, are in different regions, where minority communities coexist within predominantly Sinhala society.

In the Northeast, disputes occur due to assertions of Sinhala-Buddhist claims over sites that were inaccessible to the majority community during the civil war. These are perceived by local communities as efforts to dominate and colonize historically multi-ethnic areas. In other regions, the focus is on reaffirming Sinhala dominance within social hierarchies where mixed communities have coexisted peacefully. For instance, tensions flared in 2018, when Tamil Hindu traders were evicted from the Dambulla marketplace by Buddhist monks, sparking a broader debate over Buddhist dominance in historically mixed areas outside conflict zones. In places like Kuragala and Devanagala, tensions have been directed toward the Muslim community. These incidents highlight deeper concerns about the exclusion of minority communities from sites they have long inhabited or used.

The five sites documented in this research share common features of being ancient and archaeologically significant. They are associated with multiple religious or ethnic groups, leading to disputes involving religious, ethnic and national identities. However, each case is unique and should not be oversimplified. The disputes involve a complex interplay of local dynamics, personalities and broader social patterns.

The controversy over Dakkhina Stupa is a forgotten case, limited to scholarly circles, yet highlighting the sharp nationalist divide in academia. It has not received social media attention and is not a popular tourist site. Kandarodai is similar, where the discussion remains limited. The site is more popular than Dakkhina Stupa and must be understood within the context of neighbouring communities overwhelmed by tourism from the South to the North which began with the end of the war. Both of these sites do not have Buddhist monks who have claimed residence at the site. The Department of Archaeology supervises Dakkhina stupa in Anuradhapura and Kandarodai is overseen by the Sri Lanka Army. Dakkhina stupa does not have a

tourist footfall whereas Kandarodai attracts a sizable number of tourists, especially from the South.

In contrast to Kandarodai and Dakkhina, sites such as Kuragala, Kurundi and Muhudu Maha Vihara are popular controversies marked by media attention. They go beyond competing identity claims. These three sites now have Buddhist monks who have taken residence and ownership, establishing Buddhist temples on-site.

The case of Kuragala illustrates the disconnect between intra-religious groups and the appropriation of this divide within a context of inter-religious tensions. It highlights the roles of charismatic religious leaders who mobilize support from the community, develop business opportunities through tourism, and navigate local dynamics to their advantage. Analysis of social media shows that Kuragala generated virulent hate speech against the Muslim community on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook.

Muhudu Maha Vihara is a case where land issues, rather than the site's identity, are at the heart of the controversy. The issues surrounding the site include land grabbing and encroachment. Communities accuse the Buddhist establishment backed by the Department of Archaeology of land grabbing, and Buddhist monks accuse the communities of encroachment and destruction of heritage. Heritage sites in the former conflict zone present opportunities for new Buddhist establishments to acquire land. There is a convincing argument that the 'protection of Buddhist Heritage' is a thin veil for land grabbing. The Eastern coast sites, especially after the civil war, have been subject to Sinhala colonization processes, whereas sites like Kuragala are more focused on religious exclusivity.

Reflections

1. **Heritage sites are spatial embodiments of mythic historical narratives.**

If we understand the 'nation' as an "imagined community," as Anderson famously suggests in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991), the representation of the past and the delineation of cultural heritage become central to the process of shaping that collective imagination. History plays a potent role in imagining the nation. It gives the narrative base for political rhetoric commonly found in popular media.

Historian Nirmal Dewasiri points out five critical mythic historical narratives important to Sinhala-Buddhist imagination. These include narratives about Buddha's three visits to Sri Lanka, the arrival of North Indian Prince Vijaya, the founding of Anuradhapura by King Pandukabhaya, the introduction of Buddhism during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa, and the War of King Dutugemunu and King Elara. These accounts are drawn from Vamsa literature and folklore. They are depicted in religious murals and popular media such as novels, television dramas and films. The five sites captured in this study can be linked to one or more of the mythic historical narratives. They are spaces that embody and evoke these narratives in a sensory, emotional manner. Dakkhina Stupa and Muhudu Maha Vihara relate to Dutugemunu and Elara's narrative. Kandarodai and Kurundi are connected to the visits of Buddha and Kuragala is linked to the introduction of Buddhism. These narratives marginalize alternative accounts of the sites as seen in the case of Kuragala.

