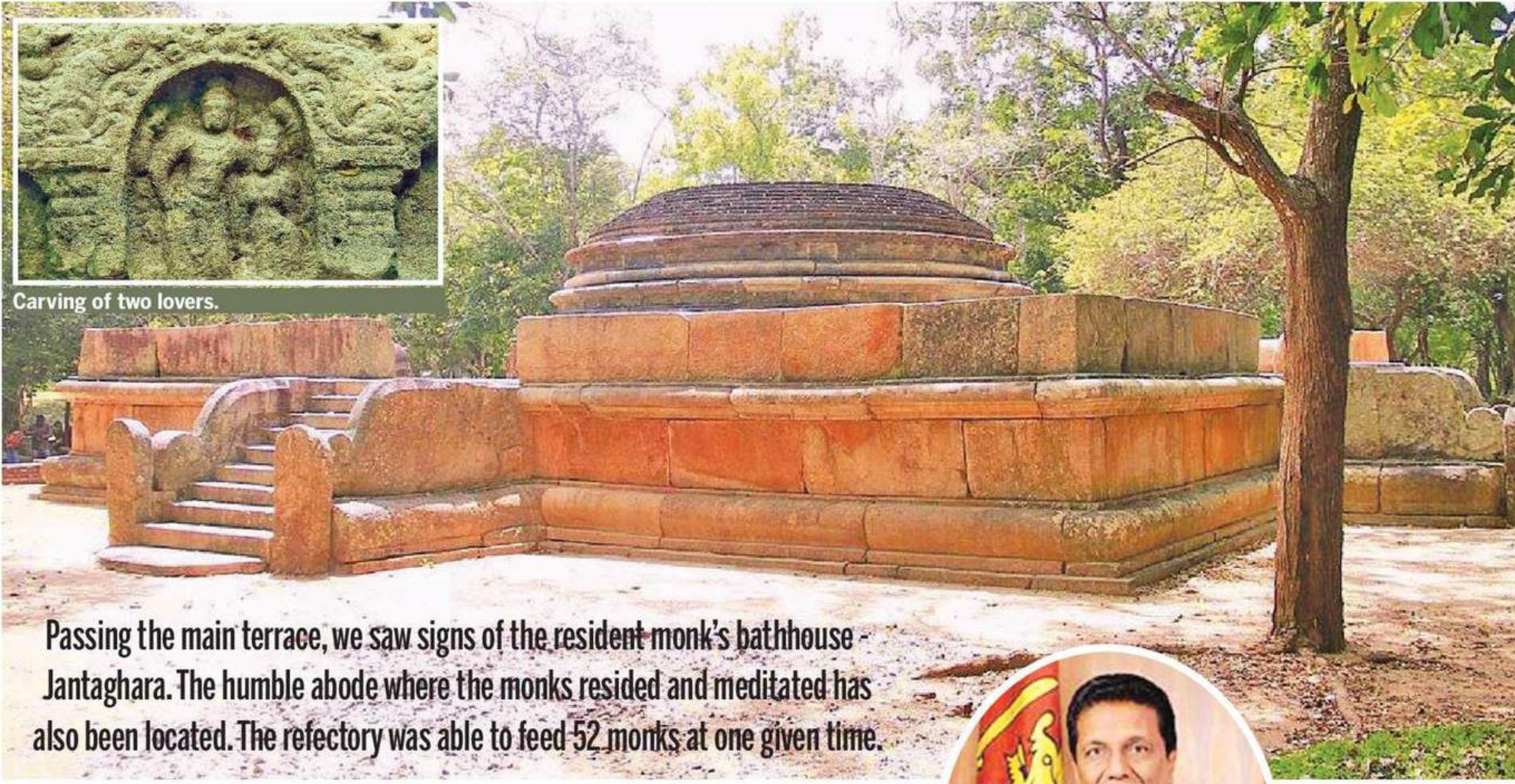




Carving of two lovers.



Passing the main terrace, we saw signs of the resident monk's bathhouse - Jantaghara. The humble abode where the monks resided and meditated has also been located. The refectory was able to feed 52 monks at one given time.

The quadrangle with four stairways.



