

# Shared Sanctities

Hasini Haputhanthri

Sujeewa de Silva















# Shared Sanctities



International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES)

2021



# Shared Sanctities

Hasini Haputhanthri

Photography by  
Sujeewa de Silva

International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES)







HASINI A. HAPUTHANTHRI is a museologist and an independent consultant with years of experience in peace building, education, culture and arts management. She is

the author of 'Museums, Memory and Identity Politics in Sri Lanka' and (with Dr. Malathi de Alwis) 'Archive of Memory'. Trained in Sociology, Asian Studies, Oral History and Museum Anthropology in India, Sweden and USA she continues to study art and architectural history with a focus on exploring shared roots. She writes and speaks on related issues on a plethora of global platforms and conducts heritage and museum walks in Colombo, Polonnaruwa and Kandy.



SUJEEWA DE SILVA is a photographer specializing in Documentary, Editorial and Travel photography with more than 20 years of professional experience.

He travels extensively, documenting lifestyles and cultures of Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and other countries in the South Asian region. Sujeeva is also a documentary film director with over 10 years of experience as director-cum-cameraman in more than 35 local and international documentary films.

His personal work encompasses documenting the effects of globalization and modernization on human lives and our planet. Especially exploring different cultures and their heritage.

# Shared Sanctities

© 2021 International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES)  
2, Kynsey Terrace, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka  
E-mail: [admin@ices.lk](mailto:admin@ices.lk)  
URL: [www.ices.lk](http://www.ices.lk)

First Published – 2021

ISBN: 978-624-5502-08-0

**Authors:**

Hasini Haputhanthri  
Sujeewa de Silva

Copyright on this publication belongs to the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES). Any part of this book may be reproduced with due acknowledgements to the authors and the publisher. The interpretations and conclusions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the ICES or the donors.

Preliminary research for this book was funded by the Ford Foundation. Subsequently, this project was supported by Historical Dialogue.lk, an initiative of the programme Strengthening Reconciliation Processes in Sri Lanka (SRP). SRP is co-financed by the European Union and the German Federal Foreign Office, and is implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and the British Council, in partnership with the Government of Sri Lanka.



**Printer :**

**Publisher:** International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES)

**Cover:** Side wall of Lankathilaka Image House

**Endpapers:** Ceiling paintings at Karagampitiya  
Sri Subhodarama Viharaya, Dehiwala



*Dedicated to this Island of encounters  
we call home*





## Foreword

### Reimagining the Past

Diversity, confluence, and pluralism have been part of the social and political life of this country for centuries. Syncretism and shared cultural diversity are found in rituals, cultural practices, monuments, in the arts, and in other places, suggesting that the country in a previous era embraced other cultures, practices, and heritage more easily than it does now. Contemporary Sri Lanka, however, has been marked more by ethnic and religious tension and violence than by a celebration of diversity.

Writers, travellers, historians, artists, and others, have written about Sri Lanka and its multicultural past for centuries. **'Shared Sanctities'** is another contribution to the literature on this subject, and seeks to provide an alternative account of art, religion, and people. As the author observes '*... most things don't make it to the textbooks. And though they don't, they are still a very significant part of the story; part of the truth....*'

In this collection, Hasini Haputhanthri explores themes of religious confluence, artistic syncretism, cultural continuity, architectural connection, and cultural fusion, through the lens of a museologist, an art historian, and a lover of people, places, and cultures. This collection draws from several years of research and is inspired by many personal encounters the author has had with sites of religious, artistic, and cultural significance. It explores the precolonial, the colonial, and the contemporary eras and is written in a prose that is accessible and at times, poetic. It explores the spiritual, the aesthetic and the mythological. The photographs by Sujeewa de Silva are an intrinsic part of these tales and provide an astonishing visual layer to the prose. Ten documentaries, also directed by Sujeewa de Silva, featuring interviews with artists, historians, and archaeologists, provide an audio-visual layer, and are released separately.

***'... islands are defined by the oceans that surround them...'***

Located at the intersection of major trade routes along the Indian Ocean including the silk route, Sri Lanka has been a land of many migrations as reflected in the island's rich and diverse ethnic and socio-cultural fabric. Hasini starts her journey with **'Greater World: Islands, Oceans and Beyond'**, in which she explores the country's place in ancient trade routes, and its location as an important port of call for traders, travellers and writers. The maritime and trade routes, and the people and cultures they brought to these shores, have had an important impact on the history, architecture, and the religion of this country.

She reminds the reader that ‘... (j)ust like us, our ancestors moved around in the world for all sorts of reasons’ and speaks to the ‘history of the oceans’, and the impact this maritime history has had on the country’s culture and heritage. She starts this section with an encounter with the Nestorian Cross: ‘... a Christian symbol in a predominantly Buddhist pilgrim site ...’. Given the migrations that occurred to and around the island, it is not surprising that a ‘Nestorian Cross’ was excavated from the site of an ancient Buddhist kingdom. In the same piece, the ‘Nalanda Gedige’ is used as an illustration of the connections between India and Sri Lanka and the confluence of Buddhist and Hindu art and architecture. She asks, ‘No one quite knows of Nalanda’s origins. Who built it? What for? Who worshipped here? Why is it called Nalanda?’ Even if the answers to these questions are obscure, the mixed Hindu and Buddhist styles of the temple are ‘out there’ and for us to appreciate.

**‘This openness has led to a confluence of art, architecture and above all, spirit, that gives Polonnaruwa a sense of a sanctuary.’**

In ‘**Temple as Museum; Religion as Art**’ the author looks at how Hinduism and Buddhism have combined to produce monuments and art of stunning beauty in the ancient capital of Polonnaruwa. While the *Gal Vihara* is perhaps the best known of Polonnaruwa’s monuments, this piece takes you through some of the lesser-known monuments. It contains a detailed account of the syncretism and the religious art of the *Tivanka Image House* where Hindu architecture provides sanctuary to a giant Buddha and to intricate 11th century paintings from the *Jataka* Tales. As the author observes, the temple blurs the lines between Buddhism and Hinduism and forces us to unlearn the labels we have absorbed in our school history lessons and through mainstream media.

**‘The Holy Trinity Church, more commonly known as the Trinity College Chapel is so distinctive in its architecture that it startles those who know the politics of Kandyan architecture.’**

In the third piece, ‘**Conflict, Confluence, and Continuity**’, Hasini explores the architecture of Kandy through three places of religious significance: the St Paul’s Cathedral; the Trinity College Chapel; and the 14th century *Embekke Devale* with its mythical wood carvings. As she writes, ‘...Trinity Chapel is one of the first and finest examples of adopting indigenous, vernacular architecture in the design of an Anglican church found in Sri Lanka.’ The subsequent David Paynter murals at the chapel drew strongly from Lankan heritage and culture. The architectural and religious hybridity of the astonishing *Embekke Devale* is captured elegantly by the author. She weaves a wonderful tale of the influence the ‘Drummers’ Hall’ at *Embekke* has had on the Royal Audience Hall at the *Dalada Maligawa*, the Trinity College Chapel, and the Independence Memorial in Colombo. It is a fascinating discussion of the many strands of art and heritage that connect the precolonial, the colonial, and the postcolonial.



***‘No matter how exotic or loud the colours of the Pettah streets are, the Red Masjid easily out does them all.’***

In a ***‘Tale of Two Masjids’*** Hasini explores the intricate world of Islamic architecture, taking us on an excursion through two iconic mosques in Sri Lanka. As the author observes, the first mosque was built by Prophet Mohammed and had no arches, no domes, and no minarets. The first of these iconic Sri Lankan mosques is the *Jumma Meeran Mosque* located inside the old Dutch Fort in Galle, a seaside town that has been enriched and blessed by Islamic influence for centuries. The *Jami Ul-Afar Masjid* in Pettah, also known as the Red Mosque, is the other. Both these mosques speak to the influence of colonialism and the fusion of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian architectural styles. As the author observes, *‘These buildings are the evidence that Islam, in its journey across time and space, has embraced other cultures and practices; it has evolved, negotiated and survived. It has given as much as it has taken.’*

***‘How did Buddhism survive against such odds? The key to understanding the centrality of Buddhism to modern Sinhalese identity, lies in the exploration of that question.’***

The fifth piece takes us on a journey to Mount Lavinia, through some of the legend that gave the suburb its name, and the history and emergence of *Karagampitiya* temple in the suburbs of Colombo. It is another exploration of mixed spiritualities and the impact of the competing colonial influences on the area, and on the places of religious significance in the suburb. In the *Karagampitiya* temple too, the paintings draw their inspiration from the *Jataka* Tales, stories with a cultural influence beyond Sri Lanka. Here temple art, rich mosaics, and architecture once more illustrate the fusion of the multiple colonial experiences with Buddhist heritage. The story and mural of *‘... a blue-eyed beauty, wearing blue sapphires and a satin dress’* lingering behind the statue of the Buddha adds an enigma to the tale.

***‘What is Buddhist? What is Hindu? What is Tantric? ... It ... makes us wonder why and who categorized or labelled the island’s artistic legacy, and its past, as Hindu or Buddhist, Sinhala or Tamil.’***

Few cultures in the world have evolved without absorbing and being influenced by other cultures and traditions. Cultural borrowing has often enriched the ‘other culture’. Ethnic and religious diversity, hybridity, and the mix of identities are not unique to Sri Lanka. Many countries, including all countries in South Asia, are plural, diverse, and complex. However, Sri Lanka’s size, and its cultural, culinary, geographical, architectural, and social diversity, puts it in a different league, leading Marco Polo to comment that it was ‘undoubtedly the finest island of its size in the world’.

Even though Sri Lanka has been a site of diversity, confluence, hybridity, and migration for centuries, modern Sri Lanka has struggled to manage ethnic and religious diversity. Ethnicity,

religion, caste, and class have been mobilized as points of entry for competitive politics. Rather than celebrate coexistence and diversity, leaders have sown animosity and anxiety leading to several bouts of inter-group violence and animosity, and the rupturing of social relations. Despite the conflict and anxiety of modern Ceylon and Sri Lanka, many sources suggest that there are long histories of shared spaces and traditions and cultural confluence spanning many centuries.

The teaching of history has been contested in many societies, both in the developed and developing world. While for some, history is about a singular narrative, for others, history is best approached through plural narratives. This compilation takes the latter approach and is inspired by the idea that history is best explored through multiple narratives, and by contesting, challenging, and interrogating dominant narratives.

This collection then is a modest contribution to the endeavour of writing plural histories. It entreats us to re-engage with and reimagine the past. It asks us to look at our history and the dominant and traditional narratives of people, places, archaeology, and art, through new lenses. These are stories about the multiple influences and experiences that have shaped places of historical, religious, and architectural significance in this country. They speak to the openness with which the past has embraced the other. They speak of encounters with the other that have enriched Sri Lankan space and place. They tell us that the past beats not just to the drums of violence, conflict, demonization, and the dominance of a single culture, but also to sounds of confluence, connections, crosswinds, and complexity. These are tales about an island that is deeply immersed in cultural fusion and religious syncretism. Tales we often tend to ignore.

My thanks to Hasini Haputhanthri for the research, the text and creation of five wonderful tales. Thank you also to Sujeewa de Silva for the extraordinary photographs that are an intrinsic part of this compilation, for the layout of this book, and for the ten inspiring documentaries that provide audio-visual layers to these narratives. My thanks to Nadine Vanniasinkam who superbly steered and managed the initiative over the years. My thanks also to all those at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies who provided administrative, technical, and other forms of support. A special word of thanks to the 'Historical Dialogue Project' of the 'Strengthening Reconciliation Processes' initiative of GIZ for its support, and to the Ford Foundation for supporting the early research.

*Mario Gomez*

*Executive Director  
International Centre for Ethnic Studies  
May 2021*







## *Acknowledgements*

Dr. Shanthi Jayawardene, Prof. Jagath Weerasinghe, Dr. T Sanathanan, C Anjalendran  
Prasanna Ranabahu, Prof. Janice Leoshko

Department of Archeology: Prof. Senarath Dissanayake – Former Director General, Mr. Deepal  
Wijethilake - Acting Director - Promotions Branch, Mrs. Leena Damayanthi Hettiarachchi -  
Archaeological Officer - Promotions Branch

Mr. Y M Samaranayake and Mr. K P R N K Pathirage at Polonnaruwa Archaeological Site  
Central Cultural Fund: Prof. Gamini Adikari, Former Director General

Sri Dalada Maligawa Media Bureau: Mr. Mindika Harindra, Mr. Sandaruwan Weerasundara

Trinity College, Kandy: Rev. Father Sanath Madagamgoda, Former Chaplain, Mr. Shane de  
Silva, Master in charge of the chapel

St. Paul's Church Kandy: Rev. Father Shelton Daniel, Former Curate

Meeran Mosque, Galle: Mr. Rauf Arooze – Trustee, Mr. Shazly Hasseen - General Secretary,  
Galle Muslim Cultural Association

Karagampitiya Sri Subodharamaya Raja Maha Viharaya: Rev. Kuttigala Chandasumana Thero -  
Chief Incumbent of the temple, Rev. Hatharabage Wimalawansa Thero

Dr. Mario Gomez, Nadine Vanniasinkam and the ICES team in Colombo and Kandy

Sharni Jayawardene

## *Acknowledgements*

### **Expert interviews:**

1. Prof. Senarath Dissanayake – Former Director General, Dept. of Archaeology
2. Dr. B D Nandadeva - Retired Professor, University of Kelaniya
3. Dr. Sirinimal Lakdusinghe - Former Director, Department of National Museums
4. Prof. Jagath Weerasinghe - Director, Mural Conservation, Central Cultural Fund
5. Dr. Malathi de Alwis - Socio-cultural Anthropologist
6. Architect Sagara Jayasuriya - Senior Lecturer, University of Moratuwa
7. Emeritus Professor Albert Dharmasiri - Painter, Art Historian
8. Dr. Janaki Jayawardene - Department of History, University of Colombo
9. Dr. Vajira Nalinda Jayathilaka - Senior Lecturer, Department of History and Art Theory, Aesthetic University of Colombo
10. C. Anjalendran - Architect
11. Dr. Sunil Wijesiriwardhena - Co-chair, Centre for Cultural Renewal
12. Asiff Hussein - Author 'Serendib' and 'Zeylanica'
13. Sunela Jayawardene - Architect
14. Ramla Wahab Salman - Historian







# Table of Contents

Foreword .....	ix
Acknowledgements .....	xv
The Greater World: Islands, Oceans and Beyond: .....	1
The Nestorian Cross	
The History of Land and Ocean .....	5
Muddled Mongrels .....	7
Temple as Museum; Religion as Art: .....	13
Exploring the Tivanka Image House in Polonnaruwa	
Conflict, Confluence, and Continuity: .....	27
Tracing the lineage of religious architecture in Kandy	
Tale of Two Masjids: .....	41
A beginner's guide to Islamic Architecture in Serendib	
The blonde behind the Buddha: .....	51
Imagining a Buddhist universe under the British	
Bibliography .....	61





# The Greater World: Islands, Oceans and Beyond

## *The Nestorian Cross*

I clearly recall the moment I came across the Nestorian Cross of Anuradhapura for the first time. It was one of those museum moments, when one small artefact stands taller than the rest in the crowded collection, and grabs a distracted visitor. At the Archaeological Museum, Anuradhapura, walking past artefacts that both enchant and estrange in chorus, this small Christian relief on a smooth granite column cast an immediate spell on me.