The idea that Tamil and Sinhala nationalist mythmaking suffers from misrecognition rather than retaliation draws attention to a deeper psychological and historical process. Misrecognition refers to the misunderstanding or deliberate misconstruing of each group's cultural and historical identity, fostering myths that reinforce exclusionary narratives. For instance, Tamil nationalism constructs an ancient, distinct Tamil homeland (Eelam), while Sinhala nationalism often posits the Sinhalese as the original and rightful rulers of the island with a duty to protect their Buddhist heritage. Both narratives are rooted in selective interpretations of history, often omitting the complex interrelations and shared experiences of the communities. Rather than direct retaliation between the two groups, it is the misrecognition of each other's legitimate histories and grievances that perpetuates conflict, as they seek validation of their identity through mythmaking.

This misrecognition becomes crucial in the politics of modern Sri Lanka, where these myths influence policies, identity formation, heritage management and resistance to reconciliation. The works of scholars like Michael Roberts (on Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism) and S.J. Tambiah (on the ritual and political aspects of Tamil identity) provide deeper insights into how these mythologies are constructed and sustained. They argue that nationalism often arises from a desire to reclaim a misunderstood or misrepresented history, leading to political actions that entrench divisions rather than addressing underlying issues of recognition and legitimacy.

Nationalist mythmaking frames the overall heritage management efforts in Sri Lanka. State departments and communities cling to historical narratives that validate their identity while failing to acknowledge the shared histories and nuanced relationships that could pave the way for mutual recognition and reconciliation. It is an issue that needs to be first acknowledged in order to be addressed.

2. Heritage of loss and violence

In Sri Lanka, the legacy of a protracted civil war that lasted from 1983 to 2009 deeply shapes the way heritage is perceived and managed. Thinking of heritage without reference to the pain and polarization of the war is impossible, as the conflict indelibly altered the cultural landscape of the country. The war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was not only a violent struggle over territory and power but also a battle over identity, memory and cultural belonging. Heritage sites, particularly those of historical and religious significance, became contested spaces, symbols of ethnic identity and flashpoints for conflict.

For the Sinhala Buddhist majority, many heritage sites, such as the ancient city of Anuradhapura, are seen as central to a narrative of continuous Buddhist civilization, reinforcing claims to cultural and political dominance. However, for the Tamil minority, who have their own historical and cultural ties to the land, the post-war emphasis on Sinhala Buddhist heritage feels exclusionary. The destruction of Tamil cultural sites, including temples and libraries, during the war, further deepened these wounds, creating a landscape where heritage is entangled with loss and erasure.

In the post-war period, the government's efforts to restore and promote Sinhala-Buddhist heritage in formerly Tamil-controlled areas are viewed as a continuation of the ethno-nationalist project. In this context, heritage becomes a tool for reinforcing state power and a reminder of the divisions that fuelled the war. The war's legacy, therefore, is imprinted on how communities relate to heritage,

whether through the loss of cultural markers, the reassertion of national identity or the struggle for recognition of a more pluralistic history. Consequently, the idea of heritage in Sri Lanka is inseparable from the pain of the past and the polarized identities forged by decades of conflict.

3. Heritage as handmaiden for Rajapaksa ideology and presidential campaigns

The contested heritage sites in Sri Lanka (Kuragala, Kurundi and Muhudu Maha Vihara), became significant within the political and ideological framework of the Rajapaksa government, illustrating how national identity is shaped and presented. Under the Rajapaksa administrations, beginning with Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidency (2005-2015) and continuing under Gotabaya Rajapaksa (2019-2022), there has been a concerted effort to align national identity closely with Sinhala-Buddhist ideology, sidelining the narratives of numerically minority communities like the Tamils and Muslims. Groups such as Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which translates into National Sinhala Heritage, Sinhala Ravaya (Voice of the Sinhalese) and Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Brigade) took charge of heritage management efforts in the government. Historic narratives and heritage sites have been key tools appropriated to market this ideology to their electorates. During the campaign for the presidency of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a street art movement featuring historical narratives, such as the Elara-Dutugemunu war, highlighted the hegemony, violence and supremacy of the Sinhalese.