Jagath Sumathipala
Baudhaloka Foundation Chairman

DISHAN JOSEPH

Vijayarama: THE ANCIENT MONASTERY of Anuradhapura

Ancient brickwork

Sri Lanka is embellished with beautiful Buddhist

temples. As we know Anuradhapura is synonymous with ancient places of Buddhist worship, which have also drawn thousands of tourists. Anuradhapura is the capital city of the North Central Province. Resonating with Buddhist heritage, Anuradhapura is one of the ancient capitals of Sri Lanka, famous for its well-preserved ruins of an ancient civilisation. During the late Anuradhapura period, the royal family and nobility of Sri Lanka strongly supported Buddhism. It is recorded that King Pandukabhaya (377-307 BC) is credited with building Anuradhapura into a great city. Anuradha, the grand uncle of King Pandukabhaya, is recognised as the person who established the settlement, using his name to identify the area. King Pandukabhaya created a post called Nagara-Guttika (Guardian of the City) to monitor the affairs of Anuradhapura. Spanning two millennia, these amazing monuments stand like giant sentinels of our cultural achievements.

The city is duly recognised as a World Heritage Site, nestled adjacent to the banks of the historic Malvathu River (once known as Kadambanadi). It is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Some opine that during its glorious era, this sacred city and kingdom was home to almost 8,000 Buddhist monks. This ancient kingdom flourished for about 1,300 years. The famous places of Buddhist veneration are Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, Ruwanvelisaya, Thuparamaya, Lovamahapaya, Abhayagiri Dagaba, Jethavanaramaya, Mirisaveti Stupa and Lankaramaya.

Another place famous for its carvings is Isurumuniya, with its beautiful rock carved elephant pond. One of my favourite venues in this sacred city is Rammasu Uyana, an ancient park containing the ancient Magul Uyana (Royal Gardens). It is situated close to Isurumuni Viharaya and Tissa Wewa. It sits on approximately 40 acres, and is an endorsement of Sri Lankan garden architecture.

According to an inscription found in Vessagiriya, the water to the park was supplied by Tissa Wewa and then released to paddy fields. It is believed that centuries ago Anuradhapura was a great learning hub for Buddhist monks, with scholars coming from India and China to study canonical texts. The area has magnificent Stupas. The world Dagaba is a Pali

The Vijayarama Monastery is built in the style of Pabbatha Vihara (Rock Temple). Its origin can be traced to Mahayana Buddhism

term which can be traced back to the Sanskrit root words *dhatu* (relics) and *garbha* (womb). The word Stupa is a Sanskrit term meaning heap or mound. Throughout its history, Anuradhapura had many monasteries. The Mahavamsa chronicle records that King Devanampiya Tissa built abodes for ordained Buddhist monks and these monasteries were called Issarasamanaka.

Last week, we visited a lesser-known monastery in the Anuradhapura area. The Vijayarama Monastery is built in the style of Pabbatha Vihara (rock temple). Its origin can be traced to Mahayana Buddhism. We were greeted by a representative of the Central Cultural Fund Dhammika Ratnayake. She shared her insight into this ancient monastic complex where monks meditated in the stillness of the forest in solitude. The ruins of Vijayarama were first noted by H.C.P. Bell (former Archaeology Commissioner) but no attention was given to these ruins since 1896. The complex was covered in jungle for over 100 years without much attention until 2014 when the Archaeological Department initiated a project to study and protect the ruins.

We began to walk around this ancient Buddhist compound which extends across an area of 12 acres. The monastery was built by King Sena I. The large central terrace (sacred quadrangle) features an elevated platform (281 feet x 268 feet) and has four edifices. We observed the Stupa, Bodhighara (bo-tree shrine), the Image House which is the Patimaghara and the Upasathogghara (the Chapter House). The concept of the *Pancavasa* is complete with the presence of the Sabha in what would be the centre of the ancient terrace. The solid Stupa is said to be made to resemble the Mihinthale Kantaka Chethiya.

We noticed the brick platform can be approached from four sides, which denote the four cardinal directions. We also observed the four animals associated with the approach ways - Elephant (east porch), Horse (south porch), Lion (north porch) and Bull (west porch). We also observed the muragala - ancient guard stones carved with figurines. The evolution of the muragala is closely linked to the evolution of the Sandakada Pahana (a semi-circular stone slab also known as moonstone). Charles Godakumbura, the Archaeology Commissioner in Ceylon (1956-1967) described the evolution of the Muragala from its origins as a painted wooden plank or a stone terminal slab, serving as a stop wedge at the lower end of a slanting rail or korawakgala through to its final form as a carved stone. Centuries ago there has been a moat along the border of the magnificent terrace at Vijayarama.

Passing the main terrace, we saw signs of the resident monk's bathhouse - Jantaghara. The humble abode where the monks resided and meditated has also been located. The refectory was able to feed 52 monks at one given time. We noticed the plinth had some amazing intricate stone carvings. There are men and women figures. Some opine the men figures represent Naga kings. There are dragon beasts - Makara firmly cut into the rock. I knelt to inspect these ancient designs and noticed quaint dwarf cuts into the solid rock.