How do you make sense of objects without a story? All these artefacts have stories that we do not know: Who could have made them? Who could have used them and what did these artefacts mean to them? The Nestorian Cross had all of these mysteries ringing in its name, a certain exceptionality for such a small motif.

I could have easily missed it.

And yet, the moment I set my eyes on it, it rose from its miniature oblivion to shine an enormous shard of light upon lesser-known aspects of our island's history. Amidst the array of artefacts that spoke of the grand Buddhist civilization of Anuradhapura – a story that we all know because we learn it in school – the Nestorian Cross told a different story.

With this miniature cross, I had a small epiphany – that most things don't make it to the textbooks. And though they don't, they are still a very significant part of the story; part of the truth. It's almost as if I carried the knowledge of the existence of the Nestorian Cross within me, an iota of ancient knowledge embedded in my psyche that simply had to be re-tapped. I am of this island, and this little cross is also my story. *Déjà vu.*

*Is it a mascot? A symbol of a place of worship?*

*Or a mark on a tomb of some Assyrian traveller*

*who decided never to leave this soil?*

*A mere decoration, it cannot be*

*For those who seek the possibility*

*Of countless stories.*

*The mysteries of Histories.*

I had scribbled amateurishly in my travel journal. The Nestorian Cross had woken me up from my mid-day museum comatose.

What's special about a Christian symbol in a predominantly Buddhist pilgrim site? When it was first discovered in 1912, during the early excavations North East of the Anuradhapura citadel, the immediate determination of the then Archaeological Commissioner, Edward R. Ayrton was that the Nestorian Cross was of Portuguese provenance. After all, the colonial masters considered Ceylon a 'Buddhist' island geographically located beneath a 'Hindoo' India. The convenient interpretation was that Christianity came to the island with the Portuguese. It was an idea born in the colonial imagination: 'The World' was 'discovered' only by them and nobody on earth ever moved an inch before they got into their ships with their guns.

Ayrton's successor, Arthur Maurice Hocart, was fascinated by the Nestorian Cross as well, as he had described it in 1924, in his book 'Memoires of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon':

*"a cross of a floret type standing on a stepped pedestal from which emanates two fronds on each side of the cross like horns,"*

and concludes that it is indeed a Portuguese Cross. But the Portuguese, who came to the island in 1505, controlled only the maritime provinces of Ceylon. Settling in the interiors of the island, and especially in Anuradhapura, a ruined and partially buried city by then, seems unlikely. The famous historian of the Portuguese period Fernao De Queyroz himself mentions the futile attempts made by the Portuguese on the orders of the King of Portugal to discover Anuradhapura.

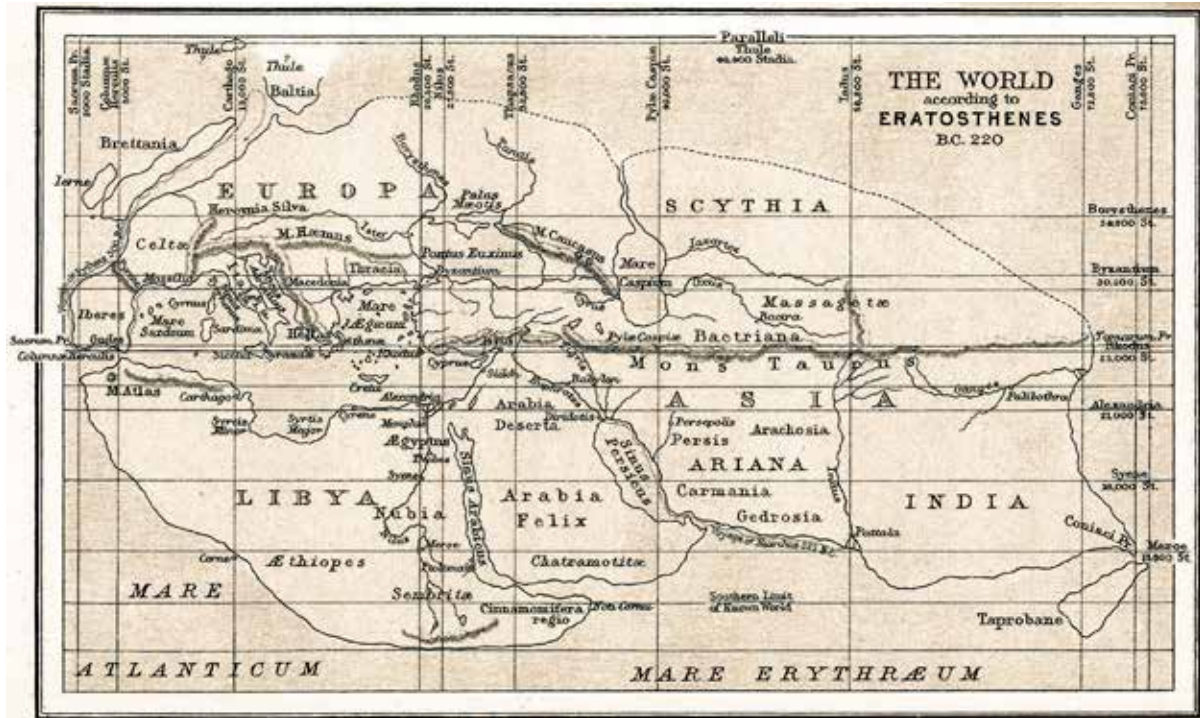
And so, the mystery of the Nestorian Cross drew scholars who called for a more realistic explanation. In 1926, the British civil servant and scholar Humphrey Codrington had put forth an argument ahead of his times. Well versed in Syrian liturgies and the history of the Oriental Orthodox Church, Codrington draws from a 6<sup>th</sup> century AD manuscript, Christian Topography by the Alexandrian merchant and monk Cosmas Indicopleustes, which describes the presence of a community of Persian Christians in Taprobanê thus:

*"In Taprobane, an island in inner India, where the Indian Sea is, there is also a Christian church [Ekklesia christianon] there, and clergy and faithful [klerikoi kai pistoi], but I do not know whether there are any further on. Similarly, in the place called Male, where pepper grows, and in the place called Kalliana, there is also a bishop, ordained in Persia. Similarly, in the island called Dioscorides in the same Indian Sea, there the inhabitants speak Greek, since they are settlers of the Ptolemies, ... and there are clergy ordained in Persia and sent to those parts, and a community of Christians."*

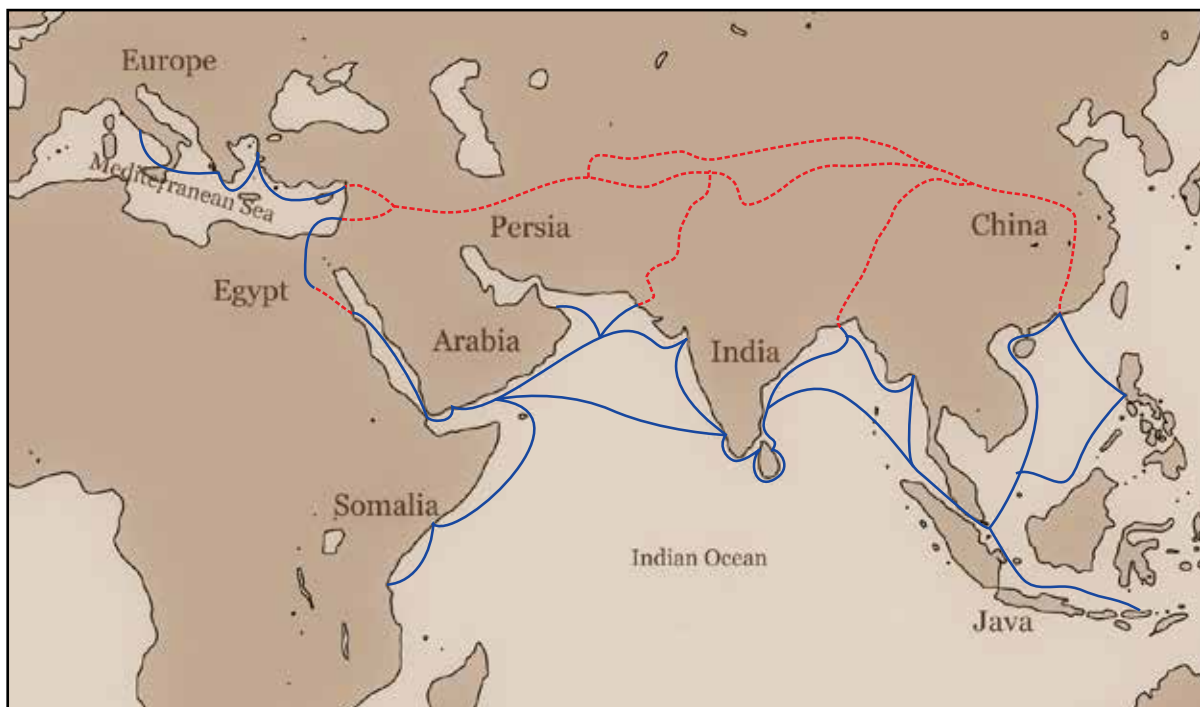
Codrington argued for a much earlier date for the cross of Anuradhapura – as early as CE 500. Three hundred years after Jesus there were already Syrian Christians in South India, and Codrington uses the similarities of the Anuradhapura cross to South Indian stone crosses bearing Pahlavi and Syriac inscriptions as further evidence, Pahlavi being a script of Middle Iranian languages. Slowly, a more plausible explanation takes shape and the island known today as Sri Lanka emerges at the centre of the ‘Silk Road of the Sea’. As Cosmas accurately described:

*“From the whole of India, Persia and Ethiopia, the island, acting as intermediary, welcomes many ships, and likewise despatches them. From regions of the interior, i.e. Tzinista [China] and other markets, it imports silk, aloes, cloves, clove-wood, sandalwood, and all native products. And it re-exports them to the people of the exterior, i.e. to Male...and to Kalliana...similarly to Sindou...and to Persia, Himyarite country and to Adulis.”*





19<sup>th</sup> century reconstruction of Eratosthenes's map of the Known World (for the Greeks), c. 194 BC with Taprobane at lower right



## *The History of Land and Ocean*

**W**e never quite realize that the history we learn in school is 'land-locked'. No one thinks that history ever happened out there at sea. This is possibly because history was held hostage by post-colonial nationalisms, where their scopes was defined by newly drawn 'national borders'. Oceans were nationalized too, but to a lesser extent than the land. After all, there are no 'sons of the sea'; only 'sons of the soil'! The moment we focus on the oceans as arenas of history, our cherished popular perceptions of it run into trouble.

From the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE the Oceanic Silk Route connected the East and the West. Trade, faiths, people and ideas took sail. Just like us, our ancestors moved around in the world for all sorts of reasons. New research is bringing to light how the Indian Ocean was replete with ships of Arabian, Egyptian, Sassanian, Tamil and Chinese merchants, to name only a few. They would have all sailed past the popular port-of-call, Mantai, in the island known as Sri Lanka today. Historians now point out the possibility of expatriate merchant communities being long-term residents in the island, due to its very strategic location between the East and the West. This was confirmed by the archaeological finds in Mantai in 1984, when Archaeologist John Carswell found a Sasanian period clay bulla with three seal impressions. Two oval seals placed closer together are of a Persian mythological creature with the head of a man and body of a winged-bull and a Pahlavi inscription reading 'abzāy farrōxīh' ("May fortune increase!"). The third seal, set within a diamond field, is a cross, with unmistakably similar stylistic features to the Nestorian Cross of Anuradhapura. So then, there's not just one, but two Nestorian Crosses found so far on the island. Perhaps there's more, waiting to be discovered.

The existence of the sea silk route ensured that the rest of the world was aware of the island's existence as early as in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. The name Taprobane is first reported to Europeans by Greek geographer Megasthenes who served as an ambassador to King Chandragupta Maurya in India, also known as Sandrokottos in the Hellenic world. The first geographic depiction of the island can be traced back to Eratosthenes (276-196 BCE), upon whose work the more famous work of Ptolemy *The Geographia* builds on.

Ptolemy's map of Taprobane, though at times disputed to portray Sumatra, is now widely accepted as the first detailed depiction of the island. It is no small wonder that the Ptolemaic place names are as accurate as 'Anurogramum' (Anuradhapura) and 'Nagadiba', (Nagadipa?). However, Ptolemy's map infers the island to be bigger than it actually is, especially in contrast to his reductionist depiction of the Indian peninsula. This is not the first time the island's size is exaggerated. An earlier treatise *De Mundo* (On the Universe), likely to have been published around 350 – 200 BCE (and incorrectly attributed to Aristotle's *Corpus Aristotelicum*) mentions

*“The island of Taprobane, opposite India, situated at an angle to the inhabited world, is quite as large as the British isle.”*

What all of these ancient knowledges indicate is that there is an Indian Ocean island which was of utmost importance to trade routes that connected the East and the West. The early larger-than-life projections were not geographically literal but only figurative of its importance to the Known World. On a banner displayed at the entrance to the Maritime Heritage Museum, Galle, Prof. Sudharshan Seneviratne expresses this idea beautifully:

*“A land known by many a name to the World System located to the east and west of this island, its history is essentially a story of trans-oceanic connectivity. It is a story of how this island came to evolve its unique personality due to the convergence of multiple streams of people, cultures, languages, religions, ethnicities and technologies. The historical saga of Sri Lanka, an island situated in a pivotal position in the Indian Ocean Rim, could not be inscribed otherwise in the annals of history and most certainly not without the story of the sea – a story of nurtured reciprocity as one of the most valued ‘ports of call’ in antiquity.”*

Enough proof that we were never an island unto itself. Not only does this change our understanding of Sri Lanka radically, but it even calls to redefine the way in which we understand islands. Even those in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, were never as cut off as one would imagine, if you ask the indigenous navigators of the Pacific Ocean. And an Indian Ocean island just off the tip of South India, can only be a hub for all the crisscrossing trade routes. Viewed in this light, a Nestorian Cross, or even a Maori Totem Pole, on this island shouldn't be a surprise!

