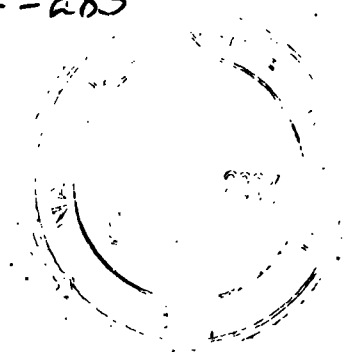


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NA-283



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ARCHAEOLOGY IN SRI LANKA - THE PRESENT

by

Roland Silva

Paper presented at a Seminar held on
85-04-08 at NAROSA.

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ARCHAEOLOGY IN SRI LANKA - THE PRESENT

by

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Mr. Chairman, Distinguished
Participants, Ladies & Gentlemen.

I am highly honoured to be able to address you on the subject of archaeology in Sri Lanka as it exists today. My colleague Dr. Raja de Silva, former Commissioner of Archaeology has already spoken to you about the past and Prof. P.L. Prematilleke, Professor of Archaeology, University of Peradeniya will, indeed, speak to you about the future. Although the title refers to archaeology specific to Sri Lanka, I feel it is prudent to place this audience in the right perspective in relation to the international scene as the scope of archaeology has changed much between the past and the present and, no doubt, in the future for the science of archaeology is as international as any other profession.

Scope of Archaeology - International Scene

Archaeology like all other sciences and professions have various levels of interaction and practice. At the two ends of this spectrum lay the private investigator and at the other end rather the international Charters covering these disciplines. Between these two extremes lay the whole host of disciplines, conventions, legislation and internationally accepted Charters which are on the one hand adhered to and on the other carefully disregarded. We as professionals accept the fact that all aspects of a profession cannot be written into codes of conduct to every stage of professional action nor would it be accepted that the scope of an archaeologist can be bound together as a fixed package of subjects beyond which one remains silent without comment. Archaeology as medicine extends from a toothache to the intricacies of moral in tampering with future progeny or as engineering from tightening a bolt to getting a man on the moon. In this regard the trend of archaeology also extends from the simple guidance of a school party to an archaeological museum to identifying a particle of ash or bone which might belong to a royal personage or an important religious leader. In a material sense, the

subjects of archaeology cover broadly the following:-

- (a) The documentation of movable and immovable cultural property.
- (b) The excavation and the systematic investigation of buried remains.
- (c) The cleaning and conservation of both movable and immovable cultural property.
- (d) The scientific recording and the publication of research covering cultural property.
- (e) The display of movable and immovable cultural property.
- (f) Legislation, para-legislation and rules of conduct formulated for the security, preservation and maintenance of movable and immovable cultural property which include the administrative and financial cover to implement such legislation and accepted conventions.

These broad headings, to our minds, cover all aspects of archaeology throughout the world whether they belong to a period of pre-history, proto-history and the different phases of history be it the ancient medieval or the recent past. In this regard, one is not surprised that there are still many countries in the world that do not have adequate provisions either in the form of enacted laws, administrative provisions or financial allocations to cover the science of archaeology. On the other hand the sophistications of such provisions crowd the legal administrative and financial divisions of some, specially those where the economy of that State relies largely on the cultural property for their budgetary balancing. Such countries are not necessarily all in Europe. Thailand in 1975 relied up to 50% of its income on tourism much of which was from such cultural property. All action towards archaeological practice is summed up in local conventions, national legislation and international statutes. These efforts can be summarised at the highest level by introducing the audience to the International Charters covering such preservation:

- (a) Recommendation on international principles applicable to archaeological excavations, adopted by the General

Conference at its 9th session, New Delhi, 5th December 1956. These recommendations were further studied in a special conference held in Cyprus which has helped to upgrade the nature of archaeological research and where conservation also acquired a better defined identity both at a level of theory and practice (1).