There were some mysterious-looking gargoyle designs. Some of these figurines seem to be playing an instrument. The attitude of the figures especially in the double-figured patterns are interesting and reminds one of the much-discussed panel of the man and woman in a love scene at Isurumuniya. According to oral tradition at Isurumuniya, it is believed that the man and woman depicted are Saliya and Asokamala. One wonders if this same couple is replicated at Vijayarama or does it denote two other humans? In addition to this small copper plaques with epigraphs have been found at this once hidden site. The verses on these plaques are maybe ancient forms of Buddhist blessings. There is a large *pokuna*, which once collected water for the daily use of the meditating monks.

The Vijayarama Monastery caught the attention of Baudhaloka Foundation Chairman Jagath Sumathipala, who dedicatedly got involved in supporting the restoration of this important archaeological site in many ways, since 2014. In 2014, he was the President of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, and at the 93rd Annual General Meeting, a request was forwarded to them seeking assistance to restore the Vijayarama Monastery, to which he responded with great enthusiasm. In 2018, he also sponsored the publishing of a book on this archaeological site. The Baudhaloka Foundation is a vibrant movement dedicated to preserving the Buddhist heritage of Sri Lanka.

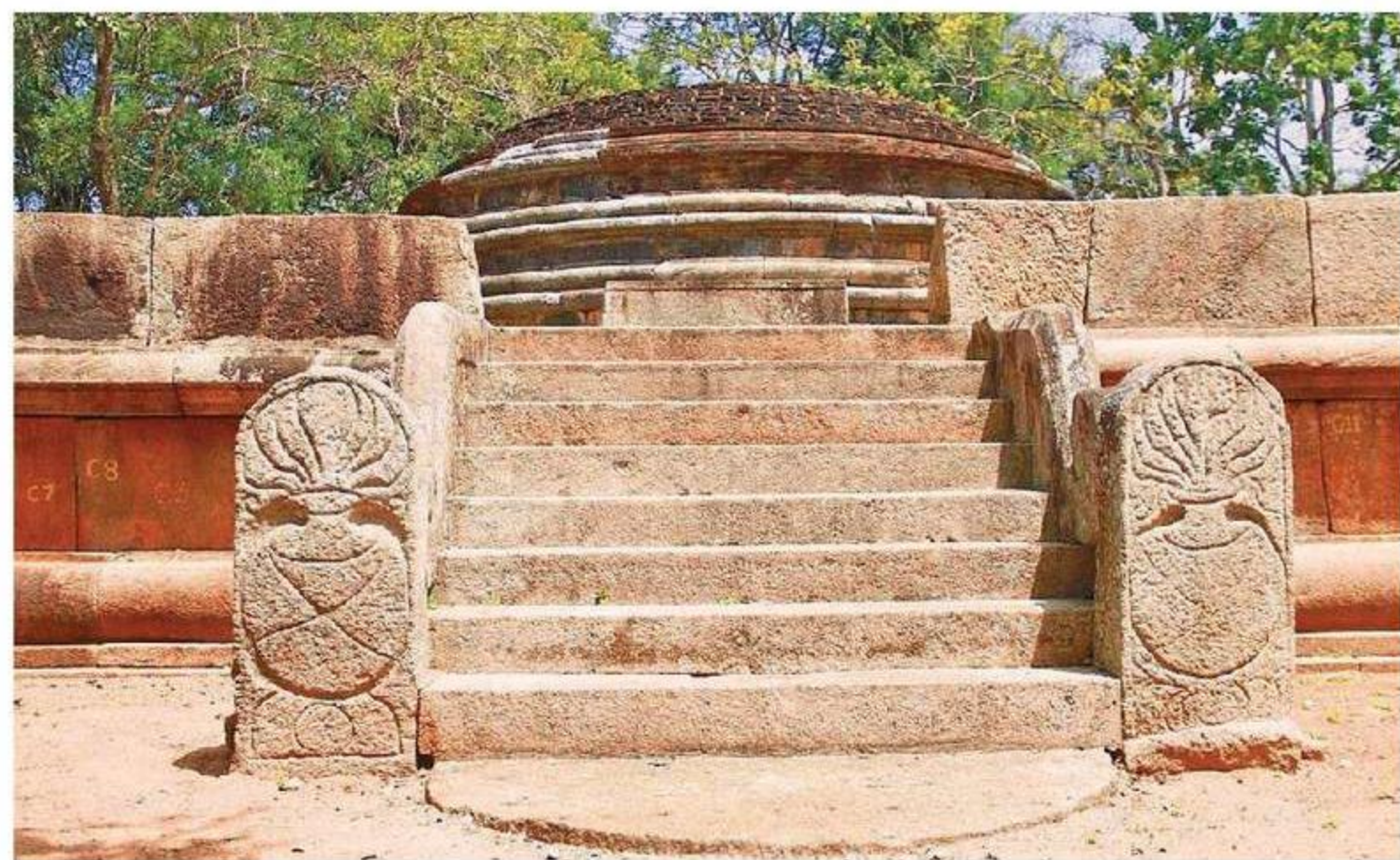
A visit to this monastery not only reveals the Buddhist history of Anuradhapura, but provokes one to think of detachment and life's values. This is a tranquil and revered venue for all those deeply interested in Sri Lankan history.