## Muddled Mongrels

**I**f economics of trade connected us viscerally to the lands beyond our imagination, then politics connected us most, among other lands, to that of our great neighbour India. Though our history is replete with many examples, the one that draws me most is another enigmatic site at the heart of the island – Nalanda. It is a temple shrouded in mystery.

Before we proceed, let's ask, why Nalanda? How do we jump from the far-flung trade routes of the Indian Ocean, into mystic ruins in the central highlands? A leap of faith indeed, geographically speaking: If the Nestorian Cross enriches the story of a great Buddhist civilization of Anuradhapura in one way, Nalanda does the same in an even more fascinating manner: It deepens the very idea of the grand Buddhist civilization of Anuradhapura, shedding light on multiple strands, including esoteric practices, more profound than the Theravada form which we identify with the island today.

No one quite knows of Nalanda's origins. Who built it? What for? Who worshipped here? Why is it called Nalanda?

None of these questions have clear answers. But there is one truth about it that is obvious and undisputed. Very much like the great Pallava temple of Mahabalipuram, South India, Nalanda Gedige is a fine example of Pallava architecture. Colonial adventurer and Engineer of the British Army Major Roland Raven Hart, struck by its charms, writes in his book, *Ceylon: History in Stone*:

*"Elsewhere there are plenty of Hindu buildings, and plenty of Buddhist ones, and some muddled mongrels; but here the styles are interwoven. The ground-plan is Buddhist, the vestibule pure Hindu and so is the little windowless shrine: the plain moonstone and crocodile balustrade and rivers of dwarfs and architrave of the doorway are Sinhalese, and jambs Tamilian; even the sculptures are fairly shared. The whole effect is charming and for me unexpectedly classical, nor did I find the exterior "over-richly decorated" as did Bell, though it is crowded with pilasters and horseshoe false windows and more jolly dwarfs. And the dome must have been a worthy climax when all its four faces were present, each with horseshoe niche and statue, instead of the only one which was found."*

The Pallavas were instrumental in the transition from rock-cut architecture to stone temples. But the Pallavas were Hindu. This makes Nalanda even more mysterious yet again. Mahabalipuram is also known as Mamallapuram, and Mamalla or the 'great wrestler' is a reference to 7<sup>th</sup> century Pallava King, Narasinghavarman I, close friend and ally of King Manavamma. Did Manavamma build Nalanda, in the grand Pallava style, in memory of his loyal friend, the great Pallava King?





Let us visualize a possible backstory, from what little we know.

It's the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, South India, the dry flat lands north of Kanchipuram reverberating with clash of swords and battle cry. The Chalukyas from the Deccan are attacking the Northern provinces of Pallava country in South India. At the heart of the battle, together with the great Pallava King Narasimhavarman I, is the fugitive Prince Manavarman of Lanka, fighting the Chalukyas to the end.

Being in exile, Manavarman has resided in the Pallava court for a very long time. Enough time, as they say, 'to go native'. Upon the defeat of Chalukyas, Manavarman is heralded as a hero for his bravery and loyalty to the Pallavas. In return, Narasimhavarman supports Manavarman, not once but twice with his armies to capture power in Lanka.

Upon the second attempt in 684 CE, Manavamma ascends the throne of Lanka, founding the second Lambakanna dynasty, which reigned in Anuradhapura for the next 400 years.

The inscription found at Nalanda does not mention Manavamma or anything about its origins. A building without a benefactor. The dates are somewhere between 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century AD. There are no clear historical records that connect Manavamma and Nalanda, though the story of Manavamma and Narasimghvarman has some historical sources such as the Culavamsa and some South Indian copper inscriptions. Incidentally, the origin of Mahabalipuram in India is also unclear. Though colonial archaeologists attribute the temple to Narasinghavarman I, these claims are not corroborated by archaeological evidence or historic records.

The vagueness and incompleteness of the past will stand between us and the truth. Similar to the Nestorian Cross, Nalanda challenges our perceptions of easy categories. What is Buddhist? What is Hindu? What is Tantric?

The iconography of Nalanda that dazzled Raven Hart, points towards esoteric Buddhist practices in the Anuradhapura period, a perspective supported by a large number of Buddhist bronzes found in the island. Some of these such as the Tara, now with the British Museum, and the Avalokiteswara from Veheragala at the National Museum, Colombo, have achieved celebrity status. In fact, the museum catalogue, 'The heritage of Sri Lankan Bronze Sculpture' believes that the Veheragala Avalokitesvara's style shows affinity to a South Indian product of 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries in the stylistic trends of the Chalukyas.

Ah, the infinite interconnections! The only inference is that faith is never a matter of straightforwardness; and that all religions and their representations are, to a great extent, syncretic.



Whoever built Nalanda, it is evidence of the close and intricate ties the island had with the sub-continent. The endless power struggles, matrimonial alliances and individuals in exile who had returned with appreciation for the 'foreign', have shaped the islands history as much as oceanic trade and port cities did. As phenomena travel across time and space, be they economics or politics, religion or architecture, exiled princes or colonial adventurers, they are destined to be the 'muddled mongrels', Raven Hart observes. He is only mistaken in one regard, that is, his use of the word in a derogatory sense. If anything, the muddled mongrel is the closest to the truth we can ever come.

As different as they may sound from each other, the stories of the Nestorian Cross and Nalanda contain a kernel of fundamental truth about islands:

Islands are like oases; Oases are defined by the deserts that nestle them; islands are defined by the oceans that surround them. The story of an oasis is the story of the dessert with its caravan routes and guiding stars.

One could only narrate the stories of this island, in connection to the vast oceans and the greater world. In that sense, it is a premise which brings a measure of relief: we have always been an island of fascinating encounters. We were never isolated. We were never alone.



## References

\_\_\_\_. Mahavamsa, Government of Ceylon, 1912

Bandaranayake, Senake. et al. "Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea", The Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO and the Central Cultural Fund, 1990.

Bopearachchi, Osmond. "Archaeological evidence on changing patterns of international trade relations of ancient Sri Lanka." *Origin, evolution and circulation of foreign coins in the Indian Ocean, 1998*

Carswell, John. "The excavation of Mantai." *The Indian Ocean in antiquity*, 1996: 501-15.

De Saxcé, Ariane. "Trade and Cross-cultural Contacts in Sri Lanka and South India during Late Antiquity (6th–10th Centuries)." *Heritage (Kerala University) (forthcoming)* accessed at <http://www.heritageuniversityofkerala.com/JournalPDF/Volume4/8.pdf>

Gomis, Oswald. "The Cross of Anuradhapura", Daily News, 22.04.2011, Lakehouse Newspapers, 2011 accessed at [archives.dailynews.lk/2011/04/22/fea32.asp](http://archives.dailynews.lk/2011/04/22/fea32.asp)

Gusev, D. and Stafeyev, S. "GIS Analysis and Digital Reconstruction of Ptolemy's India beyond the Ganges, Serike and Sinae", International Cartographic Association, 13th ICA Conference Digital Approaches to Cartographic Heritage Conference Proceedings Madrid, Spain, 18-20 April 2018: page 9

Hocart, Arthur Maurice, ed. *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon*. H. Ross Cottle, Government Printer, 1926.

Indicopleustes, Cosmas. *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk: Translated from the Greek, and Edited with Notes and Introduction*. No. 98. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Mihindukulasuriya, Prabo. "Persian Christians of the Anuradhapura Period." *A Cultured Faith: Essays in Honour of Prof. GPV Somaratna on His Seventieth Birthday*, 2011.

Prematilleke, P. L., Nalanda - A Short Guide to the 'Gedige' Shrine, Central Cultural Fund, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Sri Lanka, 1985

Queyroz, Fernão de. *The temporal and spiritual conquest of Ceylon*. AMS Press, 1930.

Raven-Hart, Rowland. *Ceylon: history in stone*. Colombo: Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, 1964.

Seneviratne, Sudharshan in *Forward to Haputhanthri*, Hasini. "Museums, Memory and Identity Politics in Sri Lanka", *Historical Dialogue*, 2021

Map of Eratosthenes accessed at <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/6154/eratosthenes-map-of-the-world/>





# Temple as Museum; Religion as Art:

## *Exploring the Tivanka Image House in Polonnaruwa*

**T**he serenity of the Gal Vihara Buddhas is best experienced at dusk, when the setting sun throws a spirited glow on the gigantic granite statues. By six o'clock, the sunlight is lifted like a curtain and the night settles in the folds of the carvings. The local devotees stream in with their offerings of flowers and incense, lighting up small clay lamps, adding to the ambience and pushing back the tourists, literally. I have witnessed ceremonial Thevava drumming a couple of times. A picture postcard moment indeed. A visitor walks away with a sense of awe at the omnipresence of Buddhism, continued down the centuries as a living practice. So, it has been, of course – there is no denying that Buddhism is inextricable from the island's legacy. However, a stroll through the Polonnaruwa archaeological site can expand that picture postcard view of Polonnaruwa and Sri Lanka's past in general, to include other narratives of equal importance and beauty.

Today, the Gal Vihara Buddhas epitomize Polonnaruwa and its past to the outside world, but is only a part of Polonnaruwa's long and absorbing tale of confluence.

Over 15 Hindu shrines dedicated to Siva, Vishnu, Ganesha and Kali are scattered across the archaeological complex, some of which have yielded bronzes of unparalleled beauty. These shrines are attributed to the South Indian Cōlas, who ruled the northern part of the island in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE and made Polonnaruwa one of their regional capitals of their medieval empire whose influence spread as far as Java.

A veritable collection of bronzes cast by local artists probably trained in South Indian ateliers, displayed today at the Colombo National Museum and the Polonnaruwa Archaeological Museum, attest that our ancient artists drew inspiration from far and wide.

Excavated chiefly in two hoards in 1908 and 1960, these bronzes ignited intense speculation and debate among art historians. Some chose to see them as imports from South India, some condemned them to inferior copies, while others claimed that these were created by native artisans who introduced their own touch to the sensuous figures of Parvati, Ganesha and Siva Nataraja. Almost half a century and many bitter arguments later, through careful study and life-long dedication to these bronzes, former director of Colombo National Museum, Sirinimal Lakdusinghe established that they form a 'Sri Lankan' school of Hindu sculpture, distinct from that of South India. This is what artist and archaeologist Jagath Weerasinghe refers to as 'internalised dynamics'; 'we adopt things, we adapt things and we internalise things' irrespective of where they originate or come from. We make it our own. In fact, in hindsight it is clear, this is how we evolved through the millennia.





Ganesh, Archaeological Museum, Polonnaruwa

This openness has led to a confluence of art, architecture and above all, spirit, that gives Polonnaruwa a sense of a sanctuary. This integration is not merely seen in the different types of buildings, shrines and stupas, that nestle cosily with each other in the inner city, but at a much deeper level.

For example, let's turn to the Tivanka Image House, one of my favourite ruins of Polonnaruwa which is a few steps away from Gal Vihara.

Sum up the Tivanka Image House in one word? I would pick the word 'Romantic'. In terms of imagination, exoticism and ambience, it is a location of deeply-felt emotion. In 'The Roack and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka', archaeologist Senake Bandaranayake observed that Tivanka,

*"is the sole surviving example of an ancient building that retains at least some elements of its wall paintings in their original form and disposition,"*

in Polonnaruwa and therefore possibly the best examples of medieval paintings.

I suggest you savour the Tivanka Image House with every step you take in its direction. Though now covered with a protective roof, one can still imagine the ruins emerging out of the jungle, as it was once discovered by the colonial explorers.

Though the temple itself was known earlier, the murals were re-discovered by S. M. Burrows in 1885. Tunnelling along the inner walls, he uncovered

*"two large panels profusely covered with paintings in very fair preservation."*

The paintings captivate him and he exalts,

*"figures and faces are excellently painted and full of life and there is one female face constantly recurring, which may be justly thought beautiful."*

Unfortunately, Burrow's tunnelling not only revealed the painting but also exposed them to the elements. When H. C. P. Bell arrived to excavate the site 15 years later in 1909 he found that many of the paintings "had faded beyond recognition." Bell explored the entire interior of the temple, painstakingly documented the murals, and had them copied for the National Museum.

Architecturally, Tivanka is a feast of detail, inside-out. The exterior facades are clouded with Vimana decorations, depictions of heavenly abodes, a common feature found in Hindu and South Indian temple architecture. Make no mistake, from the very outset you know you are approaching a sacred space. Give your rationality a rest, and approach it with your senses.

Though weathered since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, you can still observe partial depictions of celestial beings painted on the surviving exterior plaster, which means the original building would not have looked the monochromatic reddish brown of the exposed brick we see today. However, what grabs the visitors is the ring of merry dwarfs, each and every one of them with distinct features, character and mood.