Revival and restoration projects at sites like Kuragala or Muhudu Maha Viharaya were efforts to reclaim ancient Buddhist sites to cater to the Sinhala-Buddhist hardline sentiments, even if Muslim or Tamil communities historically inhabited and currently inhabit these areas. This rhetoric appeals to a sense of historical grievance, where the Sinhala-Buddhist majority views these areas as having been neglected or overtaken by other communities. All the contested sites involve an ethno-nationalist reinterpretation of history, often leading to the erasure of minority contributions to the cultural and religious fabric of these areas.

Kuragala featured prominently in the election campaign of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who visited the site in person. Upon his victory, he established the 'Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province' by Gazette Extra Ordinary 2178/17 dated 2nd June 2020. A report by the People's Alliance for Right to Land (PARL) highlights the recurring issue in Sri Lanka where archaeology-based claims are manipulated to displace communities, resulting in landlessness across all ethnic groups. PARL has documented several instances of such practices. Particularly during election campaigns, the exploitation of these tensions to gain

political advantage by inciting unrest and intimidating minority communities is a common tactic.

4. Buddhist monks in heritage preservation

With the rise of nationalist movements led by urban Buddhist monks, like the Hela Urumaya in 2003 and Bodu Bala Sena in 2012, the politicization of religion in Sri Lanka reached unprecedented levels. Heritage sites became key battlegrounds for these groups. Out of the five cases documented, the three sites that were highlighted in the media have domineering young Buddhist monks driving the controversy: Galgamuwe Shanthabodhi Thero in Kurundi Viharaya, Warakapola Indrasiri Thero at Muhudu Maha Viharaya, and Wataddara Gnanissara Thero, popularly known as Nelligala Hamuduruwo at Kuragala.

The influence of individual Buddhist monks who wield significant civil power should not be underestimated. These monks play a crucial role in raising funds for archaeological expeditions, excavations and the restoration of living heritage sites, as seen in cases like Kurundi. Their close ties to state institutions such as the Department of Archaeology, the military, political elites and the media allow them to assert control over these sites with legal and political backing. A notable example is Kuragala, where Wataddara Gnanissara/Nelligala Hamuduruwo launched the '*Yali Pibidemu Kuragala*' (Revitalization of Kuragala) project, which not only led to the construction of a new stupa but also marginalized the Muslim pilgrim site, restructured the local power hierarchy and transformed the area into a popular tourist destination. The Buddhist monk successfully garnered support from both the Buddhist and Muslim communities through some charitable work, redefining the role of Buddhist clergy in development projects. In a YouTube interview, he emphasized the construction of religious buildings as a vital component of the broader development of the area.

Though the phenomenon is beyond the scope of the study, a future research area would be the emergence of dominant young Buddhist monks and religious leaders and their role in aligning religious, national and commercial spheres.

5. Role of state institutions

State institutions play a decisive role in shaping the historical narratives emphasized at heritage sites, typically privileging Buddhist hegemony over minority perspectives. Key agencies, such as the Department of Archaeology and the military, are directly involved in identifying, excavating, restoring, protecting and managing these sites. The nature of their involvement often depends on the location of the site and the local communities residing nearby, leading to either cooperation or conflict.

The Department of Archaeology has played a pivotal role in managing tensions around heritage sites. It has been both criticized and praised, depending on its perceived stance. In the aftermath of the civil war, the Department, assisted by the Sri Lankan Army, conducted an extensive mapping of heritage sites in the North. While officials see this effort as challenging, essential and even heroic, especially due to the dangers of landmines, local communities viewed it through a more critical lens. For them, the Department's actions mirrored the colonial legacy of state institutions - disconnected from the humanitarian crises faced by these communities and lacking sensitivity to local concerns. The triad of the Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka Army and the Buddhist clergy does not signal an inclusive, sensitive approach to heritage management, especially in the eyes of communities of diverse faiths who were at the receiving end of the violence of war. It speaks loudly of the continued colonialism, dispossession, violence and erasure of diversity as characterizing the approach to heritage.