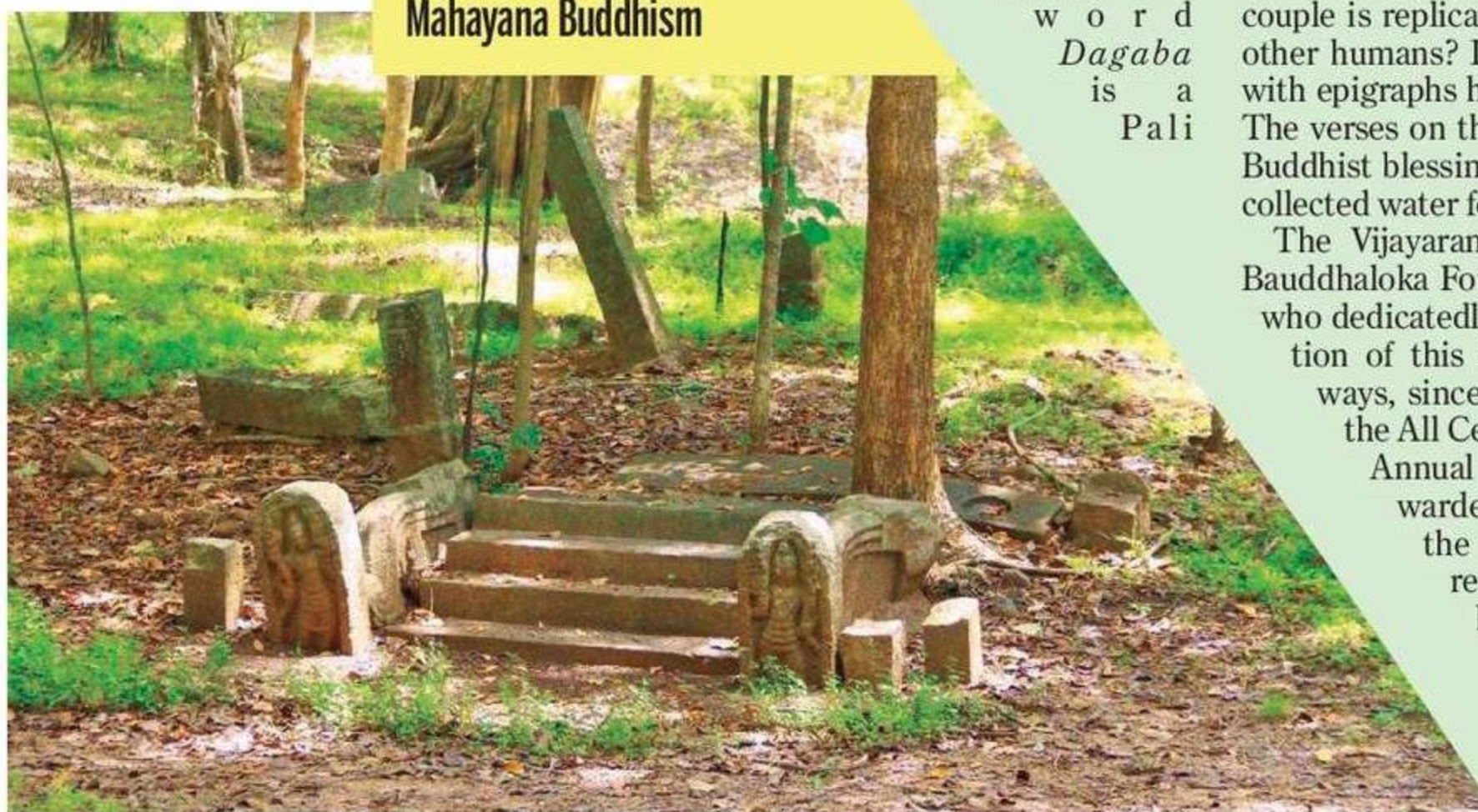
The Garbagala (stone of Inner Sanctum)



Sprouts to drain water.