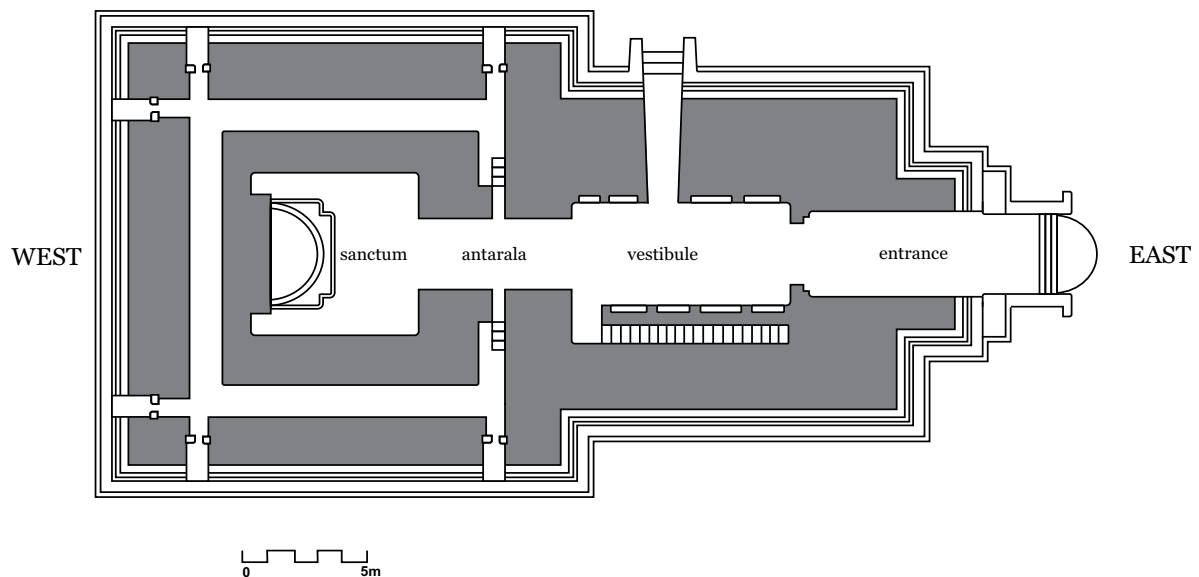
Detail, the Divine Invitation, Tivanka Image House, Polonnaruwa

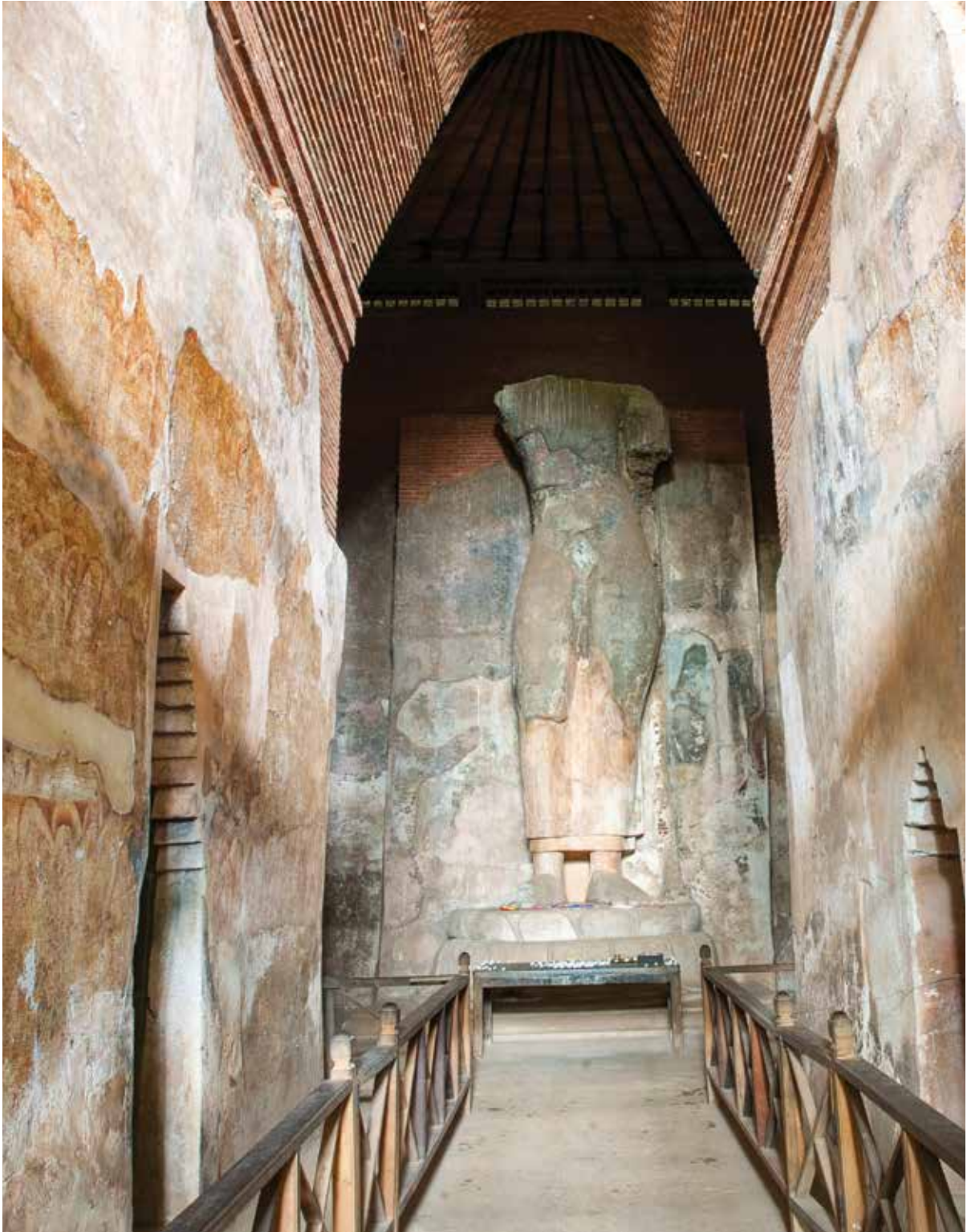


An image house, as one could guess, houses an image of religious nature. That is the easier part to figure out. Architecturally though, Tivanka can confuse you as to what image it might entomb. From the exterior, the character is not prominently Buddhist, if one is used to the gigantic yet minimalist architectural forms of Buddhist stupas from Anuradhapura. Consider Rankoth Vehera, found within the Polonnaruwa complex, hailed as the veritable twin of Ruwanweli Seya in Anuradhapura – simple, solid, and imposing in its geometry. Like the pyramids, what impresses is the purity and simplicity of its hemispherical form and gigantic scale.

Tivanka by far plays a different tune. Much more intimate in its presence, it weaves together a complex of spaces into a compound of sacred Hindu architecture: Consider its five distinct but interrelated spaces – the porch or the entrance hall, the vestibule, the side entrance, the entresol or the antechamber, and the sanctum. Surprisingly, it is not a Hindu temple, and entombs a gigantic statue of the Buddha. It can make us wonder why and who categorized or labelled the island’s artistic legacy, and its past, as Hindu or Buddhist, Sinhala or Tamil. Perhaps the frames of reference we use to categorize and name archaeological features today are not entirely congruent when applied to the past.

Like in a modern-day museum, the inner walls of Tivanka are covered with paintings. In the entrance and the vestibule, the walls are divided horizontally into three or four registers, depicting Jataka Stories from the Buddhist cannon, celebrating the previous lives of the Buddha in human and animal forms. The Jataka (Pali for ‘birth’) Tales are commonly depicted throughout the Buddhist world, connecting Sri Lanka to the art of India, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and beyond. Many Jatakas have parallels in Hindu epics such as the Mahabharata, the Panchatantra, the Puranas and even Aesop fables.





Thibanga Buddha Statue, Tivanka Image House

One might wonder not only of the variety of content offered through the tales, but also of the stylistic variety. Many commenters have pointed out the 'folk' or the 'popular' style of these Jataka panels but according to Bandaranayake,

“in fact, what we have are several styles or sub styles which still display the individualized and realistic treatment of figures and objects, rather than the stylization of the post-classic style of the late-period murals.”

They say God is in the detail. If one has the patience to delve into the Jataka Stories, one would be surprised. They can be packed with more action, violence, love, and betrayal than any television series that grabs your attention today. Consider my favourite Cullapaduma Jataka, for instance. To cut a long story short, the Buddha is Prince Paduma in this tale, exiled along with his six brothers and their wives by their father, the king, since he fears that his sons may kill him before his time. The exiled princes and their wives begin an arduous journey through a desert. To survive the deadly tract, they decide to kill their wives one by one.

So the brothers kill a wife each day and divide her into equal portions. Every time Paduma receives his portion, he saves half of it. When the day came for his wife to be killed, he brings forth the saved portions, and asks his brothers to spare his wife a day more. That night, Paduma escapes with his wife and flees in the opposite direction towards the Ganges. When the wife complains that she was thirsty, he slits his own ankle to give her his blood to drink. When she complains that she cannot walk anymore, he carries her on his back. Finally, out of their brothers' reach, the couple settles down by the banks of the Ganges in a small hut. One day, a thief whose ears, nose, hands, and feet were cut off as punishment floats down the river. Paduma saves him and tends to his wounds in their hut. The wife, angry at first, gradually begins to fancy the disfigured man. Eventually, she tricks Paduma to join her at the top of a cliff and pushes him over. Then, with her invalid lover upon her back she walks from door to door, begging for their survival for the rest of their lives. Meanwhile, Paduma miraculously survives the fall from the cliff. He returns to his kingdom after his father's death and is crowned as king. The scene on the walls of Tivanka depicts the moment when the three are re-united. The wife is carrying the thief on her shoulders and is facing King Paduma. In an act of mercy, he spares her life but banishes them from the kingdom after naming her sins.

Let's not forget that in the 11th century AD, these paintings are the closest you would get to visual entertainment. Albeit its cautionary tone, its strong sense of morality, it does not sensor emotion or human condition. Although you are in a sacred space, you are human, and so was the Buddha, in all his human incarnations. The registers depict a sequence of incidents, scene by scene, a story board for the retelling of tales one would have known through oral tradition. Imagine yourself in the 11th century AD, walking into the Tivanka, and seeing the scenes that were only alive in your imagination, given colour and form. Perhaps you are there with an elder, who might reveal to you and unknown detail, either depicted or not depicted in the register.

As one walks further in, to the entresol, the compositions grow larger in size and the subject matter changes. We are leaving behind the world of mortals which we encountered in the entrance and vestibule, where Buddha was depicted as another mortal, only beginning to understand the trials and tribulations of being a Bodhisattva (an aspirant of Buddhahood). In the entresol section, we encounter him among the divine. Knowing the time has arrived, the gods and deities are besieging the Bodhisattva to be reborn as a human in order to attain Buddhahood.

Many scholars have celebrated the Divine Invitation as the highpoint of medieval classical painting, exhibiting grandeur, elegance and almost baroque opulence. Yellow, green, and red hues dominate the colour palette with well-defined outer lines tracing the intricate details of an eye brow, a delicate mudra (hand-gesture), elaborate headgear or breast plates, recalling the world-famous murals of the Ajanta Caves in India. No doubt, the art of Polonnaruwa is the art of the elite. Classical in character and dignified in form, these splendid figures can make you forget for a moment that you are in a sacred space.

One must take time to absorb these paintings. Your eyes need to adjust to the dim light, to start noticing the details of the ancient paintings.

As you pass through the realm of the divine, you see the colossal brick statue of the Buddha emerging from the mystery of the sanctum. At the innermost sanctum of the temple, a place you only arrive at after walking through the worlds of mortals and the divine, you face the Buddha as himself, in serene transcendence. The statue is leaner than most Buddha statues and its unusual pose has given some scholars the ground to question whether it is a Buddha statue after all. Could it be for instance, the statue of Avalokitheshawara, the Bodhisattva par excellence in Mahayana Buddhism, figures of whom are found elsewhere in Polonnaruwa. Definite identification remains elusive as the 21-foot statue is today without its head. The temple derives its name from this form. Tivanka, meaning thrice bent, is an unusual pose for the Buddha, mostly reserved for female figure carvings for heightened sensuality.

In Tivanka however, one breaks the rules effortlessly and in turn, is treated to masterpieces. The temple is the museum. Art reigns sacred. Embedded in the architecture of (what we might call) Hindu is in fact the Buddhist. It is a place that makes me question the categories and labels I have been taught in my history lessons in school. Not only does it blur the lines of Hinduism and Buddhism as we know it, but Tivanka also adds a third dimension to Buddhist thought, through its architectural depth and artistic legacy. It sheds new light on what could be considered sacred, profane, and local and in the process emerges as a magnificent testimony to the confluence of this island and its history.

Needless to say that Polonnaruwa is much more than the Tivanka Image House. In fact, many visitors turn back after the Gal Vihara, never even making it to Tivanka, which is at the very end of the well-beaten path. It is the very last stop of the archaeological trail, reserved perhaps only for those who seek. But for those who do, those with time and patience, those who revel in detail and those who return, the Tivanka Image House undeniably offers more.













## References

- Bandaranayake, Senake. "The Rock and Wall Painting of Sri Lanka.", 1986.
- Bell, H C P. *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Reports*, 1908
- Burrows, S. M. "A Year's Work at Polonnaruwa." Sessional Paper X of 1886
- Chandrajeewa, S. *Emaciated female playing cymbals; a study of an ancient Hindu bronze figurine in Polonnaruwa Sri Lanka*, The Contemporary Arts and Crafts Association, 2020
- Coomaraswamy, Ananda Kentish. *Bronzes from Ceylon, chiefly in the Colombo Museum. No. 1-3*. Colombo Museum, 1914.
- Cowell, E. B. (ed.). Chalmers, Robert, W. H. D. Rouse, H. T. Francis, R. A. Neil, E. B. Cowell (trans.). 1895–1907. *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. 6 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. vol. II, pp. 81-85. <https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk/stories-in-text/jatakathavannana-193/>
- Dewaraja, L. S. *Some Aspects of Dravidian Architecture and Sculpture and their impact on Ceylon*. 1971.
- Dharmasiri, Albert. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019
- Lakdusinghe, Sirinimal. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019
- Meegama, Sujatha Arundathi. "South Indian or Sri Lankan? The Hindu Temples of Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka." *Artibus Asiae* 70.1 (2010): 25-45.
- Meegama, Sujatha Arundathi. "From Kôvils to Devâles: Patronage and "Influence" at Buddhist and Hindu Temples in Sri Lanka." University of California, Berkeley, 2011.
- Seneviratne, Anuradha. "Polonnaruwa Medieval Capital of Sri Lanka." Colombo: Archaeological Survey Department, 1998.
- Thantilage, A. 'Scientific observation on the unification of Siva and Parvati bronzes by Sirinimal Lakdusinghe', *Sirinimal Lakdusinghe Felicitation Volume*, Neptune Publishing, 2010.
- Weerasinghe, Jagath. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019







# Conflict, Confluence, and Continuity:

## *Tracing the lineage of religious architecture in Kandy*

**T**he year is 1825. The second Bishop of Calcutta, Rt. Rev. Reginald Heber is visiting Kandy, the hill capital of British Ceylon, accompanied by Governor Edward Barnes for a Confirmation Service. The event takes place at the Royal Audience Hall besides the Temple of the Tooth Relic. It is the same location where, 10 years ago, the Kandyan aristocracy sided with the British, signing the infamous Kandyan Convention of 1815. An outright coup, craftily manoeuvred over time by John D'Oyly, the chief translator to the British Government. It conveniently dethroned the 'Malabari' monarch for the Kandyan chieftains, ceding the Kingdom with the British Crown while retaining their own rights as nobility and upholding the inviolability of Buddhism. It is a well-known historic moment that ended 2358 years of self-rule in the island.

A decade since, a small but confidently growing community of Christians still held their Sunday worship and church festivities at the ancient audience hall of the exiled kings. Rev. Heber mentions to Governor Barnes that 'it is out of taste'. The grim faces of the Buddhist Clergy in the Temple and the Trustees of the Devalas were hard to miss.

