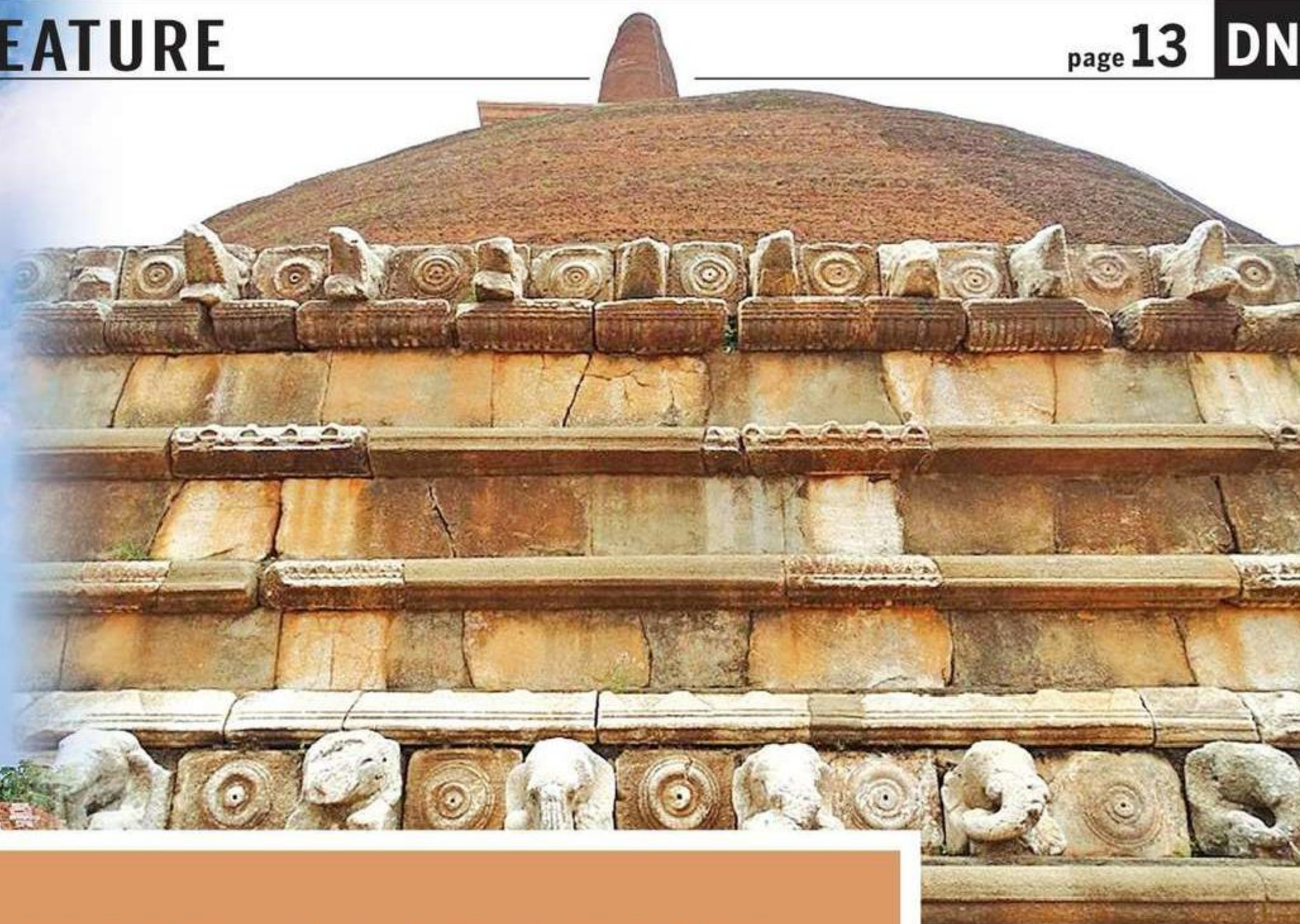


Abhayagiri Dagoba



Carvings on the ancient dagoba



Bath Oruwa

THE ANCIENT GLORY OF ABHAYAGIRI VIHARAYA

The Stupa has three basal rings. Glazed and plain tiles have also been found. Pottery has also been found here - cups and bowls. Beads have also been found during excavations. Some opine the monks used bead chains to count mantras.

DISHAN JOSEPH

The pre-colonial history of Sri Lanka has been constructed from a variety of textual sources, in particular, the *Dipavamsa*, *Mahavamsa* and *Culavamsa*. The kingdom of Anuradhapura can be called the cradle of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Once Buddhism was established, the monasteries of Anuradhapura gained international recognition and drew monks from across Asia. The splendour and religious zeal of Anuradhapura which has the *atamasthana* (eight Sacred places) cannot be compiled into this one page. Sri Lanka was once known as *dhammadipa* - the chosen land of Buddhism among Buddhist adherents.

Ancient chronicles show contact was maintained between King Devanampiyatissa's kingdom and the Mauryan Empire. After his conversion to Buddhism, it is recorded that Mauryan Emperor Asoka (272-235 BCE) sent missionaries to neighbouring states to spread the Dharma. Asoka's son Arahata Mahinda who was sent to Sri Lanka, after converting Devanampiyatissa, supported spreading Buddhism throughout this island. Subsequently, Asoka's daughter Sanghamitta brought a branch of the Sacred Bodhi tree from Bodhgaya, under which the noble Buddha gained enlightenment, to Sri Lanka. This remains a significant centerpiece that is still venerated by millions at the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura. Further, relics were brought to Sri Lanka, including the noble Buddha's alms bowl, while his collarbone was enshrined within the Thuparamaya in Anuradhapura.

