

Sandesa Kavya Descriptions of Sites Destroyed by the Portuguese

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The Portuguese encounter group consisting of over 40 multi-disciplinary researchers in a nearly two-year period study has been documenting the sites destroyed by the Portuguese in their cultural ("spiritual") and "temporal" conquest of Sri Lanka. The group has visited around 50 sites in different parts of the country from Jaffna in the North, to Devundara in the South, from Kotte in the West to Batticaloa in the East. Nearly thousand photographs of destroyed sites have been taken. A key element of the documentation included examination of Sinhalese, Tamil and Portuguese sources on the sites destroyed. Portuguese documents were a primary source for the acts of destruction of almost the entire key Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim centres of worship along the Western coast. In attempting to reconstruct how these centres, especially the Buddhist ones looked like in the pre-Portuguese period, the group took recourse to Sinhala literature specially, the Sandesa Kavyas which were written between the 14th to 16th centuries. The Sandesa Kavyas thus used included the Gira, Hansa, Kokila, Mayura, Parevi, Salalihini, Sevul and Tisara. In using this material, the poetic metaphor and ornamental descriptions were discounted while concrete descriptions such as "five-storey building", "vihara to the North" etc were taken into account. 194 verses were found in the Sandesa literature describing the sites, specially the better-known ones. Sites described in the literature include Agbo Vehera (Weligama), Attanagalla Raja Maha Vihara, Barandi Kovila, Dalada Medura (Kotte), Delgamu Vehera, Devinuwara, Dorawaka Vehera, Galpatha, Galapatha, Ganananda Pirivena, Gangatilaka Vihara (Kalutara), Kadurugoda (Jaffna peninsula), Kali Kovila, Kelaniya, Keragala, Kotte city, Mapitigama Vihare, Nawagamuwa Devale, Paiyagala Vehera, Ratgam Vehera, Saman Devale Ratnapura, Totagamuwa, Veherakanda, Vidagama. The site descriptions before the destruction were correlated with Portuguese acts of destruction, for example in the vivid description on the sacking of Devinuwara. The descriptions in the two language realms, namely Sinhala and Portuguese were then correlated with the actual site situation today and the ruins existing. The paper summarizes this corpus of descriptive verse.

Key Words: Portuguese; Sri Lanka; Sinhalese; Tamil

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