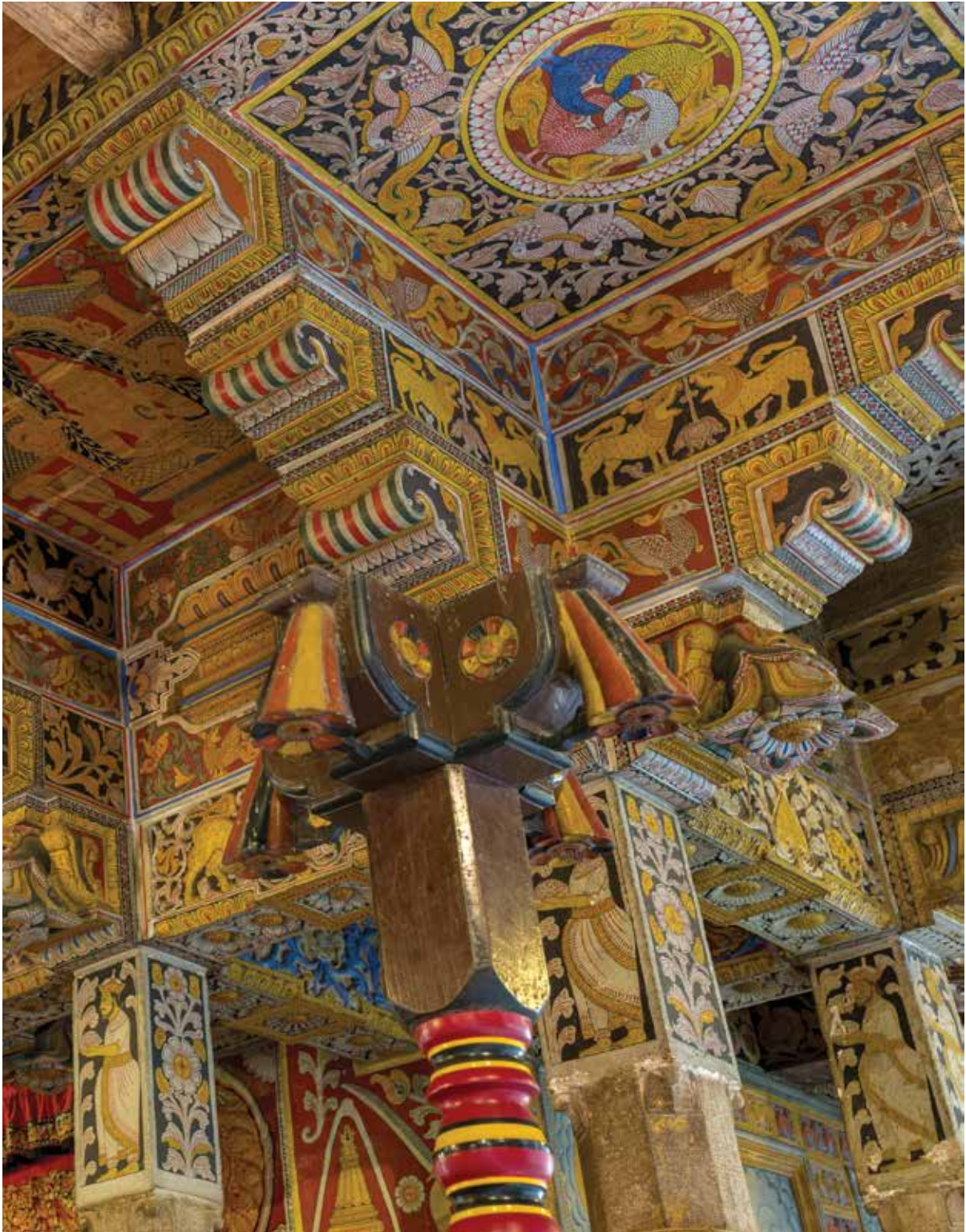
Indeed, no act could be innocent in Kandy, a city that hid long-held rivalries, political scheming, and domination, under its calm misty mornings. And no other building reeked of political intrigue than the royal audience hall, or 'magul maduwa', which now served also as a church, among other things, to the British garrison in Kandy. Perhaps this was what Rev. Heber referred to when he observed

*"the great need for a church of their own, more appropriately sited and more suitably designed."*

Maybe it had nothing at all to do with the architecture of the Magul Maduwa, which obviously was a far cry from the Gothic churches of Europe. The idea for what is today St. Paul's Church, Kandy thus took root, though it was many years later in 1843 that the British Colonial Office gave its crown land adjacent to the Temple of the Tooth relic for the construction to begin.

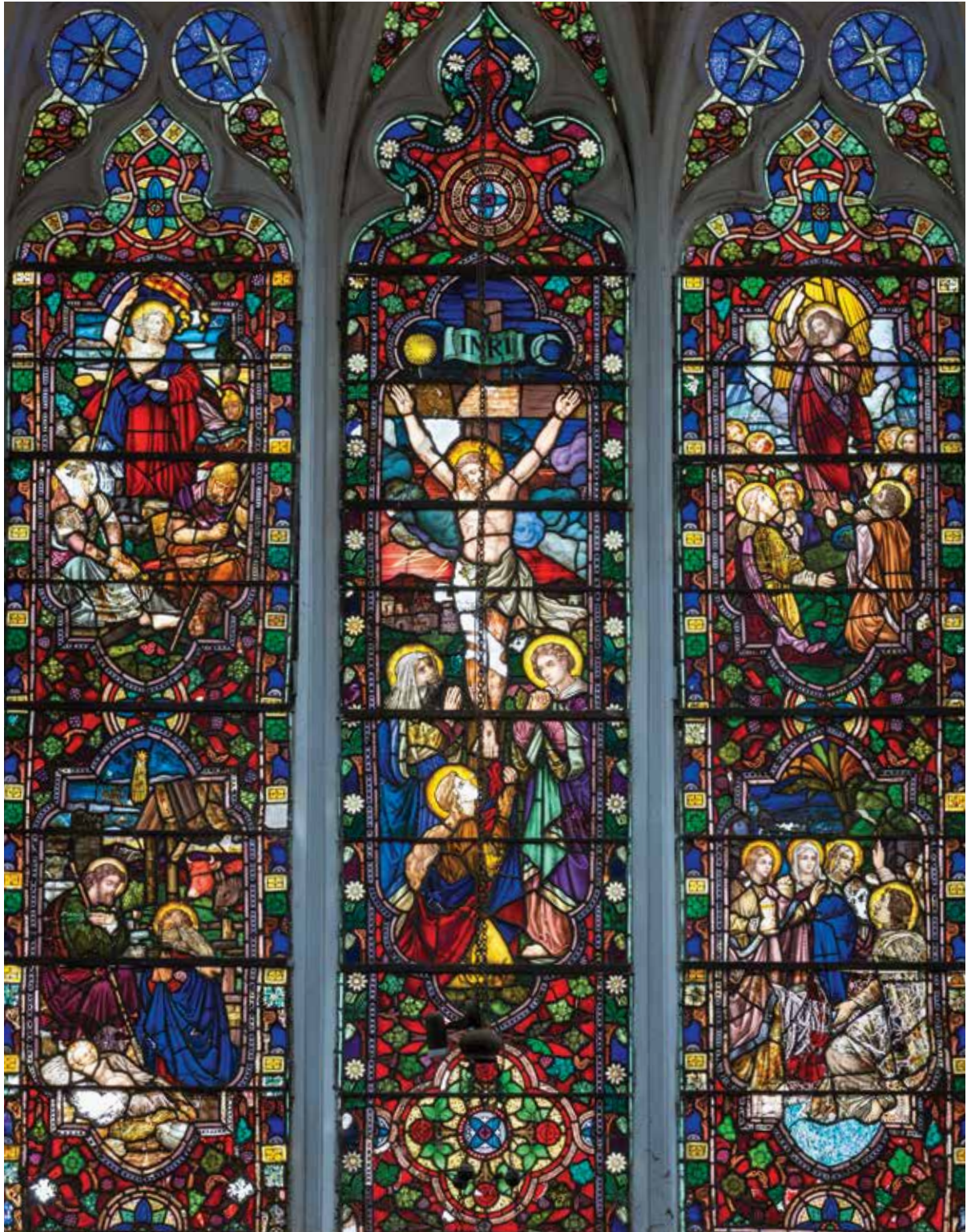






Pekada carvings, Sri Dalada Maligawa, Kandy







St. Paul's, Kandy opened its doors for worship as a garrison church in 1846, though the construction took much longer to complete, serving the many British regiments stationed in Kandy. It was to this church that His Majesty King George III presented a silver-gilt communion set, to serve the spiritual needs of the British military garrison. This gift continues to be in use at St. Paul's to date, especially at the services for Easter and Christmas.

Since it was built from public subscriptions, the limitation of funds dictated the plain, unadorned building. Nonetheless, in its architecture, it was unmistakably reminiscent of the Gothic Revival cathedrals of Victorian England. Built entirely in brick, the church is today a bright ochre red, magnificently Anglican down to the beautiful painted glass windows. It was perhaps one of the earliest buildings to spring up in Kandy, of completely foreign architecture. Over time, many colonial buildings sprang up within Kandy, though not limited to religious buildings, such as the Kandy Postal Office building from 1867. Local buildings were converted and remodelled into neoclassical colonial glamour, the famous Queen's Hotel being one of the best examples. The building was originally built as an aristocratic residence, 'Dullewe Walawwa', by Devendra Moolachariya, the royal architect to Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, and was taken over to be the Governor's residence soon after 1815.



Façade, St. Paul's Church, Kandy



Fast forward roughly 80 years to the 1920s, and we find a most unusual chapel, tucked away in a pretty little corner below the principal's bungalow of Trinity College Kandy. The Holy Trinity Church, more commonly known as the Trinity College Chapel is so distinctive in its architecture that it startles those who know the politics of Kandyan architecture. Gone are the rib vaults and the flying buttresses of the Gothic church architecture of the High and Late Middle Ages in Europe, still practised at the period of its construction in the 1920s. Nor are there any stained-glass windows of the St Paul's Church. The colonial tune has changed from dominating the conquered to understanding the masses they ruled, and baptized. In fact, Trinity Chapel is one of the first and finest examples of adopting indigenous, vernacular architecture in the design of an Anglican church found in Sri Lanka.

What other building would this chapel be modelled after, but the Royal Audience Hall of Kandy! An irony that can only be understood in hindsight. One must imagine and relish the reaction of Rt. Rev. Reginald Heber had he ever seen it ("Out of taste, Governor Barnes!"), even if only for amusement.

Nonetheless, the chapel borrows gracefully from Buddhist architecture of the island's ancient civilization. A myriad carved stone pillars rise, lifting up a lofty Kandy-style double pitched roof and creating an open house of prayer. Designed by no other than the school's Vice Principal at the time, Rev. Lewis John Gaster, a qualified architect and draughtsman, the chapel took over 12 years and 100 labourers to complete. Carved by local craftsmen, these 16-foot pillars are adorned with pekedda designs and their capitals carry coats of arms of British Schools that donated funds for the chapel.

In 1929, David Paynter, a pioneering painter of his age, who was also a staff member at Trinity, painted the four murals, equally revolutionary in their conception. The murals depict biblical scenes in a local setting. The landscape is familiar. Jesus is no longer light-skinned and blonde but native brown.

Painted in 1933, Paynter has set the crucifixion, with a beardless Christ on a cross, in a mangrove swamp, such as to be found on the east coast of Sri Lanka.

"Are Ye Able" located in the side chapel was painted in 1928, shortly after Paynter had returned from studying art in Europe. It conveys something of a lush vegetation characteristic of parts of Sri Lanka which so impressed him on his return from Italy. In it, the mother of James and John kneels before Jesus of Nazareth, who is clothed in a yellow robe, and asks him to give her two sons, standing on either side of Jesus, the chief places in his kingdom.

What the Trinity College chapel does so wonderfully, is becoming one with the architectural traditions of the island. An assimilation of sorts that works both ways. It makes us reconsider the Royal Audience Hall itself and question its own origins.









The Crucifixion, David Paynter





The Royal Audience Hall was originally built as part of the Palace Complex in Kandy. Though today referred to as the Temple of the Tooth Relic, it was in fact far from a temple, but a King's Court. Similar to the nexus of Church and Kingdom in Europe, the Lankan Kings clutched the Tooth Relic, a potent symbol of Kingship, to their bosom. It stayed where they stayed, moved when they moved. And the Royal Audience Hall, the place for public engagements, was where the Tooth Relic was displayed occasionally to the public.

The building we see today is in fact an extended building, enlarged for the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1872. The original was modelled after an older place of worship from the 14th century – the Embekke Devale.

Dedicated to the Hindu God Murugan who is worshipped among the Buddhists as Kataragama Deiyo, Embekke Devale makes a modest first impression. However, its most prominent feature the Drummers' Hall, is replete with some of the best wood carvings in the island. Some of the woodwork found there came from an abandoned "Royal Audience Hall" at Gampola. With 514 wondrous wooden pillars, each with its own narrative, Embekke is for those who revel in the details.

The wooden pillars are adorned with mythical beasts one only encounters in dreams: a double-headed eagle, a bull and an elephant morphed into one, a lion in the form of an elephant, swans entwined, mermaids, and so forth. Some depict day-to-day scenes, folk dances and other delicately carved patterns. The archetype of a Kandyan roof is found here, with 26 wooden rafters pinned together in what's known as 'madol karupawa'.

Not unlike the hybrid spirituality it embodies, Embekke carries a sense of mysticism one can only be comfortable with when one gives up strictly defined boundaries. Legend has it that Embekke was built, following a dream simultaneously seen by Queen Henakanda Biso Bandara, consort of King Wickramabahu, and a poor village drummer. Though originally dedicated to the Hindu/Buddhist god Murugan/Kataragama, upon her death the Queen too became a deity at Embekke. A poetic tribute to Embekke exists, as 'Embekke Varnanaawa', beautifully detailing, entwining fact and fiction, myth and reality.

One can trace back the architectural lineage of Embekke Devale, to an abandoned royal audience hall from a past kingdom, or perhaps even to the glory days in Polonnaruwa. The Drummers' Hall unmistakably influenced the later Royal Audience Hall in Kandy, the Trinity College Chapel and even the Independence Memorial Hall in Colombo. In a yet another dramatic turning point, in 1948, the ceremony marking the start of the country's self-rule after gaining independence from the British, took place in the Independence Memorial Hall, fashioned after the structure of Magul Maduwa within which we had lost it 150 years ago.

Only history can treat you to such nuances.





## References

\_\_\_\_\_. *Temple of the Tooth Relic Kandy: Architecture, Sculpture Painting*, Central Cultural Fund, Ministry of Cultural Affairs Sri Lanka, 1999

\_\_\_\_\_. *Restoration of the David Paynter Murals*, <https://www.trinitycollege.lk/chapel/>

\_\_\_\_\_. <https://www.trinitycollege.lk/portfolio/architecture-murals/>

Anjalendran, C. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Bibile, Ranil. A meeting of cultures, the Chapel of Trinity College Kandy, 2017 <https://www.trinitycollege.lk/2019/01/17/a-meeting-of-cultures-the-chapel-of-trinity-college-kandy/>

Crompton, Andrew. "The architecture of multifaith spaces: God leaves the building." *The Journal of Architecture* 18.4 (2013): 474-496.