Our ancient kings were magnificent patrons and promoters of Buddhism. During their reign, they enhanced the Sangha, which transformed ancient Sri Lanka into a serene heaven for monks from beyond our shores. With regard to Sri Lanka, a number of deities such as Ganesh, Vishnu and Kubera continued to be venerated after the advent of Buddhism but their positions were reconstituted within a cosmography that placed the Buddha centrally.

When I first saw Abhayagiri Viharaya two decades ago, it did not resonate with the superlative beauty, which usually adorns an ancient Viharaya. This is because of its brown outer surface, which resonates with a 'different' kind of beauty. The colossal Abhayagiri Viharaya was built by King Vattagamini Abhaya (known as Valagamba). It is the second-largest brick-built monument in the world. Prior to this, there had been a small Jain monastery on this site. King Vattagamini Abhaya had to be in exile for 14 years due to an invasion. However, he collected his troops and gallantly drove out the invader. The triumphant king decided to build the Viharaya on this site. Ven. Mahatissa Thera of Kuppikala was appointed the Chief Monk by the king, as he had been faithful to the king. This Viharaya duly blossomed into a major hub of international learning consisting of four faculties - *Uttara Mula*, *Vahadu Mulla*, *Kapara Mula* and *Mahanetpa Mula* covering the whole



Moonstone

Buddhist philosophy. It was on par with the Buddhist universities of Nalanda, Jagaddala and Vikramashila in India. Different Sects have been found in Anuradhapura. The first was the centric monastery, dating from the first century CE. They are designated as centric due to a layout focused around a massive and imposing Stupa. The Mahaviharaya, Jetavana, Abhayagiri, and Vessagiriya in Anuradhapura fall into this building style. The travelling Chinese monk Fa Hsien reported that more than 10,000 monks and nuns resided in the Anuradhapura area. The Abhayagiri Viharaya once accommodated 5,000 resident scholar monks. Abhayagiriya embraced Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. Abhayagiri Dagoba was the original custodian of the Sacred Tooth Relic.

The figure of 5,000 monks indicates how strong Buddhism was in this era and the abundance of provisions to sustain such a large religious community. When I walked around its vast precincts, I could imagine how these monks had lived, accumulated knowledge and worshipped as a united and faithful fraternity. The area has many interesting remains of a vibrant religious order. For instance the *Bath Oruwa* - carved out of solid granite stone is a

reminder of the community meal time. We can now assume that cooked rice was kept in this long rectangular stone, from which the monks served their meals. The grand complex has twin pools called the Kuttam Pokuna, although they are not identical in size. The prudent planners had built 30 bodies of water, of which the largest is the Eth Pokuna (Elephant Pond).

The area has remains of a building with guard stones (*muragal*). There are moonstones with intricate designs. Among the designs are swans, symbols of wisdom and purity. The treasury of Abhayagiri Viharaya was said to contain jewels and gems of much value, garnered from patronage. King Gajabahu I had also supported the growth of the Vihara complex. During the reign of King Parakramabahu, he supported the Mahaviharaya, and soon Abhayagiri Viharaya began to lose its glory.

For 800 years, this great Buddhist University and Stupa complex was shrouded in obscurity. It was literally covered by trees. In the 1880s, it was discovered and its value realised. The excavations at Abhayagiriya in Anuradhapura in the 1980s unearthed Buddha statues lying flat with their heads removed and this was cited as evidence of



Ancient ruins

destruction as narrated in the *Culavamsa* (reference: *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*). Archaeological interest in this area is found in the pioneering work of S.B. Burrows whose findings were duly published in 1886. Subsequently, H.C.P. Bell, S. Paranavitana and G.E. Godakumbura engaged in research at this historic site.

There was a period in history when this amazing Stupa was covered with trees and creepers due to neglect. A massive restoration project was set in motion under the guidance of Professor T.G. Kulatunga and the Central Cultural Fund. This project lasted many years. There was so much cleaning to do followed by accurate recreation of some areas. Brick by brick the restoration maintained progress. During October and November, there was intense rain, but these men and women remained committed. In the final weeks of this project, hundreds of volunteers came from adjacent villages to complete this long and difficult task. This nation owes its deep gratitude to all these people who invested so much time to bring back this magnificent Buddhist Stupa to its former glory.

Abhayagiri Viharaya displays plain bricks and ornamental bricks. The Stupa has three basal rings. Glazed and plain tiles have also been found. Pottery has also been found here - cups and bowls. Beads have also been found during excavations. Some opine that the monks used bead chains to count *mantras*. Numismatic evidence is proven from coins - copper, silver and even gold. It is interesting to note that brass ornaments were also found at this archaeological site. The area has also revealed fragments of coral, which would have been used in plastering work. Abhayagiriya stands as a historic and religious symbol. You must take at least two hours to walk around this vast complex. I conclude with this saying "Let the discerning man guard the mind, so difficult to detect and extremely subtle, seizing whatever it desires. A guarded mind brings happiness" - *The Dhammapada*. Centuries ago the monks of Abhayagiri Viharaya learnt about life and its values. May we follow their example and build a righteous nation.



Eth pokuna



Ancient filter system



Guard stones - Muragal



Kuttam Pokuna