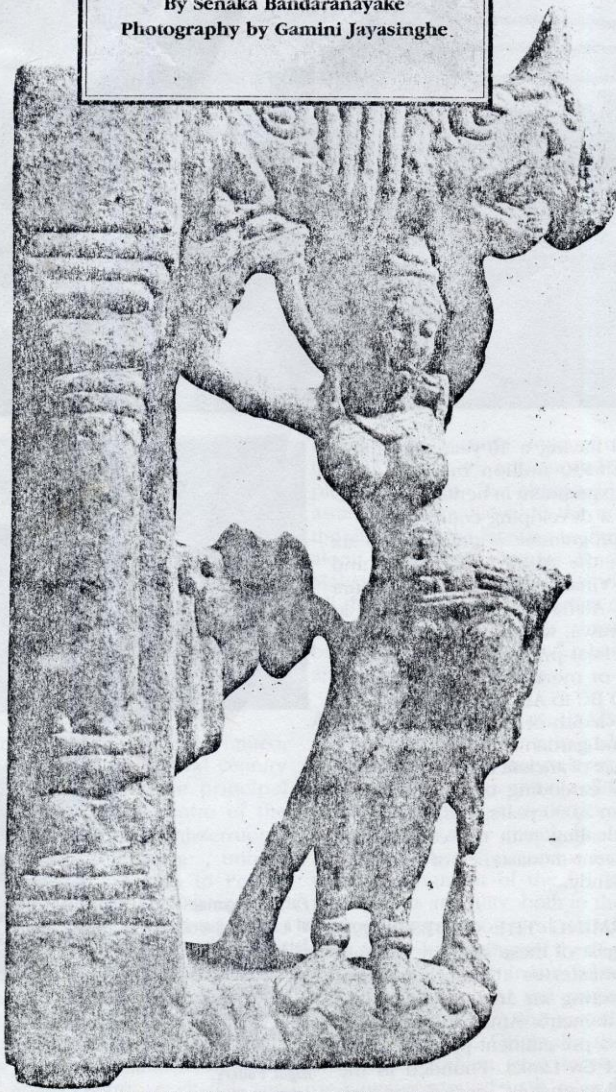


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LIVING IN THE
PAST

GREAT DISCOVERIES IN
THE CULTURAL TRIANGLE

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Photography by Gamini Jayasinghe