De Alwis, Malathi. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

De Silva, N. and Chandrasekara D P. *Heritage Buildings in Sri Lanka*, National Trust Sri Lanka, 2009

Cassim, A M. "Mythical Motifs of Embekke", *Daily FT*, 2017 accessed at <https://www.ft.lk/FT-Lite/mythical-motifs-of-embekke/6-607071>

Jayathilaka, Vajira Nalinda, Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Jayasooriya, Sagara. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Peiris, Anoma. *Architecture and nationalism in Sri Lanka: The trouser under the cloth*. Routledge, 2012.

Rajapaksa, S. *Pauranika Sthana haa Smaaraka: Mahanuwara Disthrikkaya*, Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka, 2016

Weerasinghe, Jagath. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019





# Tale of Two Masjids:

## *A beginner's guide to Islamic Architecture in Serendib*

**L**ike all tales – meaning stories inevitably personalized in their telling – this one too has to start with a backstory: It goes back to the memory of me standing, at the age of nineteen, in front of the Taj Mahal stunned into silence by its architecture. Born to a nominally Buddhist family and educated in a Convent, nothing had prepared me for the splendour of Moghul India. And the intricacy of Islam.

Visiting the Taj Mahal on a scorching midsummer day with throngs of annoying tourists is hardly a romantic experience. With all due respect to the legendary couple, one needs to get over the mortal love story to see the true romance that lies at the heart of this iconic building, and perhaps at the heart of Islam – the romance between art and geometry, between faith and science.

*“This interplay extends from what can be experienced directly with the senses, into religious, intellectual, mathematical and poetic ideas,”*

writes Ebba Koch, Architectural Advisor to the Taj Mahal Conservation Collaborative. So yes, for the refined eye, there is romance everywhere in this edifice.

As I write this, years later, I must return to the Taj Mahal to recall some of the main features of Islamic architecture I have now learnt – the majestic onion dome; the guarding minarets; the iwan – a vaulted space with an arch-like gateway. This feature found its way across the Mediterranean Sea with the Crusades and became the famed ‘Gothic’ arch in European cathedrals; The pishtaq is the portal that frames the iwan, adorned with arabesques of interlocked lianas, mosaics and calligraphy quoting Quranic verses; The ‘Paradise Garden’, with its perfect four-quartered symmetry, alludes to the many references from Islamic texts – ‘Paradise is a Walled Garden’ full of bloom and abundance, (the layout of which I also recognize in the royal gardens of Sigiriya, though one can only speculate about a connection). It has it all, the Taj Mahal, especially for the beginner. I have now found the word for it: ‘Perfection’. It’s a perfect structure – pure in its marble essence, utterly symmetrical in its geometry and heavenly in its transcendence of life.

To call a set of features found in Moghul buildings ‘Islamic’ architecture isn’t the perfect way to set about the topic, though. The quintessential courtyards were there, way before Islam, in Mesopotamia. “The arch they borrowed from the Roman aqueducts,” expounds Sohail Hashmi, Delhi-based historian and memory-keeper, debunking what he calls, ‘the myth of Islamic Architecture’.

*“Judaism and Christianity both held their congregations under domes. In fact, Muslims didn’t use the dome for a very long time. The first mosque was built by Prophet Mohammed. It had no arches, no domes, and no minarets.”*

In fact, the Holy Qur’an offers no description of a mosque. If there is a distinct style that can be identified as Islamic, it evolved gradually, building on myriad elements of cultures that came before it.

“There is no uniform ‘Islamic’ style,” notes Sri Lankan architect Murad Ismail.

*“As Islam travelled across time and space, it adopted and got absorbed into local traditions. Islam blended in.”*

So the Great Mosque of Xi’an in China has an octagonal pagoda as its minaret. In Mali, the Great Mosque of Djenne is built with mudbricks, not marble, in the vernacular style of the African peoples of Sahel and Sudanian grasslands. One just has to look at the breadth of the Islamic world to know how well it has weaved itself into the mosaic of many cultures.

Serendib is no exception. As we know from the 10th century writings of Al-Masudi and 14<sup>th</sup> century chronicles of Ibn Battuta, the island was an oasis in the sea, a safe haven in the Maritime Silk Route for the Arabian travellers and traders; legendary sailor Sinbad included!

*“Legend connects one town to another with mosques and shrines being the markers along a long-forgotten map of Sufi’s (saints) along the southern littoral,” writes historian Ramla Wahab-Salman. Some of these early mosque builders would have employed local craftsman, material and design to suit the tropical climes. Thus, the inward-looking courtyards of the Mediterranean mosque transformed into outward gazing verandahs in the tropics. “Unfortunately, these early mosques that so freely embraced the vernacular are now being replaced by a new wave of mosques built in the last 40 years,”*

Murad Ismail points out. What is being erased as a result is a fascinating tale of confluence of cultures.

All the more reason to make this a tale of three, four, five, six, or more masjids, but for a start let’s begin with my favourites:

Unlike my homage to the Taj Mahal, discovering the Jumma Meeran Mosque inside the old Dutch Fort in Galle was a moment of serendipity. As you stroll along the ramparts, you see this unusual construction facing the lighthouse on Point Utrecht, glowing gently in the evening light. For a moment I think I am standing in front of a baroque cathedral in Lisbon. But nay, I am in Galle, in front of a mosque that captivates me as equally as the Taj Mahal.

Galle, or Qali, as Ibn Battuta referred to it, has long been an important port, eyed by all colonial powers that roamed the region in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But the Arab traders had been

around for much longer. And they hadn't come with guns to conquer. In Qali, they had settled, married, and blended into the community by the time the Portuguese arrived and started building a fort in 1588.

Though there's a claim that the mosque has been around for 300 years, the present structure dates from 1909. Life was tough for the Muslim community under the Portuguese. Some even left to the central highlands, welcomed by the Kandyan monarch. It was only under the Dutch that they managed to build their own place of worship in Galle.

*"The numerals painted on the front wall of the mosque facing the sea, state the year 1325 Hijri which probably denotes the existence of a prayer space much before the 20<sup>th</sup> century."*

Writes Ramla Wahab-Salman. The exact dates, we may have lost to history, but the building that stands speaks for itself.

The Meeran mosque has an eclectic touch, with a dash of Portuguese Baroque, British Victorian and ever so slight Islamic detailing, ringing true to the ground it stands on. Galle has passed through three colonial powers and the building carries the signs of all of them.

The façade is framed by paired towers as in any Gothic cathedral (think Notre Dame), with deep-set windows. Slender turret-like minarets tipped with small crescents are the only giveaways that it is indeed Islamic. But the perceptive eye will notice that the mosque faces the sacred direction of Quibla, as does every other mosque on earth.

Inside, one is treated to beautiful mosaics on the floor (imported from Italy, I am told!) and stained-glass windows. The simplicity of the mirhab and mimbar are heightened in the roomy prayer hall full of sunlight.

The present-day structure is said to have been commissioned by a resident of Galle Fort, Ahmed Haji Ismail, who also built mosques in Weligama and Poruwa. One has to wonder at the understatement of its identity. In a time where Islam is often accused of standing apart, one is immediately struck by this mosque. Becoming one with its colonial setting and history, this house of prayer displays an uncommon level of self-confidence. Whatever the physical form is, it is the essence that matters, and in essence, a house of prayer, it is.

Meeran Masjid is not the only mosque that comfortably negotiates the ebb of history. The famous Dawatagaha Mosque in Colombo is another such example of fitting neatly into the jigsaw puzzle of time and space. Situated right on the Lipton circus besides the Town Hall, a landmark colonial building, it again straddles British Victorian while remaining elegantly Islamic. It also combines an interesting legend of saints and miracles while cosily fitting into an urban landscape, almost immune to the ruins of time. The pigeons and the creepers growing out of its stylish minarets? No threat, they just add to the ambience.





To bring this tale to its destined finale, I must end with another mosque of surpassing beauty. Situated amidst the bustling markets of Pettah, no one can miss the Jami Ul-Afar Masjid, lovingly called the Red Mosque and arguably the most famous masjid of the island. No matter how exotic or loud the colours of the Pettah streets are, the Red Masjid easily out does them all.

Reading the anthropological map of Pettah is an interesting exercise, particularly if you wish to understand the provenance of the masjid. The area north of Colombo Fort was called ‘Pita Kotuwa’ which literally translates into ‘outside the fortress’.

*“This area from the clock tower near Hunter’s Raleigh Bicycle shop at that time through Main Street was dominated by businessmen, mainly Muslims: Jezima’s, Zitan Stores, W. M. A. Wahid. Some South Indian Hindus like Hirdramanis and Kundanmals, are also some of the big names that have been mentioned as having stood tall on both sides of Main Street. The roads crossing the Main Street were called ‘Cross Streets’ – First Cross Street, Second Cross Street, Third Cross Street etc. On the east of Main Street, South Indian traders were said to have stored their merchandise, while the opposite side was the domain of the North Indian Borahs and Memons. Historically, it is important to understand this mix, because although they were all Indians, they had culturally different practices and were of two different sects – the South Indians were the followers of the Shafi’e school of theology while the North Indian Memons were followers of Imam Abu Hanifa,”* explains Dr. M. Haris Z. Deen.

With its mesmerising red and white candy strips, 49 minarets, pomegranate domes, and a clock tower, Red Masjid is nothing short of a spectacle. One has to wonder about the architect and be pleasantly surprised that it is a simple ‘mason bass’ who designed it.

A brick mason like his father, Saibo Lebbe was commissioned to design and build a mosque at Second Cross Street by South Indian traders. He had never stepped outside Ceylon and had no access to any literature on architecture. When the mosque was built in 1908 it is said that Saibo Lebbe had to depend on black and white pictures and photographs given to him by the patrons from India. No wonder the brick work turned out stunning with each single brick painted by hand. The red bricks are kept in four designs – jagged, spiral, striped, and checkered – creating an optical feast. On the edge of the outside border are calligraphy-painted by hand.

Scholars of architecture identify the style of the Red Masjid as ‘Indo-Saracenic’, also known as Indo-Gothic, Gothic-Moghul, Neo-Moghul or Hindoo. It’s a term worth googling. Knowingly or unknowingly Saibo Lebbe was tapping into a fascinating fusion of Hindu, Muslim and Christian (and Indian, Arabic and British) architecture for his house of prayer. Devised by British architects in late 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial India, Indo-Saracenic is essentially a hybrid style that draws elements from native Indo-Islamic (think Moghul) and Indian architecture (think Rajasthani palaces), and combines it with the Gothic Revival and Neo-Classical styles favoured in Victorian Britain (think House of Parliament). The unquenchable thirst for oriental exoticism ensured that the British designed their administrative buildings across the Raj in this style, and

also took it back to Britain and then exported it elsewhere, to Malaysia and British Ceylon. Other notable buildings in this style in Sri Lanka include the landmark Cargills building, the Victoria Memorial Eye Hospital, Colombo, and the Jaffna Public Library.

No wonder it is déjà-vu. As if I am back in Old Delhi, walking through the chaos of Chandni Chowk, with Shah Jehan's Red Fort looming over it. Pettah feels similar and different at the same time, with its narrow streetscape overcrowded with things literally falling apart. And then, there you are, in front of the red and white Jama Masjid across Meena Bazaar, as suddenly the Red Masjid on Second Cross Street in Pettah.

Perhaps this is what grips me about Agra, Delhi, Galle or Pettah: the parallels. Time and again, one encounters the other in such places, gods meet other gods, civilisations meet other civilisations. Time and again, these encounters lead to something more. Some choose to fight. The others embrace.

Today, the world seems confused about Islam. But beyond this initial confusion, there is room for understanding, appreciation and love, which even the Victorian British, despite their famous stiff upper lip, found in Moghul India.

As you strip off the layers of history like a consummate restorer of a ruin, what emerges is a different tale of Islam than the one we are used to hearing on media. These buildings are the evidence that Islam, in its journey across time and space, has embraced other cultures and practices; It has evolved, negotiated and survived. It has given as much as it has taken.

Egyptian Architect Abdel Wahed El-Wakil, one of the most renowned architects of our time, highlights the wisdom of traditional architecture over modern insecurities of individualism when he says,

*“Traditional Art is not trying to make the artist a special man. It tries to make every man a special artist.”*

According to him, it is simple, down to earth, does not seek to stand apart, and is one with the universe.

You never see ugliness in Islamic art and architecture, no neurosis, personal problems; nor any of the dark stuff that so obsesses modern art trapped within its own ego. Because it recognises that the problems of the artist are just storms in a tea cup, utterly irrelevant in the larger scheme of things. Designed by royal architect or brick mason, in Moorish Spain or Moghul India, there is no identity crisis in Islamic Art. It is not about where and what and whose tradition. It is a tale of oneness with Allah, with Beauty and Love. The artist must come out of his small cocoon and confines of identity, to create a reflection of paradise on earth, for himself and for the others.

As we gaze upon their creativity, we realize, so must we.



## References

Anjalendran, C. Lecture, 'Islamic Architecture in Sri Lanka' delivered on 09.03.2019, Colombo School of Architecture, notes by author 2019

Anjalendran, C. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Deen, M. Haris Z. 'Saibo Lebbe: The unlettered architect who designed and built Red Mosque October 9, 2015' accessed at [http://www.island.lk/index.php?page\\_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code\\_title=133146](http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=133146)

El Wakil, Abdel Wahed. Geoffrey Bawa Memorial Lecture 'Architecture, art and traditional civilizations' delivered on 26.07.2018, Colombo, notes by author 2018

Hashmi, Sohail. TedX talk 'Breaking the Myths of Islamic Architecture', 2018 accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4G4tWT3fRI>

Hussein, Assif. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Ismail, Murad. Telephone interview, 12.03.2019 notes by author 2019

Koch, Ebba. "The Taj Mahal: Architecture, Symbolism, and Urban Significance", *Muqarnas*, Vol. 22, 2005

Jayathilaka, Vajira Nalinda. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Wahab-Salman, Ramla. 'Legend along Littoral Landscapes: Tales from the Muslim World' published in Ground Views accessed at [https://groundviews.org/2016/02/03/legend-along-littoral-landscapes-tales-from-the-muslim-world/?fbclid=IwAR2OxywIX\\_kyeDSIWpjdIPmvY3-JWdBgTDQ4jaRES4CoJPw\\_XpsLrZqPdO8](https://groundviews.org/2016/02/03/legend-along-littoral-landscapes-tales-from-the-muslim-world/?fbclid=IwAR2OxywIX_kyeDSIWpjdIPmvY3-JWdBgTDQ4jaRES4CoJPw_XpsLrZqPdO8)

Wahab-Salman, Ramla. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

TimeLine Documentary, "Paradise Found", Digital Rights Group, 2005 accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdOxBCpk39c>







Exterior, Red Mosque, Pettah





# The blonde behind the Buddha:

## *Imagining a Buddhist universe under the British*

**"A** few days ago we joined a large party in an excursion to the Governor's Country House, Mount Lavinia. It is a charming residence; it literally overhangs the sea, and has all the beauty that the hill and valley, wood and rock, with a beautiful beach and a fine open sea, can give... and in the valley are palm-trees, which hide all the farm-offices, and afford shelter to a collection of animals of the deer and elk kind, from the interior of the island...