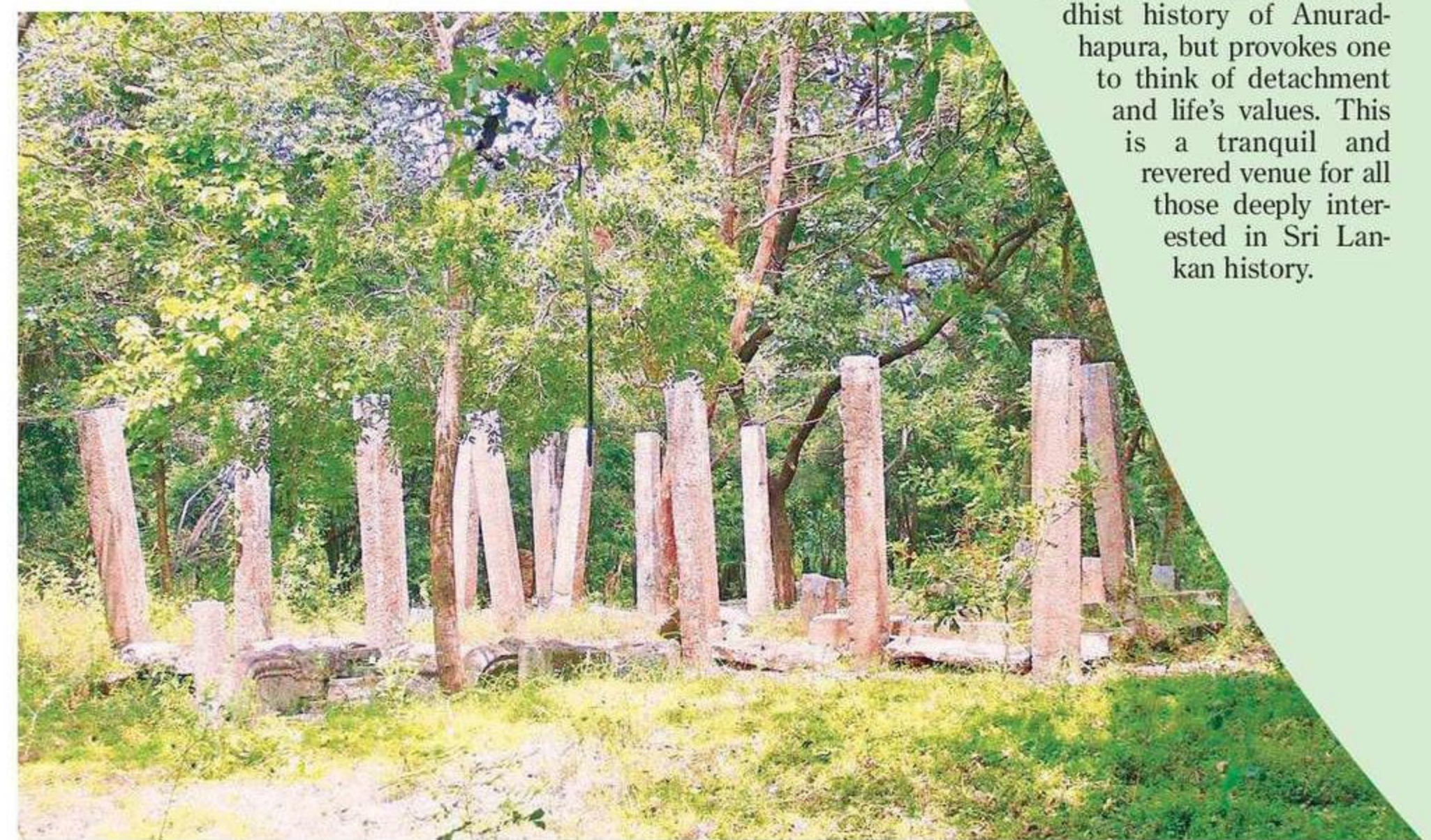
Muragal - Guardstones



Muragal on one of the four sides. (Pictures by Dushmantha Mayadunne)



The ruins that withstood time.



The ruins of a bygone era.