

A Little bit of our Heritage

Tissamahārāmaya Rajamahā Vihāraya

by

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In the deep South of Sri Lanka in the ancient Kingdom of Rohana in Māgama or Mahagama, one of the largest urban centers of that period, lies yet another site hallowed by the presence of Lord Buddha on his third and final visit to the island of Lanka. The visit was made in the eighth year of his enlightenment accompanied by 500 Arahants on a Wesak full moon day. Today this area has been demarcated as being situated within the District of Hambantota in the Southern Province. The place that the Buddha sanctified by his presence is known as Tissamahārāmaya.

No pilgrimage to the South of Sri Lanka is complete without worshipping the sacred stupa, built at Tissamahārāmaya, which is one of the *Solosmsthāna* or sixteen sacred sites.

Built over 2000 years ago, Tissamahārāmaya was a major educational monastic center housing many buildings, of which only a few ruins remain today, along with the enormous stupa rising towards the sky surrounded by lush paddy fields. The Monastery was in continuous operation from the 3rd century BCE to the 11th Century CE extending spiritual guidance to the people of the Rohana Kingdom. This outstanding seat of learning was called and known in ancient times as Silāpassa Pirivena.

A few meters away is a huge expanse of water, the Tissa reservoir, with an embankment of approximately 1.2 km supporting the main road to Kataragama. Low misty hills can be seen far away towards the northern boundary of the reservoir.

This enormous edifice dominating the skyline of the ancient Rohana Kingdom, has been built by King Kāvantissa in the 2nd Century BCE as recorded in the Mahāvamsa, the Great Chronicle. Historians believe that it was originally built by King Mahānāga of the Rohana Kingdom in the 3rd Century BCE and to have been renovated and expanded by King Kāvantissa in the 2nd Century BCE. According to literary records, the frontal bone relic and a tooth relic of Lord Buddha is enshrined within the stūpa. It stands at a height of 50 m, has a circumference of 165 m and bears a hemispherical shape known as *bubbulākāra* (bubble-shaped) and is built in the classical Anuradhapura architectural style. The structure is constructed on a granite platform. The dome is made of brick with a covering in lime plaster.

There are guard stones, moonstones and stone pillars among other artifacts at the premises. The main Image House is replete with beautifully sculptured Buddha statues and murals depicting scenes from the Jataka tales.

Throughout the ages in times of prosperity as well as in dark times of wars and invasions, this monastery flourished as the foremost center of Buddhist learning in the south of Sri Lanka. Several Kings of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa including Kings Ilanāga, Vohārakatissa, Prince Mahānāga, Vasabha, Jetṭha Tissa,

Vijayabāhu I, Parākramabāhu I, and Nissankamalla have lavishly contributed towards the upkeep of the monastery and restoration works.

This intellectual and spiritual seat of learning was ransacked by the army of one of the cruelest invaders, that of Māgha of Kālinga in the 13th Century CE. So ended the grand era of spiritual awakening of Rohana. The monastery was abandoned and fell into decay and remained in this state for over 600 years. An attempt to revive it around 1662 CE by King Vīraparākrama Narendrasinha did not succeed. Thereafter, it fell into further disuse and decay with the colonialists taking over the administration of the maritime areas.

Around 1853 CE, a monk, Vepatira Sumana Thero, found the ruins of the monastic buildings whilst on pilgrimage and single-handedly began restoring the temple. Upon his demise Walpita Medhankara Thero continued with the restoration works. In 1900 CE the newly restored *caitya* with a red crystal adorning its pinnacle was unveiled to the delight of the pious Buddhists in the South as well as the entire country reviving this monument to a semblance of its former glory.

The *Tissa vāva* adjoining the temple is an engineering marvel built by King Mahānāga ably assisted by his engineers. It provided drinking water to the city's inhabitants and irrigated the agricultural lands in the surrounding areas.

A pillar inscription found in nearby Kirinda provides valuable information regarding the relics enshrined within the stupa.

An octagonal granite pillar inscription located close to the bund of the Tissa reservoir in Akurugoda dated to 1CE, is a copy of the text found at Kirinda Rajamaha Vihāraya situated a few kilometers away, which records that a regional viceroy, a Nāga Prince had abandoned his false heretical beliefs and converted to Buddhism at that very spot.

A third inscription known as the Tissamahārāma slab inscription housed at the National Museum in Colombo records royal land grants to the Tissamahārāmaya Monastery, provisions for monks, and records the royal genealogy of certain Kings of

the Anuradhapura period. The inscription is recorded in Brahmi and early Sinhala whilst the issuer of this inscription is debatable.

Excavations in and around Tissamahārāmaya have yielded roman coins and mediterranean pottery among other artifacts confirming that Tissa, the ancient capital of Māgama was connected to international maritime trade routes covering Rome, India and Southeast Asia and the Far east. The maritime trade was handled through nearby coastal ports such as Kirinda situated in the Kirinda Oya/River and Godavāya located near the mouth of Walawe River

This region is dotted with several ancient stūpas and temples. Out of those the must visit sites are: the Sandagiriya stūpaya , Yaṭāla Daladā stūpaya, Debaravāva Mānik Vehera and Kirinda Raja Maha Vihāraya.

The launching pad for many a battle to gain the Kingdom of Rajarāṭa from invaders were in the vicinity of these hallowed grounds. The villagers around this sacred area are those that have been inhabited from ancient times and are aligned to the concept of vāva and dāgāba-village and temple (වැවයි දාගැබයි - මෙයි පන්සලයි) concept. These idyllic villages and temples are worth visiting at anytime of the year and would fill one with peace and spiritual tranquility.