- (b) The UNESCO recommendation concerning the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites at the Second International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments which records the decisions and the resolutions of a meeting held in Venice in 1964. These proposals were reviewed at the First International Congress on Architectural Conservation, University of Basle, Switzerland, March 1983 where recommendations were offered to review and where necessary recast the Venic Charter of 1964.(2).
- (c) UNESCO inter-governmental conference of Ministers of Culture of Asia, Jogjakarta, 1973. The resolution provided that UNESCO takes the initiative to get the town planners of Asia together to work out a code of cultural ethics to preserve in a significant manner the ancient city centres of this region. This resolution was only marginally provided for in a conference got together by UNESCO to study the ancient city centres of Asia during 1979 (3).
- (d) The 19th General Assembly Session of UNESCO held in Nairobi in 1976 recommended the safeguarding of historic areas of cities and the formulation of rules covering the contemporary role. But this resolution has had no direct response nor follow-up.
- (e) The regional trend towards formulating rules covering the protection of Archaeology and Fine Arts was evolved as a consequence to the meeting of Ministers of Education of ASEAN countries in their deliberations of 1974

which resulted in a sub-group called ARCAFA (Applied Research Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts) being formed constituting these countries. This group met in common session in 1980 to review and to revise where necessary the legislation and para-legislation concerning the excavation and conservation of monuments and sites as a Regional Charter covering ASEAN countries(4).

- (f) The Asian Regional Conference of the Commonwealth Association of Architects met in Colombo in 1975 on the Theme of the Conservation of Historic and Ancient Buildings. Important and pious resolutions covering the preservation of ancient buildings and specially modern constructions of the recent past were looked into in depth at this conference, but these resolutions have not, unfortunately, had the impact and influence necessary, either, in Sri Lanka or in the region.
- (g) The First Asian Regional Conference on Historic Places was held in Sydney in 1983 and the outcome of these resolutions covered a vast range of proposals including movable and immovable property of yester-year such as machinery, locomotives etc. These trends of thought and proposals have yet to be digested and ruled upon.
- (h) The International Committee of Monuments and Sites held its 7th General Assembly in 1984 in Rostock and Dresden which had a series of resolutions which suggested not only the preservation of town centres, but also simple village centres specially of South and South-East Asia. It also looked seriously at the concepts of cultural tourism. The Rostock/Dresden declaration at the 8th General Assembly of ICOMOS in May 1984 is of special significance and covers the unanimous view of this assembly on the trends of preservation covering (a) cultural heritage and

and modern life, and (c) enhancement of monuments and sites.

- (1) The Second Asian Regional Conference on Historic Places held in Colombo in March 1985 cover conservation aspects ranging from town and village environments to gardens, monuments and the interiors of edifices. It also projected the future concepts of conservation including trends towards legislation, finance, administration, training and technological research.

This continuing growth and development of ideas will, no doubt, ensure; at an international level, the correct perspective towards the growth of archaeological interest covering both movable and immovable property.

Trends in Archaeology in Sri Lanka today

Sri Lanka is proud to record that it houses the largest cultural heritage project ever handled by UNESCO so far. Here we refer to the work of the Cultural Triangle which operates at an initial cost estimate of around U.S. \$50,000 or Rs.1,119 million. We will be utilizing the work of the Cultural Triangle as an example of ^{the} trend of archaeology in Sri Lanka today in most of the case studies discussed in this paper. This does not imply that there is no work outside the work of the Cultural Triangle, but for convenience we will be concentrating on the Cultural Triangle which indicates the line of thinking meant for the Cultural Triangle and the archaeological work in all other Departments where such research is being conducted presently. The scope of the work of the Cultural Triangle covers excavation, conservation and the layout of ancient monuments and the display of the movable cultural property discovered at the various sites. It has considered and implemented the basic requirements provided by the International Charters. For example, sufficient area of every site has been reserved for future investigations. The conservation conventions follow closely the Venice Charter. The objects discovered at the sites will not be sent out of the site, but housed in museums with the proper security and scientific protection. The

documentation of excavated objects are being regularly published at six months intervals and the research covering these finds are exposed to the entire academic community of the world interested in South Asian material. The provisions of modern usage at a religious, scientific and cultural level is being provided to maximum advantage. To view this at a more digested level, the following points are recorded:-