*We have now been at Colombo for some days; and I am so delighted with the place, and with the English society here, that if I could choose my place of residence for the rest of the time of my absence from England, it should be Colombo."*

Maria Graham, writer, traveler and artist, described her surroundings in March 1810 in her journal, probably looking out of a window of the Governor's idyllic outpost. It immediately gives the feeling of a Sunday morning, which in 1810, one imagines to be even more languid, with the sea breeze and birdcall echoing through the surrounding woodlands. She may have chosen to take a stroll to the nearby fishing village afterwards.

At the time, Mount Lavinia, was the name of the Governor's House, not the name of the surrounding village. No one knows exactly when the name took over the entire locale seven miles South of Colombo, or even why the Governor, Sir Thomas Maitland, called his little hideaway Mount Lavinia. Legends and lore galore about a native mulatto dancer that drew the affections of Maitland, known to have been rather stoic and standoffish to his own people. The truth of the matter one may never know, but what we can observe is how the British left their mark on the landscape of a tropical island and the mindscape of its people, in a most enduring manner.

Fifteen-minute stroll from where Maria sat writing that Sunday, was the hamlet of fisher folk aptly named as Karagampitiya. There's no mystery about this name – Karava being the caste of the fishermen. It was a part of a much bigger settlement known then as Medimala (or Nedimala). One can trace the history of Medimala to the reign of Parakramabahu VI (1412-1567), who gifted the village to Natha Devale of Papiliyana. Now, a devale is a shrine of mixed spiritual provenance, that held sway over the rituals of the common folk. Kings could profess to be Buddhist, their queens Hindu, and among the people these worldviews tended to amalgamate into a heady spiritual concoction. It is said that the King built another devale for the fishermen, at the foot of a Na tree on the hillock of Karagampitiya, to protect the fishermen who were the suppliers to his palace and wade off the threats of foreign invasions.

And so, a sacred spot was marked some 200 years prior to Maria Graham exploring the coconut and spice groves of the area.

Out there, the Indian ocean was replete with ships of white invaders, trying to outpace each other in their frenzied race to colonize. The history of the world as it was known by then, was about to change forever.

When the Portuguese arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they destroyed the devale and used its stone pillars to build what is today seen as St. Anthony's Church, Mount Lavinia. Then came the Dutch, who built a Dutch church, and a resting place – *an ambalama* on the eastern slopes of the Karagampitiya hillock. Eventually, a monk hailing from Hikkadua, Ven. Indrajothi took residence in this ambalama and it is him, who is considered the first incumbent of the Buddhist Vihara which stands today proudly on the Karagampitiya hill. When the British came, they built a Methodist Church and dismantled the older Dutch Church and is said to have returned the original stone pillars to Karagampitiya temple.

The temple itself must have been built in stages and is believed to have been completed by 1790s. The Buddha images of the temple are attributed to the same artist of Kelaniya temple and thus dated a decade earlier to 1780. So we do know that some form of the temple existed by the time Maria Graham wandered through the area. She does not write about it in her journal, so we cannot know if she actually did visit Karagampitiya temple, but we do come across a description of her visiting a temple further South along the coast – “a celebrated Buddhist temple at Bellagam, about twenty miles East of this place [Galle]” she writes, on 18<sup>th</sup> February.

*“After breakfast we walked to the temple, through some of the prettiest fields I have ever seen... a flight of rude stone steps leads to the building, which is low and mean, but near it are the ruins of an older and more handsome structure. Opposite the temple is a large solid conical building, supposed to cover the ashes of a Buddhist saint, one of which ornaments the court of every temple to Bhud.*

*Within the temple is a recumbent figure of Budh; twenty-eight feet long; his countenance is broad and placid, his hair is curled like that of a negro, and on the crown of his head is a flame like ornament, such as I have seen in Montfaucon and Denon, on the heads of the Egyptian deities.”*

The ‘colonial gaze’. Something we still retain within us, though not quite aware of it. Maria's descriptions illustrate it so well that it makes her journal ever so readable.

*“There is besides a gigantic four-handed statue of Vishnu, of a dark-blue colour, which appears to be of porcelain. The walls within the temple are covered with painted figures of Bhud, as they are called here, but which strongly resemble the Jain figures I have seen elsewhere...”*



*“The outer walls are painted with an immense number of figures, among which I noticed several exactly resembling one in Denon's 40<sup>th</sup> plate, of a conqueror holding the hair of a number of enemies at once with one hand, while the other is raised, apparently with the design of cutting off all the heads. The priests were all either unable or unwilling to give any explanation of these pictures, which appear to refer to the history or the mythology of the island, or both.”*

Maria's vivid descriptions of Buddhism give us more than an idea of how Buddhism was seen and understood by different groups of people, but also what the associated power dynamics had been, in that era. She describes,

*“Formerly there was an annual importation of books and priests from Siam, the great seat of Bhudhism; but of late years the intercourse between that country and Ceylon has nearly ceased, and the priests are consequently become extremely ignorant in the Cingalese territory; nor is it probable that those of the Candian country are much more enlightened, for the king, being of a Hindoo family, Bhudhism has ceased to be the religion of the court, and is therefore much neglected.*

*The popular account of Bhudhism which follows, I regard with some distrust, as it reached me through the translations of some missionaries, who seem to have falsified, or at least exaggerated, some of the absurdities of that system, in order to obtain a stronger hold over the minds of their proselytes, very few of whom are learned enough to have recourse to their books in the originals for information, and therefore quietly acquiesce in the belief that Bhud and Satan are one and the same person ; while their spiritual guides impress on their minds the sinfulness of worshipping the devil. Even the Maha Modeliar, a Dutch Protestant, and a man of sense, is so possessed with this idea, that he would fain have dissuaded us from going into the temple...”*

How did Buddhism survive against such odds? The key to understanding the centrality of Buddhism to modern Sinhalese identity, lies in the exploration of that question.

Today, Karagampitiya Sri Subodharama Raja Maha Vihara, nestles away in the hustle bustle of the Dehiwala junction, with only a few of its regular devotees aware of the clues it holds to answering some of the most intriguing socio-political inquiries of the day. Archaeologist Senaka Bandaranayake attributes it to cluster of maritime temples that sprang up in the Southern littoral in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, absorbing the colonial elements and blending them with those inherited from the Kandyan school of paintings as well as the ‘vestigial’ remains of Kotte tradition. He elaborates,

*“The Karagampitiya temple impresses us today as a perfectly integrated traditional temple complex of c. 1900 with a cycle of old and new paintings that elegantly express the artistic and iconographic parameters of the Southern school, starting from its period of mid-century maturity, undergoing subsequent evolution and demise.*

*The murals at temples such as these constitute some of the richest and most extensive artistic treasures that remain of Sri Lankan pictorial art in its final period of efflorescence, on the threshold of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Painted almost within living memory, they give access to an imaginative world that is no longer available to us, and provide insights into the ideological and semiological structures of an important segment of Sri Lankan society, in a way that is not easily paralleled by any other form of documentation.”*

Do not dismiss it as scholarly exaggeration. The temple keeps its promises, with several buildings on serene sand terraces that treat you to surprising subtleties and nuances if you care to look closer. Let us start with the main image house, located in the upper terrace.

The walls of the image house are adorned with paintings which re-imagine a Buddhist universe through contemporaneous colonial imagery and motifs. Even in the purely decorative lianas, one finds roses and bunches of grapes alongside traditional lotus decorations. Had Maria Graham walked into Karagampitiya temple during her Sunday stroll, she would have observed certain material representations from her own surroundings on the temple walls, infused into Buddhist narratives still unknown to her. As she complains in her journal, without the help of an interpreter, she may not be able to grasp fully the universe depicted, similar to witnessing the depictions on a tomb walls of Egypt. Without the knowledge of Egyptian mythology and dynastic politics, one cannot understand the key messages. Indeed, these are not stories merely there to entertain. The illustrations of the great events and exemplary lives unfolded on the walls of the temple, remind the devotees who walk around the premises, the unflinching rewards and retributions of all deeds they could possibly commit within a lifetime. It is indeed a very moral universe one encounters here.

The arrangement of the paintings remains faithful to the traditions of temple paintings practiced in the island for over a millennium. They are the same stories, from the life of Buddha, and the Jatakas, meaning the previous lives of Buddha, that are well-known to the people. The three outer walls of the shrine room which simultaneously form the inner walls of the ambulatory, contain narrative paintings arranged in series of superimposing horizontal bands. Scene depicting the proclamation of the twenty-four Buddhas of the Past run around the top of the three walls. The remaining space on the walls display illustrations of Jatakas tales such as Khadirangara jataka and Nimi jataka, Mahajanaka jataka, Manicora jataka and so on. Decorative bands containing floral scrolls and lotus petal motif run on the lower part of the three walls completing the pictorial panels. The ceiling contains panels representing the Buddhist paradise, filled with a wealth of decorative designs.

The earliest set of surviving paintings on these walls can be dating back to 1897, much later than Maria Graham visited Colombo, but art historians agree that they are some of the first and finest forerunners of the distinctive realistic trench that came to characterize twentieth century art.

*“A fair achievement of the three-dimensional effect and the use of Western-style perspective is quite noticeable. Realistic, but idealistically tinted colours, prevail and glow under the touch*

*of light from an invisible source. Architecture and costumes show a mixture of local and imported European styles, obviously reflecting the current mode of the period. The events unfold themselves in the surroundings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Sri Lanka, and yet a lyric and romantic atmosphere of a fairy-tale pervades all the scenes.”*

Consider for instance this depiction of King Brahmadata, a legendary figure appearing in Buddhist literature, one usually imagines to have lived in ‘ancient’ India. The artists are compelled to represent a ‘palace’ in ‘ancient’ India, with whatever sources of information and imagination they have. The artists in Polonnaruwa would have drawn their notion of wealth and luxury from their own surroundings, and so do the artists of Karagampitiya. The King himself stretches on an armchair, popularized by the Dutch while a Western type chandelier and lamp illuminates the premises.

In another scene, the abode of a wealthy merchant Anepindu Situ, is painted as a two story building with arched windows, with noticeable features from both western and vernacular architecture. On the upper floor we see the furniture that we are intensely familiar with today, Galle Almirahs, writing tables but we would not have had if not for the colonial experience. There is a man reading a newspaper with English lettering, which in fact is the name of the artist.

Not only the paintings on the wall are full of architecture, furniture and dress influenced by the colonial experience; if you manage to tear your eyes away from these absorbing tales, look down to see the beautiful mosaics at your feet, another unmistakable feature of a culture in transition. Mosaic art is found mainly in the buildings of the colonial period in Sri Lanka, such as Maduwanwela Walawuwa, Richmond Castle, as well as Buddhist temples such as Vijayananda Vihara, Galle, and Rankoth Vihara, Panadura. These ceramic mosaics are fashioned out of English and Chinese plate and porcelain and are considered highly original in their conception due to their dating to 1880s and 1890s, some of the earliest found in the island. As seen depicted in the image house floor, new and foreign creatures such as unicorns entered the Buddhist universe. Jagath Weerasinghe argues that even the lion, whom we can trace back to Kandy, to Yapahuwa and to Polonnaruwa reaching further into our historical traditions, the lion we find in the Southern temples of this period is a colonial lion. It is the same lion, but also a different lion in this context.

*“The practice continues, but the identity changes,”* summarizes Weerasinghe.

But perhaps the most fascinating aspect, at least to Maria Graham, had she really witnessed Karagampitiya temple as we do today, would have been the depiction of women. Consider for instance this striking depiction of Queen Sivali from Mahjanaka jataka. The beautiful young queen is in her bridal attire, with her man close behind her, to whom she has given her kingdom as well as her hand.

*“Her sweet and gentle expression, the pose and the headdress seem reminiscent of the standard configuration of Virgin Mary in the European Art of the time.”*



Similarly, two ladies whom we cannot identify are seen at Anepindu mansion wearing headdresses and cloth, again under a roman arch, and a vase of flowers. The scene is not quite relevant to the narrative, so it is safe to assume it was only drawn for the mere joy and beauty of it, with no purpose of message or story-telling.

The most well-known depiction of a woman at Karagampitiya temple is that of real significance, especially if you pay attention to the details of its setting. It is an image you cannot miss, given much prominence: As you enter the main image house, you are greeted by the usual adornment of a Makara torana framing the entrance of the shrine with the four principal gods from the Hindu pantheon – Brahma, Vishnu, Siva and Indra accompanied by mythical creatures. Floral motifs reminiscent of Rococo style fill the space, with traditional Sinhala flower grow out of the stem of a baroque style leaf. Right above the door way though, is the mysterious figure of a lady, flanked by prancing unicorns as seen in the emblem of the British Empire. Who else could be accompanied by such royal insignia other than Queen Victoria herself, who ruled the island from a distance at the time these images were painted. Her hair and eyes are dark like her subjects. With her permission you may enter into the shrine room. And yet she is a local woman, simply adorned; and yet she is the Queen of the British empire. What an insidiously delicious power play of reverence and rebellion.

However, the real find is not in the image house but another building named Sat Sati Ge. This building is a secondary hall with a beautiful façade resplendent with mosaic work, twisted Tuscan columns and panel doors. Even on the outside, this building which is supposed to illustrate the seven weeks the Buddha spent following his enlightenment, seems the most Europeanized. Inside, the paintings are in a state which cries for proper restoration. In the dim light one can see landscape art very similar to the western tradition of naturalistic drawing. Art historians do not really see these paintings as original, but mere imitations, and perhaps rightly so.

Not many actually know of her. The blonde behind the Buddha. Peering from and almost hidden behind the statue one sees a blue eyed beauty, wearing blue sapphires and a satin dress. She could have just stepped out of a ball that the Governor Maitland might have hosted in his country residence. Someone who would have been a reference point for Maria Graham, as she mentions the delightful English society she found in Colombo. However, unlike the queen Sivali from jataka tales, and queen Victoria one cannot easily explain her.

