

A Little bit of our Heritage

DIVĀGUHĀVA

by

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Another hallowed site for Buddhists, the fifth among the 16 places of worship (*Solosmasthanā*), is *Divāguhāva* situated in the District of Ratnapura in the Sabaragamuwa Province. It is about 8 km away from the turn-off to Eratna on the Kuruwita-Deraniyagala Road. It borders the Sri Pada peak wilderness sanctuary and is located within the lush evergreen forests.

It is recorded in the *Mahāvamsa* that the Buddha on his third visit to Sri Lanka placed the impression of his left foot at the top of *Sumana Kūṭa* (Sri Pāda). ‘And after he had spent the day as it pleased him at the foot of this mountain, with the brotherhood, he set forth to *Dighavāpi* (Ch.1, v.78). The place the Buddha rested with the 500 Arahants is referred to as *Divāguhāva*, a translation of which is ‘Cave where (the Buddha) rested’. Controversy and serious debate existed regarding the exact location of this cave (*guhāva*, *lena*) for decades until the erudite monk Venerable





Ananda Maitreya Thero confirmed and established, as recently as 1995, that the cave known as *Baṭatota lena* was the cave used by the Buddha to rest during his visit to Sri Pada.

According to local lore, in 1905, the erudite scholar monk Venerable Waskaduwe Sri Subhuti Maha Thera had climbed Sri Pada taking the Kuruwita route. The path had been taken over by jungle and he had to clear the densely overgrown undergrowth in order to proceed. Whilst clearing the jungle, he had come upon quite a large cave. Upon examining it, he was surprised to find that it was an ancient temple now in a dilapidated

condition. He had the temple refurbished and had a *devālaya* built for the guardian deities. Unfortunately, after his death, the cave had again fallen into neglect.

The latest finding and confirmation of the *Divāguhāva* is an interesting story. For generations no one could map out the exact location of *Divāguhāva*. According to the ancient texts the Sri Pada mountain peak was visible to the cave. Further it was said to be a large cave, full of light and able to house several hundred Arahants.

Since various sites were being suggested as the likely site in several parts of the island, the world-renowned Buddhist scholar monk, Venerable Ananda Maitreya Thero took the initiative to find this sacred site lost to pilgrims and explorers alike for centuries. Many caves including the *Bhagavā lena* situated just about 150 meters below the summit of the Sri Pada peak was thought to be *Divāguhāva* for a long time. However, many remained unconvinced. As the debate regarding the exact location of the cave raged, Ananda Maithreya Thero having studied the texts that mentioned this sacred place, folk lore and legends popular among the local villagers, set forth to find the cave which was likely to be *Divāguhāva*. It should be large enough to accommodate the Buddha's entourage of five hundred disciples and also, should be in direct line of sight with the peak of Sri Pada Mountain as stated in the ancient texts.

In the Eratna-Kuruvita area, he was able to find the very same cave found by Venerable Subuthi Thero, but in a very dilapidated state having been looted and heavily damaged by treasure hunters. After inspecting the premises, the ancient frescoes, the several damaged Buddha statues and other artifacts, and taking into consideration the enormous size of the cave and its location, viz., the entrance to the cave being 18 meters in height and the summit of Sri Pada being clearly visible, the Thero concluded that it was the long lost sacred and hallowed site where the Buddha

had rested after leaving his left foot imprint at *Sumana Kūṭa* or Sri Pada.

The entrance to the cave in height measured approximately 15 meters. It is flooded with sunlight throughout the day from dawn to dusk. On a clear day, it gives an unhindered, magnificent view of the summit of Sri Pada. The cave, itself, is approximately 18 meters in width and between 25 to 50 meters in length and has three main components.

The main Image House is the central attraction housing a massive ten-meter-long reclining Buddha statue. The entrance to the Image House is decorated with a heavily embellished *Makara Torana* (Dragon Arch) replete with mythical creatures and guardian figures. Although the façade may have been built during the Polonnaruwa period, the embellishments suggest that it had undergone substantial repairs during the later Kandyan period. Painted on the stone walls behind the Buddha statue are ancient frescoes depicting several figures of monks (interpreted to be Arahants) holding bunches of Sal flowers in their hands, and figures of several deities and persons. There are also several other beautifully sculptured Buddha statues in standing, sitting and reclining postures.

According to historical chronicles, the cave was discovered during the royal pilgrimage made to Sri Pada by King Nissanka Malla (1187-1196 CE) of Polonnaruwa, who then commissioned the shrines, the *makara torana* façade and the murals to be done on the rock face. These paintings and sculptures may have been repaired and restored several times. Present-day scholars are of the view that these artefacts belong to the Kandyan period. There is a small stupa built inside the cave which is painted white. It also houses a sculpture of a deity painted in blue believed to be that of the guardian deity Upulvan, generally believed to be God Vishnu. Another interesting feature of the cave is the *Manduka Vila* (මණ්ඩුක විල), a small pond which collects clean water perennially dripping from the roof of the cave.

The declaration by the Venerable Thero regarding the discovery of the sacred site helped in re-building the temple with the aid of the Department of Archaeology, providing funds and state protection. With the establishment of the sacred site as the long-lost *Divāguhāva*, it became a major sacred site reflecting a truly spiritual ambiance - drawing pilgrims from all parts of the island. Several small shops, a car park and other amenities have been established to serve the pilgrims. A flight of steps has been built to ease the long and arduous climb to the cave.

The surrounding area has much evidence of ancient human habitations. Many caves in which stone and bone tools, ornaments made of shells and bones belonging to prehistoric man have been found, along with fossilized remains of animal and plant remains which formed part of their diet. The most important of them, the famous *Baṭadomba lena* is located about 4 km from Kuruwita. The skeletal remains of the modern human, *Homo Sapien Balangodensis* or the “Balangoda Man”, carbon dated to be 38,000 years old, was excavated by the foremost Paleontologist, Dr. P.E.P Deraniyagala and his team at *Baṭadomba lena*. This is one of the oldest skeletal remains of the modern human found in South Asia.

Another interesting cave complex located close to the *Divāguhāva* is the Sthṛīpura cave site. According to local lore, it is believed to have been the cave used by the Queens of King Valagamba (1 BCE) during the time he was organizing his army whilst in hiding at the *Baṭatota lena* nearby.