(a) Excavation

- (i) Documentation of the site prior to excavations is being done in terms of contour surveys, tree surveys and building surveys whether they are modern or ancient.
- (ii) Aerial photography at the lowest flight levels of 3,000 to 5,000 feet above ground level is being carried out.
- (iii) Resistivity surveys covering selected areas of the site is being carried out.
- (iv) Excavation grids of 30 metres covers the whole area of the site with datum levels established on the grid inter-section points. These 30 metre grids are further sub-divided into 81 squares and the excavation work identified according to these pits.
- (v) The excavation work is under the supervision of a Graduate Excavator who is trained by the Archaeological Directors. A maximum of 10 pits are supervised by a Graduate who keeps the scientific recordings in the relevant books provided for this purpose. These standard books are subsequently duplicated and stored as archival material after each six-monthly excavation report is published.
- (vi) Photographic and drawing records are kept by the photographers and the draughtsmen set apart for this project. The photographers have also kept three dimensional photogrammetry records so that these sites can be re-plotted.

These negatives are carefully stored so that the layers ~~have been~~ that have been destroyed through excavations can be reviewed even in a 100 years if the negatives are properly stored. The quadropod design for this purpose and the system evolved for such recording is a patent of the Cultural Triangle. The processing of archaeological material discovered and they being recorded in the six monthly report is only the first part of the publication where the discovered objects are recorded without bias in their proper stratified levels.

(vii) The dating material for Carbon 14 or Thermoluminescence or any other method is carefully stores and researched upon.

(viii) The documentation of excavated material is covered in three index cards apart from the excavation record books. These include (a) special finds card (b) pottery card and (c) the stratification card. The data recorded in those cards are so provided that the information could be fed into a computer and retrieved in time of writing the report. These data cards are standardised so that the computer could retrieve and compare material from other sites as well.

(b) Conservation

The conservation work is covered under 5 sections - stone work, brick work, timber work, interiors, and movable cultural property.

(i) Stone work

Work covering the conservation of stone work includes both the rough hewn stones as well as the delicately carved units. The conservation of the former is on the basis of dismantling and re-assembling according to the original plans and details of the old edifice. However, the composition of mortar and any packing, uses modern materials. The delicately carved stone work will, however, be suitably cleaned of its organic accretions and refixed at the original sites with the necessary protection against speedy deterioration

of the stone object. Where delicate objects are found which cannot stand up to the out-door life this would be moved into the site museums.

(ii) Brick work

Every effort will be made to retain the undisturbed brickwork intact specially if they are decorated or moulded or has plaster upon it. Slightly distorted wall remains will not be tampered with as they lend to the character of antiquity and therefore enhances the display. Brickwork where portions have disappeared due to weathering or collapse are replaced with new bricks of exactly the original dimensions, but ensuring that all bricks are stamped with the year of conservation. The mortars for such brickwork should be very firm so as to stimulate as close as is possible to the adhesives used in ancient times. This is vital in order to maintain the homogeneity of the old and the new fabric and to prevent any deterioration of the old in preference to the stronger modern additions.

(iii) Timber work

The replacement of timber work is most demanding specially those beams and other such units that carry a structural load. Every effort is being made to retain the old timbers specially if they are carved or occasionally even painted. If replacement of timber is necessary, the year of conservation is marked on the new pieces. However, every detail of the old timber carved into the new work including the joinery techniques. Tiles resting on such roofs are also carefully studied and the new tiles made to such specifications.

(iv) Conservation of interiors

The conservation of interiors include the repair of broken sculpture and wall paintings including fixed furniture. Some sculpture is of stone while the bulk of such objects consist

of stucco where the interior is varied. Some of the interiors may be of brick and mortar while others are of timber. However, the exteriors which are areas subject to much of the decay have a clay interior and lime plaster exterior with pigments covering the surface. Repairs to such sculpture depends on the state of each item. If the statues have not been plastered at all, the inner core is conserved as a mass of bricks forming a general shape indicative of the original sculpture. If the sculpture has substantial plaster then the balance portions are repaired so that the new and the old can easily be distinguished. But the new plaster would have a similar consistency to the old where the plaster is painted. Every effort would be made to provide a pigment in the added area in a manner that would show the specialists the new portion straightaway. Where such patches of repair are necessary and are viewed, no re-painting is done at all except to provide a neutral but distinct colour difference identifying the old from the new. Paintings are generally covered with much dust and soot and these have often to be cleaned. At the same time preventive measures have also to be adopted wherein the devotees have to be requested to avoid the lighting of lamps within the dark interiors of painted caves.

