## —Text & Pix by — Mahil Wijesinghe

ntering through a huge Ma-

kara Thorana, I make my way

through the narrow pathway

of Sri Dalada Mawatha. It is a

brisk ten-minutes walking in a rustic

setting with a breathtaking view of the

awe-inspiring mountains and glimpses of Sri Pada. The 'Sal' trees laden with

blossoms lie in the temple premises.

Heaps of fallen Sal flowers had been

freshly swept into piles, emanating a

thought that comes to your mind as

you step into less known Delgamuwa

Vihara. Dating as far back as the King-

dom of Seethawaka, Delgamuwa Viha-

Peace and tranquility is the first

glorious fragrance.

# A temple of yore

### Delgamuwa Rajamaha Viharaya



Grinding stone (Kurahangala) in which the sacred Tooth Relic was hidden during the reign of King Mayadunne in Kingdom of Seethawaka

#### ra holds a significant place in our annals. At a glance it may look like any other temple complex, but it is the role that it played providing protection to the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha for over 40 years in the (Kurahangala) grinding stone from invaders that makes it unique.

Delgamuwa Vihara is in a sleepy village of Delgamuwa in Kuruwita, Ratnapura and can be reached via the A4 (Colombo-Batticaloa) road. Located close to Kuru Ganga on a hillock with a grand vista of the countryside sprawling below at the edge of a vast stretch of paddy fields of Delgamuwa, the ancient chronicle Rajawaliya, refers to this as Labujagaama Vihara.

#### Seal of sovereignty

Ever since the 4th Century AD, when the Gautama Buddha's Tooth Relic was brought to Sri Lanka hidden in Orissan Princess Hemamala's hair, the Relic had grown in repute and veneration in Sri Lanka and throughout the Buddhist world. It became not only Sri Lanka's most prized possession, but the very seal of sovereignty. The national capital was regarded as the place where the Tooth Relic was permanently housed.

With the fall of the Anuradhapura Kingdom in the face of Chola invasions in the tenth Century AD, the Sri Lankan Kingdom was constantly on the move and the sacred Tooth Relic was also moved from Kingdom to Kingdom with all the pomp and pageantry of royal patronage and protection.

The Sacred Tooth Relic's narration with Delgamuwa Vihara is an interesting episode during the days of King Mayadunne in the Kingdom of Seethawaka. Chief Incumbent of the Vihara Ven. Mahalle Vipulatissa Thera told us the history of the Vihara.

According to chronicles, in the time of the Kotte Kingdom, Keerawelle Hiripitiya Nilame - the Diyawadana Nilame of the time to whose protection the sacred Tooth Relic had been bestowed- saw a dream where he was advised to take the sacred Tooth Relic

away from Kotte. After replacing the sacred Tooth Relic with an imitation, the Nilame fled to the Pepiliyana tem-

who gave it to Ven. Mahindalankara

ple to meet a bhikkhu for a better interpretation of his dream. There, the bhikkhu urged him to take the sacred Tooth Relic to the Central region as danger was imminent. The sacred Relic was taken to King Mayadunne of Seethawaka Kingdom,



Artefacts found in the protected room in the Vihara

Thera of the Delgamuwa Vihara. The Thera hid the sacred Tooth Relic in a (Kurahangala) grinding stone which has been kept in the Vihara for over 40 years. However, King

#### King of Seethawaka

Mayadunne was killed by his son, Prince Tikiri Kumaru who became King of Seethawaka as Rajasingha I. He wanted to pay homage to the sacred Tooth Relic and decided to hold a Perahera, which started from the Delgamuwa Vihara and proceeded to Saman Vehera in Ratnapura, (presently Maha Saman Dewalaya), joining the annual grand Esala Perahera.

The sacred Tooth Relic hidden in the grinding stone at Delgamuwa Vihara in Kuruwita, was then brought to Kandy by King Wimaladharmasuriya I. Due to the initiative of Ven. Devanagala Ratnalankara Thera of Senkadagala after a discussion with Ven. Mahindalankara Thera and Diyawadana Nilame of Keerawelle Hiripitiya, the sacred Tooth Relic was kept in a special two-storeyed temple erected close to the royal palace in Kandy.

After the sacred Tooth Relic was taken to Kandy, the Portuguese had invaded Delgamuwa Vihara, robbed everything and established a fortress in the name of Kuruwita Balakotuwa. But later the Vihara was restored in 1956, the unsheltered grinding stone where the sacred Tooth Relic was hidden for many years, was kept on a protected structure for devotees to pay homage.

An ancient stone inscription mentioning that King Rajasingha I of Seethawaka had offered several villages including Delgamuwa to the Sacred Tooth Relic, was found in the temple ground a century ago.

Thinking that these properties would have been lost to them, an ancestral village headman and a few villagers are said to have buried this inscription in the well at the temple. Ven. Vipulatissa Thera told us that he was told of this episode by a few elderly persons in the village who had seen it when they were small boys.

The temple is divided into two sections as the upper and lower terraces. While the residence of the bhikkhus (Avasa Ge) lies in the lower terrace, a path leads towards a flight of stone steps to the upper terrace of the temple. Ending my ascent, I came upon a white dagaba along with a modern image house which was rendered with colourful paintings.

#### Glimpse into the past

Today what remains of Delgamuwa Vihara gives you glimpse of a ruined foundation of a building, a few stone carved flights of steps, two ruined stone carved flower altars and most significantly a massive (Kurahangala) grinding stone which provided protection for the sacred Tooth Relic, placed in a specially built structure in the upper terrace under the shade of centuries old Bo tree with its sprawling branches spread out in all directions in the upper terrace.

As I ventured further into the Eastern side, lies another oval shape two storeyed building housing some artefacts. Ancient coins, tiles and pieces of porcelain plates which belonged to different periods of time have been excavated from the temple grounds and are now exhibited in this well protected place.

Looking at the surrounding vistas, what drew me was the profound serenity of this spiritual site. With history at the seams, the chief bhikkhu said if an extensive archaeological excavation is carried out at the site, new discoveries will be unearthed here.

We decided to leave it to archaeologists who may one day rediscover the temple's glorious past and tell the long forgotten tale of Delgamuwa Vihara.



The upper terrace of the Delgamuwa Vihara