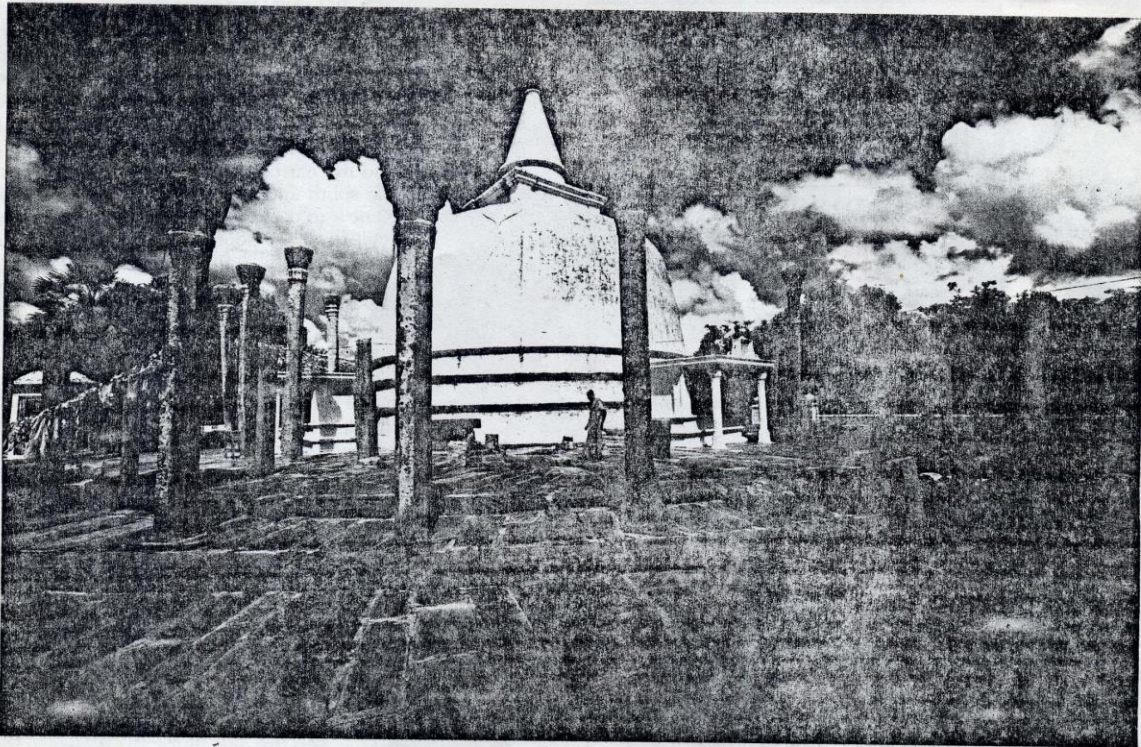


SRI LANKA'S EARLY CIVILIZATION, dating back at least to the 3rd century BC, was principally located in the large, undulating plain that stretches across the northern half of the island, with extensions into the flatter terrain of the northern peninsula and the narrower plains and valleys of the south and east. Known as the Dry Zone – to distinguish it from the wetter regions of the southwest and the central mountains – this region is in fact marked by heavy seasonal rains during the winter monsoon from November to January.

The combination of climate, undulating terrain and relatively rich soil made this area especially suitable for the development of a major rice-growing civilization, which was based on an elaborate network of village reservoirs, or "tanks," and colossal manmade lakes and canals. These are considered by historians of science to be some of the most remarkable feats of hydraulic engineering in the premodern world. The high productivity of this agrarian system supported a large population and a supply of food, wealth, labour and management skills that made possible the construction of a number of major monumental complexes – mainly urban and port centres as well as monasteries.

The skeletal remains of several ancient cities and literally hundreds of Buddhist monastic complexes form the most dramatic and visible elements of the highly complex archaeological landscape of the Dry Zone region. The best known of these are the cities of





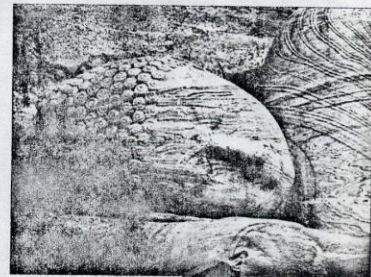
Anuradhapura, Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa, where archaeologists have been working for the last one hundred years. These three sites are inscribed on the World Heritage List – a register of the world's most important archaeological sites. Dating from a much later period – the 17th to 19th century – but also a World Heritage site, is the city of Kandy, the capital of Sri Lanka's last historical kingdom, with its core region in the central highlands.

The triangular zone formed by linking Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy has given rise to the concept of the "Cultural Triangle," a major 10-year programme jointly sponsored by the Sri Lankan government and UNESCO. The programme is run by archaeologists from Sri Lanka's Archaeological Department – which celebrates its centenary this July – and from the departments of archaeology and history of four universities, together with architectural consultants from six major, private architectural firms. Such joint management of a programme of this scale – almost entirely designed and handled by local special-

ists, and having a 10-year time frame and a US\$30 million budget – is a unique experiment in heritage management in a developing country.

The programme is divided into six projects: the Abhayagiri Vihara and Jetavana Vihara project at Anuradhapura and the Alahana Parivena project at Polonnaruwa, which cover three of Sri Lanka's best-preserved metropolitan *viharas*, or monasteries, of the period from 300 BC to AD 1200; the project at Sigiriya, a 5th-century fortified city, palace and garden complex; Dambulla, a sequence of ancient cave-temples with a history extending over a period of more than 2,000 years; and, finally, the project dealing with the central core and adjacent monasteries of the living city of Kandy.

FORMING THE OLDEST AND largest of these sites are the two monasteries at Anuradhapura, each covering an area of about one square kilometre. Anuradhapura itself occupies a pre-eminent position in the history of Sri Lanka. Founded in the 3rd or 4th century BC, or perhaps even



Far left: Figurine of a female guardian, Jetavana Vihara.
Left: Guardstone, Polonnaruwa.
Top: Anuradhapura.
Above: Reclining Buddha, Polonnaruwa.
Right: Pottery, Jetavana Vihara.