(v) Conservation of movable objects

Conservation of movable objects is a vital pre-requisite in any excavation programme. Some of these objects require urgent handling as their exposure to the atmosphere after excavation produce fast deterioration due to oxidation and drying. Therefore, the conservation programme is not only to provide the chemical cleaning, but suitable environmental conditions to the objects to retain a suitable degree of chemical balance where deterioration is reduced to a minimum. In order to cater for this need, the Cultural Triangle has provided a mini laboratory in each of the projects and a

major laboratory central to all six projects. The staff has been suitably trained both in Sri Lanka and abroad and the equipment funded by International and other agencies. The items of special treatment include rather corroded finds and the wet ivories and thin glass which are the most delicate objects discovered in recent times.

(e) Display

The display covers two aspects (i) immovable monuments and (ii) movable cultural property.

(i) Immovable monuments

The concept of display of immovable monuments covers two important facets (a) as most of the monuments are of a religious nature, they have to be suitably arranged to meet the requirements of the religious public (b) these objects are also visited by numerous visitors both local and foreign and as such the security, the presentation and the historical data covering such edifices should be properly outlined. Considering all these, it has been found useful to treat most of the sites covered by the Cultural Triangle as pedestrian areas with a security fence protecting the reserve. The point of entry and exit has been suitably arranged so that both pilgrims and visitors enter the site adjacent to the modern monastery or the visitor centre where provision has been made for parking and other facilities. The religious public would by custom pay their courtesies to the religious personnel and then enter the sites, while the visitors will be provided with a suitable description of the monuments using a scale model and a loudspeaker system. The ground will be adequately landscaped and resting places provided. Garden lights and subdued floods will illuminate the monuments so that the pilgrims and visitors could enjoy the monuments in the coolness of the evening. Lighted-sign boards and guiding arrows will assist the

visitors. Guide books and other publications will be available at the visitor centre. The religious aspiration of the sites have to be revitalised with suitable modern monastic units for the religious and all religious functions of annual processions and other daily functions need to be promoted.

(ii) Display of movable cultural property

The question of the repatriation of the cultural property has been raised rather firmly in recent years. This was with regard to the return of such cultural objects that were taken away to the colonial metropolis in that era. Considering this same philosophy in a national sense, the people of any city is likely to object to the transfer of their cultural property to its own metropolis. Recognising this potential trend, the Cultural Triangle has provided a museum at each site of excavation to house the cultural property proposed to be unearthed at each site. Suitable security and chemical preservation has to be provided so that the objects so discovered and properly displayed will not suffer as a consequence to this decision. International conferences have underlined this trend of philosophy and it is our duty to take cognisance of such guidance.

Educational and professional status

The educational aspects of archaeology have developed substantially in the recent past. The Universities of Peradeniya and Kelaniya had provided archaeological course for their students originally at a Post-graduate level, but now it has been geared to cover under-graduate studies as well. At the same time Jayewardenepura University has revived its course for under-graduates studying archaeology and Jaffna University and Ruhuna University are preparing to revitalise their studies in archaeology. A healthy climax to these trends of University effort have been for the Ministry of Higher Education to invite dons and the professionals engaged in archaeological work to pool their resources to a central organisation that will cater to the practical professional needs of this