As seen in Kurundi, the Department's involvement in excavation and reconstruction has been particularly contentious. Tamil groups argue that such sites hold equal significance to their history and the Department's focus on Buddhist restoration is seen as an attempt to assert Sinhala-Buddhist ownership over these areas. Protests have erupted in response to new Buddhist constructions or restorations in multi-ethnic areas like Kurundi, Kuragala and Muhudu Maha Vihara, where such projects are perceived as efforts at Sinhala-Buddhist colonization rather than genuine archaeological work. On the other hand, the Department faces criticism from Sinhala-Buddhist hardliners, who claim it does not do enough to protect Buddhist heritage.

The Department operates under the Antiquities Ordinance of 1940, which governs its management of archaeological sites. However, there are growing calls for reform, as the current framework is seen as inadequate for addressing the complexities of heritage management in ethnically diverse areas like the North and East.

In conclusion, while the Department of Archaeology has a legitimate role in preserving Sri Lanka's heritage, its strategies and activities, especially in the North, are in dire need of reform. State institutions cannot serve all their people equally unless they move away from an overt obsession with Buddhist heritage. They need to create space for a more inclusive understanding of heritage that promotes a different vision of Sri Lanka - not just as a predominantly Theravada Buddhist nation but as a land rich in diverse faiths and cultures.

6. Legal issues underlying contested heritage

The controversies surrounding heritage sites are deeply intertwined with several legal and regulatory issues. It involves the interpretation and selective application of laws governing heritage preservation, land use and religious rights. Key legislation includes the Antiquities Ordinance of 1940, the Buddhist Temporalities Ordinance and various land rights regulations which have become the basis for both preservation efforts and conflicts. It became clear that there is a plethora of laws and regulations, some archaic, some contradictory and some politicized, leading to much contestation and confusion. For instance, in Muhudu Maha Vihara, residents claim that the lands were given to them through the Jayabhoomi Scheme, a programme under the government of former president Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. So different parties refer to different laws and regulations which are at odds with each other, presenting a legal impasse for those seeking solutions. Furthermore, there are claims that the ordinance has been applied selectively, often focusing on Sinhala-Buddhist heritage while ignoring or marginalizing Tamil-Hindu and Muslim heritage at the same sites.

A mapping of these laws and regulations is a valuable step forward. A summary overview is given below, based on information available online on LAWNET (https://www.lawnet.gov.lk/) and Peoples' Alliance for Right to Land (PARL) (https://www.parlsl.com/publications).

Regulatory frameworks directly related to heritage management

Antiquities Ordinance (1940, amended in 1956 and 1998)

Features:
Defines "antiquities" and provides for their protection.
Establishes processes for declaring protected monuments.
Grants power to the Department of Archaeology to manage protected sites.

Limitations:
Narrow focus on monuments and tangible heritage.
Limited scope for addressing contested heritage or intangible cultural heritage.

Contradictions:
Often overlaps with broader land-use laws, creating confusion about jurisdiction.
Does not account for post-conflict dynamics or multi-religious narratives.

Buddhist Temporalities Ordinance (1889, amended in 1931)

Features:
Governs Buddhist temple property and its management.
Focuses on the rights and responsibilities of custodians of temple lands.

Contradictions:
Favours Buddhist institutions, sidelining other religious groups' claims to heritage.
Conflicts with secular principles of land management in multi-ethnic areas.

Forest Ordinance (1907, amended several times)

Features:
Protects forest reserves and regulates human activity within them.
Many heritage sites are located within forest reserves.

Contradictions:
Restricts archaeological excavations and development in forested areas.
Creates jurisdictional disputes between the Department of Archaeology and Forest Department.

Land Development Ordinance (1935)

Features:
Facilitates state-led land settlement programmes.
Allocates land to individuals, often disregarding traditional ownership.
Contradictions:
Widely used for distributing land in the post-conflict Northern and Eastern provinces.
Ignores cultural heritage considerations in land redistribution.
Used in politically motivated settlement programmes, exacerbating ethnic tensions.

Urban Development Authority (UDA) Act (1978)

Features:
Focuses on urban planning and development.
Involves large-scale infrastructure projects that can affect heritage sites.

Contradictions:
Prioritizes development over conservation in urban areas.
Creates tension with heritage laws, especially regarding buffer zones for monuments.

