

A Little bit of our Heritage

The ancient Stupa of *Dīghavāpi*

by

Preeni S. Witharanage,

MBA (USJ) MA(Kel) PGDipACOMAS (Mor) Attorney-at-Law



The literal translation of the Pali word *Dīghavāpi* is a long reservoir. Situated in the ancient rice bowl of *Dīghamandala* (Pali) or *Digāmadulla*, (Sinhala) in the Eastern Province lying less than 10 km inland as the crow flies from the seacoast.

From 1961, *Digāmadulla* is known as Ampara and is part of the administrative district of Ampara although the name *Digāmadulla* is also simultaneously used when referring to this area. The ancient stupa of *Dīghavāpi* is one of the revered Buddhist sites and is one among the *Solosmasthanā*.

According to the ancient chronicles, the Buddha on his third and last visit to Lanka, after having rested at *Divāguhāva* in the foothills of the *Sri Padasthānaya* has visited the *Dīghavāpi* area, thus rendering it as a hallowed site.

King Kavantissa (205 BCE - 161 BCE) was instrumental in getting his younger son Prince Saddhatissa to build several reservoirs and a network of canals in order to produce the

agricultural supplies needed to provide food required for the massive military effort being organized to free the Rajarata Kingdom from the South Indian invaders.

Prince Tissa achieved this gigantic task by re-engaging several rivers flowing through the *Digāmadulla* area into a network of feeder canals. In this manner he was able to irrigate thousands of acres of paddy. The agricultural crops thus generated fed the local populace and was also sufficient for the upkeep of temples housing thousands of Buddhist monks.

Upon his consecration as King, Saddhatissa (137 BCE – 119 BCE) built the great stūpa of *Dīghavāpi* enshrining relics of Lord Buddha and also a main vihāraya for the monks. The Chronicles also records that he built several monasteries along the road from Anuradhapura to *Dīghavāpi*. With the gradual shifting of Kingdoms towards the southwest the prosperity of the *Digāmadulla* area once enjoyed waned. Most of the temple lands were taken over by thick forests. The last restoration of this edifice was by King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe (1751 CE - 1782 CE). He also made a donation of 2000 acres of land for the upkeep of the temple.

After the fall of the Kandyan Kingdom, during the colonial period, due to the constant invasions and the continuous harassment meted out by the British army, many of the hapless inhabitants of *Digāmadulla* were forced to flee to other areas. Thereafter, since there was no active monastery at *Dīghavāpi*, the British took control of the area under the Waste Lands Ordinance of 1840.

The recent discovery of this stupa is also interesting. In 1916 a monk by the name of Kohukumbure Revatha having read about the ancient stupa visited this area in search of it. He met people taking bricks by the cartload and when questioned was told that the bricks were being removed from a mountain of bricks situated deep within the jungle. Having visited the site he realized that this was the ancient *Dīghavāpi* stupa. Thereafter, he was instrumental

in campaigning to protect and safeguard the structure. After the death of the monk under unfortunate circumstances, the Department of Archaeology intervened to protect the stupa. Presently the ancient site is protected as an archaeological monument. Although several projects were mooted from time to time for the restoration of this edifice, it is still under construction.

With recent excavations several very valuable artifacts were unearthed including four golden caskets, gold-leaf inscription with one confirming the historical dating of the ancient temple and facts relating to the ancient royal lineage. A large collection of ancient coins belonging to several eras and pottery were also found in the premises. The different types of coins confirm the established international trade with the Ruhuna Kingdom.

All the ancient irrigation works and the stupendous ancient edifices are associated with the Kings of Ruhuna, notably, King Kāvantissa, King Saddhātissa, King Bhātikābhaya (20 BCE – 7 CE).

Not only reservoirs but also numerous ancient temples dot the landscape of Dighāmadulla. Some have been recently excavated and restored. Mangul Maha Viharaya, Buddhagala monastic site, Kuḍumbigala Forest Monastery, Gonagolla monastery known for its Sigiriya type frescos are some of the well-known ancient sites, whilst Rajagalatānna and Nīlagiri Seya were excavated and restored in the recent past. Restoration work has been undertaken at Samangala and it promises to yield a hitherto unknown past. Nuwaragala, is another ancient rock fortress which has served as King Saddhatissa's sanctuary for sometime and is also associated with the indigenous people of the country.

Digāmadulla is typical ancient Buddhist land with numerous cave temples, monasteries, stupas and reservoirs, golden paddy ripening in the sun being home to descendants of Kandyan nobility as well as villagers who fought the British, now living scattered and in pockets who still narrate their stories with pride.