discipline. Legislation approved in the last two months has sanctioned the establishment of a centre for Post-graduate Archaeological Studies which will confer its own qualification independent of other institutions of higher learning. Initially, this centre will assist the near 200 archaeological graduates in the field, working with the Cultural Triangle, to upgrade their knowledge in this discipline. These scholars will prepare themselves for a post-graduate M.Sc degree which we hope will be the stepping stone to a flush of doctoral degrees to come. The Architectural scholars engaged in the conservation of monuments have also evolved a course of training at the University of Moratuwa leading up to a M.Sc course in the conservation of monuments. This course which covers a curriculum closely linked with the Rome Centre has a practical bias in that those engaged in applied work are encouraged to follow this extended weekend course leading up to the M.Sc. Apart from those students stepping on to further research, this course is in its 3rd year now has opened its doors to the international community providing three places for students from the South Asian region. We are proud to note that this is the only conservation of monuments course presently carried out in Asia, the other nearest being Sydney and Rome. The archaeologists covering the two disciplines of excavation and conservation have considered even the next step towards professionalism in these two areas. Already an adhoc committee of archaeologists has been established with the Professor of Archaeology, Peradeniya University as its Chairman. The first effort of this committee is to have the organisation incorporated to form a professional body of archaeologists so that it becomes a fullfledged professional institute. The architectural conservators have at the same time linked itself with the international body of ICOMOS and has formed a national body associated to the mother institution. It has functioned for three years now and it has a representation in the executive committee in Paris. This body was recently

responsible for hosting jointly with other organisations the Second Asian Regional Conference on Historic Places. With this trend the status of archaeologists of Sri Lanka has certainly kept well abreast of international development and has most definitely taken a lead role in Asia.

Research and Practice

The archaeological research and practice in the conservation of monuments has taken many leaps in the recent past. The basic research of any archaeologist covers the dating of artefacts and this area has been best harnessed by the fresh dating techniques that have been evolved in establishing the periods for the sites under the purview of the Cultural Triangle. The pottery sequences and other datable materials like coins, beads and foreign objects located at these sites have given distinct dates for the strata of these major excavations. Positive efforts have also been made not only to date objects in foreign laboratories but also to establish our own places of experiment. We have in this regard established recently the dating of bricks, tiles, pottery and even plaster using Thermoluminescence. The carbon dating of our artefacts will be a reality in the not too distant future. Pollen studies are being pursued. The research in archaeological studies which was confined to the Archaeological Department has now been expanded in a major way to all the teaching institutions of the country and they have taken the spearhead of attack in leading the work of the Cultural Triangle. The conservation of monuments and its practice so far under the sole purview of the Archaeological Department has been opened up to private professional architectural organisations. These specialists have on their own acquired the new specialities of conservation and have accepted their responsibilities with courage and foresight. They have broken new ground in opening up conservation practice to staff and labour outside the government institutions. Contractual clauses, guidelines and specifications have been studied, formulated and incorporated into documents of international acceptance. The conservation results now being achieved is indeed the test of such pioneering efforts. The research of archaeologists and architectural conservators are flowing out of the regular press to reach the research centres of other countries and international bodies. The excavation reports for each project are published every six months and the conservation

reports every year.

Public interest and economic benefits

The public interest and economic benefits in developing archaeology has been focussing attention in the recent past and both financiers and the political authorities genuinely convinced of this resource. We have been able to convince the Government that archaeology can be a money spinner for that aspect of tourism called cultural tourism. We have shown that if these suggestions are implemented the results are inevitable. It is no mystery that two-third of Italy to the south of Florence lives entirely on tourism. So is Spain and in Asia, Thailand is an outstanding example. These hard facts of political thought were accepted in 1978 where the Cabinet Paper proposing the work of the Cultural Triangle recorded an input of 29.4% visitors to the historic cities. We have since imposed an enormous charge as entry fees to visitors for this area and despite an apparent disincentive the practical outcome at the end of 1984 was a 61% visitor census. As it exists at present the trend of visitors to the historic cities is not only the foreign component, but also the domestic tourists which has multiplied many times over and thereby, carries a didactic tag against their own upgrading of knowledge concerning their culture and heritage. The secret and the proof of this exercise is in results and practice rather than theory. The actual grant of the Government to this enormous ~~campaign~~ international campaign is only 10% while the balance 90% comes out ^{of} the ingenuity and enterprise of the institution set up to implement this, which is the Central Cultural Fund. The begging bowl of this organisation has been able to harness 90% of the entire expenditure from local and foreign sources. As such, the economic benefit and the public interest is a package that has proved its worth and certainly an eye opener for the future. The work that the Cultural Triangle is handling is perhaps less than a 10th of the resources available in this country.