Presidential Task Forces for Heritage Management (e.g., 2020 Eastern Province Task Force)

Features:
Established to manage archaeological heritage, often with a Sinhala-Buddhist focus.
Operates outside traditional legal frameworks.

Contradictions:
Lacks transparency and inclusion of minority communities in decision-making.
Overlaps with and undermines the Antiquities Ordinance and local governance mechanisms.

Presidential Task Forces for Resettlement

Scope:
Include ad-hoc mechanisms for land allocation and management, such as the Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management.

Relevance:
Impact land use and access in the Eastern Province, especially in areas with contested heritage.

Issues:
Perceived ethnic and political biases in decisions.

While a detailed analysis of the contradictions between these frameworks is beyond the scope of this study, it is essential for developing a more integrated approach to balancing heritage preservation, community development and reconciliation.

7. Role of media and social media

Traditional media, such as newspapers and television, and social media platforms were venues for promoting discourse on these sites. The study looked at content found in newspapers, selected television content, and digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter). The most prominent use of mass and social media indicated amplifying ethno-nationalist narratives. Most user comments on Facebook and YouTube reiterate a deep belief in the Buddhist heritage of Sri Lanka and some can be categorized as hate speech towards minority communities. These included direct threats and coarse language.

On traditional media channels, there is a pronounced lack of space for alternative interpretations. TV channels focus on politicians and religious leaders. The voices of communities, especially minorities, were absent in the Sinhala and English language content covered in this study. While social media has also created space for minorities to share their perspectives, the dominant discourse was focused on ethno-nationalist narratives. Due to the digital divide, local communities living around the heritage sites are not likely to use these platforms to voice their concerns.

A positive step forward would be to involve journalists and content creators for digital platforms in a dialogue in formulating awareness-raising initiatives for inclusive heritage management.

Concluding Thoughts:

Towards Inclusive Heritage Management

Achieving a sustainable and peaceful approach to heritage management requires centring the lived experiences of communities and embracing the multifaceted histories - oral, textual and anthropological - of contested sites . This necessitates a shift from archaeology-driven frameworks to a more holistic heritage management perspective. Archaeology alone cannot fully address the sociopolitical and cultural dimensions of heritage sites. Instead, an inclusive approach must integrate social history, community aspirations, and contemporary cultural and media practices, moving beyond technical interpretations to foster dialogue and understanding. Both traditional and digital media can serve as vital tools in facilitating this dialogue and amplifying diverse narratives.

A crucial step is to avoid projecting modern ethnic conflicts and rigid identity categories onto the past. Heritage should not be manipulated to sustain notions of ethnic ownership or unbroken continuity but should instead encourage reconciliation and critical reflection. Historical discourses shape national identities and their control can perpetuate division. Countering ethno-nationalist narratives with a more inclusive vision of heritage is key to fostering a shared sense of identity.

Inclusive heritage management must carefully balance the competing claims of various communities - Buddhist, Muslim, Tamil - without allowing heritage to become a tool of marginalization or political dominance. This requires engaging local communities respectfully, creating dialogue platforms and adopting heritage preservation strategies sensitive to cultural diversity.

Finally, recognizing the pluralistic histories of heritage sites is essential. Many of these sites are not relics of a single culture but have evolved through centuries, serving diverse religious, social and political roles. By embracing the multilayered histories of such spaces, heritage management can become an instrument of cultural reconciliation. Rejecting exclusivist interpretations allows these sites to be reimagined as shared spaces, fostering inclusivity and mutual respect.

Through this framing, heritage can serve as a bridge, not a barrier, in the pursuit of harmony.

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Contested Histories

Hasini Haputhanthri

In *Contested Histories*, Hasini Haputhanthri delves into five of Sri Lanka's heritage sites, each embroiled in controversy. Drawing from interviews with local communities, experts, political thinkers, journalists and social media activists, Hasini examines how these sites are undergoing transformation. She raises critical questions: How should we approach heritage conservation when multiple layers of history coexist? Which narratives do we prioritize? What do we lose in the process? Can heritage be shared equitably? By asking these questions Hasini charts a path toward inclusive heritage management in an island fraught with complex challenges.

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