None of the publications or research articles actually ever refer to her or even hint at her existence. Is she a temptress, like the three daughters of Maara, or Death, who haunted the Buddha as he sat striving for his ultimate goal? But then, why is it one, and not three? Is it just a fantasy of an artist? This blonde behind the Buddha seems to have been dismissed by the art historians. It is likely that she is not considered great art, as the paintings of Sat Sati Ge are referred to as being too imitative. Or perhaps she has silenced the art historians.

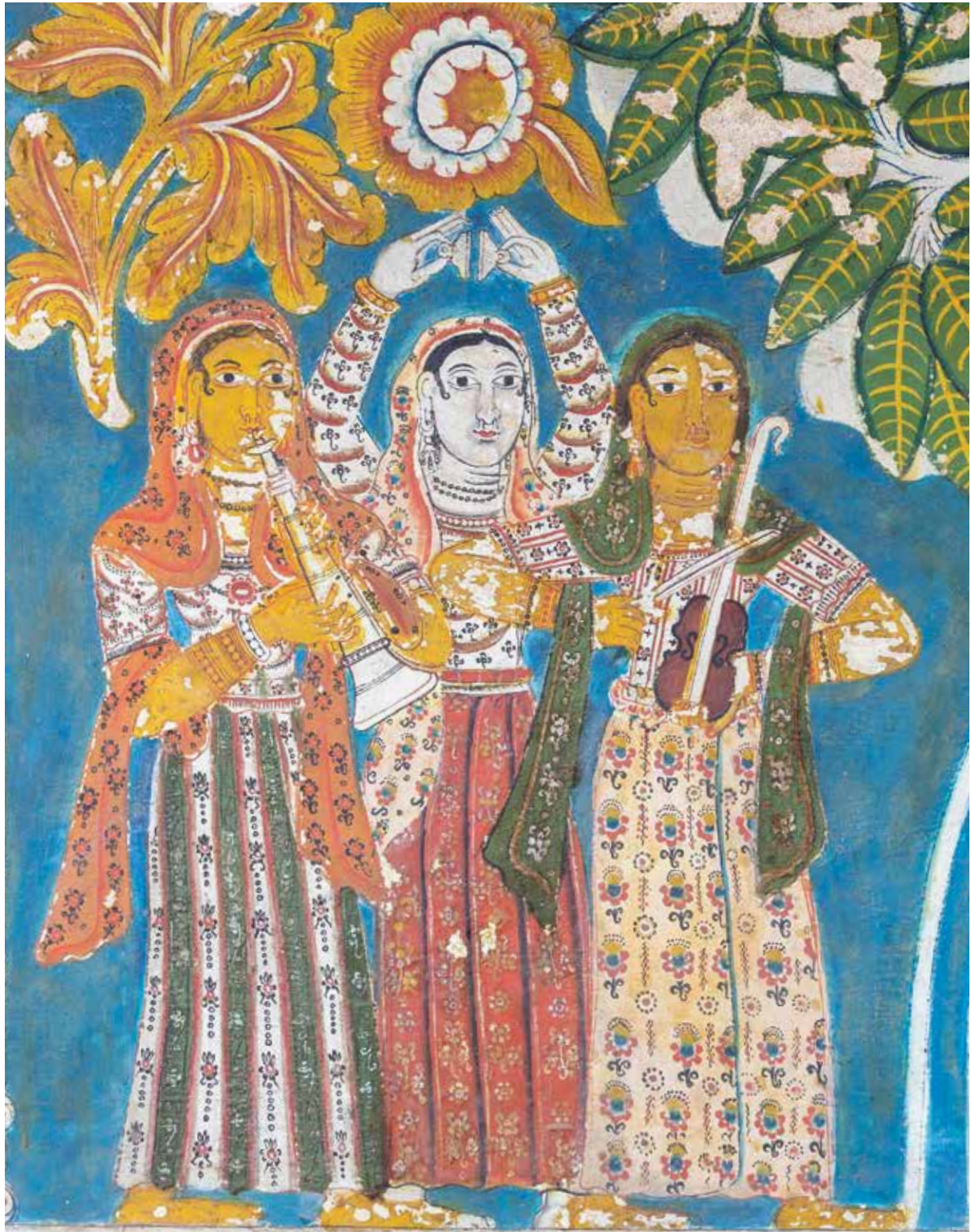
Whoever she is and whatever our inadequate explanations for her may be, she exists. Always peering from behind the figure of the Buddha much larger than her. And yet there's a sparkle in her eyes as if she is about to step into the light, but not quite. Could one see an analogy to modern day Buddhism in here? A practice that continues in this island since times immemorial, but not the same practice anymore.



Top: Façade with mosaic designs, Sath Sathi Ge

Bottom: Localised depiction of Queen Victoria









## References

Anjalendran, C. Notes taken by author during guided tour to Karagampitiya Sri Subodharama Raja Maha Vihara, 2018

Anjalendran, C. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Bandaranayake, S. “*The Rock and Wall Painting of Sri Lanka*”, Stamford Lake Publication, Pannipitiya, 2016

Chutiwongs, Nandana; Prematilake, Leelananda; Silva, Roland. “*Paintings of Sri Lanka - Karagampitiya.*” Colombo: Centenary publications, 1990

Embuldeniya, P. *A Study On Cultural Assimilation Indicated from Mosaic Art In Sri Lanka*, EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, Volume: 5 Issue: 2 February 2019, EPRA Publishing, 2019

Graham, M. “*Journal of a Residence in India*”. Constable, 1813

Jayathilaka, Vajira Nalinda. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Jayasooriya, Sagara. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Weerasinghe, Jagath. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

## Bibliography

\_\_\_\_\_. Mahavamsa, Government of Ceylon, 1912

\_\_\_\_\_. *Temple of the Tooth Relic Kandy: Architecture, Sculpture Painting*, Central Cultural Fund, Ministry of Cultural Affairs Sri Lanka, 1999

\_\_\_\_\_. <https://www.trinitycollege.lk/portfolio/architecture-murals/>

\_\_\_\_\_. *Restoration of the David Paynter Murals*, <https://www.trinitycollege.lk/chapel/>

Bandaranayake, Senake. "The Rock and Wall Painting of Sri Lanka.", 1986.

Bandaranayake, Senake. et al. "Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea", The Sri Lanka National Commission for UNESCO and the Central Cultural Fund, 1990.

Bell, H C P. *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Reports, 1908*

Bibile, Ranil. A meeting of cultures, the Chapel of Trinity College Kandy, 2017 <https://www.trinitycollege.lk/2019/01/17/a-meeting-of-cultures-the-chapel-of-trinity-college-kandy/>

Bopearachchi, Osmond. "Archaeological evidence on changing patterns of international trade relations of ancient Sri Lanka." *Origin, evolution and circulation of foreign coins in the Indian Ocean, 1998*

Burrows, S. M. "A Year's Work at Polonnaruwa." Sessional Paper X of 1886

Carswell, John. "The excavation of Mantai." *The Indian Ocean in antiquity, 1996*: 501-15.

Cassim, A M. "Mythical Motifs of Embekke", Daily FT, 2017 accessed at <https://www.ft.lk/FT-Lite/mythical-motifs-of-embekke/6-607071>

Chandrajeewa, S. *Emaciated female playing cymbals; a study of an ancient Hindu bronze figurine in Polonnaruwa Sri Lanka*, The Contemporary Arts and Crafts Association, 2020

Chutiwongs, Nandana; Prematilake, Leelananda; Silva, Roland. "*Paintings of Sri Lanka - Karagampitiya.*" Colombo: Centenary publications, 1990

Coomaraswamy, Ananda Kentish. *Bronzes from Ceylon, chiefly in the Colombo Museum. No. 1-3.* Colombo Museum, 1914.

Cowell (trans.). 1895–1907. *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births.* 6 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. vol. II, pp. 81-85. <https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk/stories-in-text/jatakathavannana-193/>



Cowell, E. B. (ed.). Chalmers, Robert, W. H. D. Rouse, H. T. Francis, R. A. Neil, E. B.

Crompton, Andrew. "The architecture of multifaith spaces: God leaves the building." *The Journal of Architecture* 18.4 (2013): 474-496.

De Saxcé, Ariane. "Trade and Cross-cultural Contacts in Sri Lanka and South India during Late Antiquity (6th–10th Centuries)." *Heritage (Kerala University)(forthcoming)* accessed at <http://www.heritageuniversityofkerala.com/JournalPDF/Volume4/8.pdf>

De Silva, N. and Chandrasekara D P. *Heritage Buildings in Sri Lanka*, National Trust Sri Lanka, 2009

Deen, M. Haris Z. 'Saibo Lebbe: The unlettered architect who designed and built Red Mosque October 9, 2015' accessed at [http://www.island.lk/index.php?page\\_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code\\_title=133146](http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=133146)

Dewaraja, L. S. *Some Aspects of Dravidian Architecture and Sculpture and their impact on Ceylon*. 1971.

Embuldeniya, P. *A Study On Cultural Assimilation Indicated from Mosaic Art In Sri Lanka*, EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, Volume: 5 Issue: 2 February 2019, EPRA Publishing, 2019

Gomis, Oswald. "The Cross of Anuradhapura", Daily News, 22.04.2011, Lakehouse Newspapers, 2011 accessed at [archives.dailynews.lk/2011/04/22/fea32.asp](http://archives.dailynews.lk/2011/04/22/fea32.asp)

Graham, M. "*Journal of a Residence in India*". Constable, 1813

Gusev, D. and Stafeyev, S. "GIS Analysis and Digital Reconstruction of Ptolemy's India beyond the Ganges, Serike and Sinae", International Cartographic Association, 13th ICA Conference Digital Approaches to Cartographic Heritage Conference Proceedings Madrid, Spain, 18-20 April 2018: page 9

Hashmi, Sohail. TedX talk 'Breaking the Myths of Islamic Architecture', 2018 accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4G4tWT3fRI>

Hocart, Arthur Maurice, ed. *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon*. H. Ross Cottle, Government Printer, 1926.

Indicopleustes, Cosmas. *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk: Translated from the Greek, and Edited with Notes and Introduction*. No. 98. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Koch, Ebba. "The Taj Mahal: Architecture, Symbolism, and Urban Significance", *Muqarnas*, Vol. 22, 2005

Map of Eratosthenes accessed at <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/6154/eratosthenes-map-of-the-world/>

Meegama, Sujatha Arundathi. "South Indian or Sri Lankan? The Hindu Temples of Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka." *Artibus Asiae* 70.1 (2010): 25-45.

Meegama, Sujatha Arundathi. *“From Kôvils to Devâles: Patronage and “Influence” at Buddhist and Hindu Temples in Sri Lanka.”* University of California, Berkeley, 2011.

Mihindukulasuriya, Prabo. "Persian Christians of the Anuradhapura Period." *A Cultured Faith: Essays in Honour of Prof. GPV Somaratna on His Seventieth Birthday*, 2011.

Peiris, Anoma. *Architecture and nationalism in Sri Lanka: The trouser under the cloth*. Routledge, 2012.

Prematilleke, P. L., *Nalanda - A Short Guide to the 'Gedige' Shrine*, Central Cultural Fund, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Sri Lanka, 1985

Queyroz, Fernão de. *The temporal and spiritual conquest of Ceylon*. AMS Press, 1930.

Rajapaksa, S. *Pauranika Sthana haa Smaaraka: Mahanuwara Disthrikkaya*, Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka, 2016

Raven-Hart, Rowland. *Ceylon: history in stone*. Colombo: Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, 1964.

Seneviratne, Anuradha. *“Polonnaruwa Medieval Capital of Sri Lanka.”* Colombo: Archaeological Survey Department, 1998.

Seneviratne, Sudharshan in *Forward to Haputhanthri*, Hasini. “Museums, Memory and Identity Politics in Sri Lanka”, *Historical Dialogue*, 2021

Thantilage, A. ‘Scientific observation on the unification of Siva and Parvati bronzes by Sirinimal Lakdusinghe’, *Sirinimal Lakdusinghe Felicitation Volume*, Neptune Publishing, 2010.

TimeLine Documentary, “Paradise Found”, Digital Rights Group, 2005 accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdOxBCpk39c>

Wahab-Salman, Ramla. ‘Legend along Littoral Landscapes: Tales from the Muslim World’ published in *Ground Views* accessed at [https://groundviews.org/2016/02/03/legend-along-littoral-landscapes-tales-from-the-muslim-world/?fbclid=IwAR2OxywIX\\_kyeDSIWpjdIPmvY3-JWdBgTDQ4jaRES4CoJPw\\_XpsLrZqPdO8](https://groundviews.org/2016/02/03/legend-along-littoral-landscapes-tales-from-the-muslim-world/?fbclid=IwAR2OxywIX_kyeDSIWpjdIPmvY3-JWdBgTDQ4jaRES4CoJPw_XpsLrZqPdO8)

## *Interviews, Lectures and Guided Tours*

Anjalendran, C. Lecture, 'Islamic Architecture in Sri Lanka' delivered on 09.03.2019, Colombo School of Architecture, notes by author 2019

Anjalendran, C. Notes taken by author during guided tour to Karagampitiya Sri Subodharama Raja Maha Vihara, 2018

Anjalendran, C. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

De Alwis, Malathi. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Dharmasiri, Albert. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

El Wakil, Abdel Wahed. Geoffrey Bawa Memorial Lecture 'Architecture, art and traditional civilizations' delivered on 26.07.2018, Colombo, notes by author 2018

Hussein, Assif. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Ismail, Murad. Telephone interview, 12.03.2019 notes by author 2019

Jayasooriya, Sagara. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Jayathilaka, Vajira Nalinda, Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Lakdusinghe, Sirinimal. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Wahab-Salman, Ramla. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

Weerasinghe, Jagath. Recorded interviewed by author for Shared Sanctity documentary film series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, 2019

























# Shared Sanctities

Hasini Haputhanthri

Sujeewa de Silva

Since times immemorial, people have experienced the divine spiritual through art and architecture. In *Shared Sanctities*, museologist and writer Hasini Haputhanthri explores some of the historically sacred spaces in Sri Lanka together with photographer and film maker Sujeewa de Silva, producing five visual narratives on religious confluence.

Hasini and Sujeewa situate Sri Lanka as an island of encounters, where people, ideas and traditions from all over the world arrived via sail boats and ships and then took root, adapted and grew into new forms. By exploring heritage sites of Polonnaruwa, Nalanda, Kandy, Galle and Colombo they document how temples and kovils, churches and mosques have all borrowed, shared and evolved through time, making the island, as Marco Polo says 'undoubtedly the finest island of its size in the world'.