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# The Pillared Pride of Embekke

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# THE PILLARED PRIDE OF EMBEKKE

D. T. DEVENDRA

OF the famous Audience Hall in Kandy, with its ornate pillars and characteristic high-pitched roof, much has been written and many a visitor to Kandy has seen it ; but few perhaps, until recent times, have seen or known of a similar masterpiece of Sinhalese art and architecture at Embekke Devale at Gampola, which lies in comparative seclusion in the shadow of the crag of Daulagala off the Kandy road. Embekke Devale is dedicated to the Sinhalese War God Kartikeya or Kataragama Deviyo ; it is unique for a number of important reasons—it provides the oldest extant example of a pillared hall of wood, of exquisite workmanship, ingenuity and grace. Tradition has it that it was the source of inspiration for the work at the Audience Hall in Kandy. Its Dig-ge or Drumming Hall affords the finest examples of Sinhalese craftsmanship in wood. Very little of the work of the Sinhalese wood-carver's art has been preserved for us. And Embekke is but a glimpse of the skill of the master craftsmen who belonged to the College of Wood Sculptors of ancient times.

Tradition connects it with the Gampola ruler Vikrama Bahu III. This Gampola period of our history shone with some lustre beyond question. Along with that of Kotte, it glowed for a brief while before it was extinguished in the 16th century. Culturally speaking, it is to this Gampola period that we owe the most ambitious as well as the most beautiful of our later buildings such as Abhinava Lankatilaka on the top of the Parnasaila eminence and Saddharmatilaka Vihara in the village of Gadaladeniya, both of which belonged to the mediæval country of Sinduruvana.

## Interesting Feature

The Vahalkada or Entrance Porch, which is here detached, is itself as interesting a feature as the main portion, and a study of some of its aspects will be in worthy context.

This porch has ten pillars, let into blocks of stone, set in three rows of which the two extreme ones have three each. They are of the same age and type as those in the main hall. These measurements indicate some idea of the strength of the woodwork. Each pillar measures 11 inches by 13 and is  $8\frac{1}{2}$  feet up to the bracket from where it extends 10 inches farther up to the top of the capital ; a capital is 9 inches across and  $3\frac{1}{4}$  feet long. Great wooden beams with corbelled ends 8 inches by 10 and in length  $16\frac{1}{4}$  feet rest on these pillars on the outer sides ; while in front and at the back are double, over 30 feet in length.

The Vahalkada gave wide scope to the ingenuity and freedom of the artist in wood. In the pillars, the medial panels, the upper portion directly below the capitals, as well as the capitals themselves, may be counted 116 faces for carving. The artist had succeeded in filling them up with different designs as he had, indeed, in the far more numerous spaces in the dig-ge or tom-tomming hall. It would not be possible to meet with a repetition. To such an extent had he taken his intricacies, apparently in his determination never to repeat himself, that one comes across designs which are artistically incomplete. In particular the leaf-sheaths had been so often utilized that in his inability to invent more he had had to leave unsatisfying patterns.

## Stamp of Individuality

The medial panels contain the most prominent designs. These "cubes" stamp an individuality on the local pillar. The designs contain representations of real life as well as the mythical. The former contain human, animal, floral, leaf, and rope (or coil) motifs. This last had been woven into crossed patterns with 21, 16, 8 and 4 loops; the leaf, including liya-potha and liyavela in varieties; the sun and lotus for flowers; the royal lion, kesara sinha, and the hansa (swan) for animals. The human figures are interesting. There is one of a soldier with square shield in the left hand and an undulating bladed dagger, pointing downwards, in the right. In another, two women face outwards, holding a spring between bent forefinger and thumb, with the other three fingers straight upward; in yet another is an intimate scene—a domestic group of a mother seated on a long, low stool, suckling her baby, while her little boy stands by, lightly touching her left shoulder with the hand.

The mythical motifs are a scaly-bodied feathered bird with human face, serapendiya; the double-headed eagle, bherunda pakshiya; the elephant-headed lion, gaja sinha; a goddess on a lotus seat; a female reminiscent of the woman-creeper, nari lata; and, lastly, a fierce being of the bahirava kind wearing a head-dress resembling a crown.

In both sections the panel designs are framed within squares of the kundi rakkan design, which in turn are set between arimbu squares. On the sides above the cobra knops of the upper part of the pillar is the familiar pearl string. Above this and immediately below the capitals is a bo-leaf within which are various combinations of leaves open and closed; the whole is bordered by arimbu framework.

The under-faces of the capitals contain a great variety of lotuses with the flower-stalks grooved or ribbed. The very king-posts of the roofs are carved,

## The Tom-Tomming Hall

The piece de resistance and the natural attraction of Embekke is the tom-tomming hall, dig-ge. A massive stone doorway, built some 50 years ago, gave it entrance. This has since been removed by the Archaeological Department in the course of conservation work. A group of 4 pillars are set in front on either side, with the front pair slightly forward. Next, at 2 feet distance are six pairs running the length of the hall, and another pair is sunk in the wall with the two lions which may be taken now (whatever it originally was, if it had formed part of the ground-plan) as the hall limit. The pathway or aisle between the two inner rows is 14 feet wide. The outer pillars support one massive beam each; but the inner three, one laid on the top of the other. The cross-beams are double and, directly above the capitals, corbelled. The king-posts are more elaborately carved than those of the Entrance Porch. They are, in point of artistic fact, simulate pillars. In especial, the outer cross-beams are finely carved. Of these pillars two are later replacements.

The wealth and novelty of designs at Embekke are well illustrated here, for, in addition to those mentioned in connection with the Vahal-kada, there are others calling for notice. Among male figures are those of a soldier on horse-back, who holds a looped rein in his left hand; a warrior with circular ox-hide target in the right hand and a long sword in the other; the strange figure of a man with three long plaited strands streaking from the head, a trident held vertically in the left, a rectangular box-like object in the right and, in the corner below, a bag on pot with rope handle (this figure is repeated twice again) lastly, a pair of wrestlers.

Among mythical creatures is one from whose mouth is issuing a fine forked wreath; a lion of the royal caste (kesara Sinha) which, true to description, is eating into the brain of a kneeling

elephant ; the device known as usumba kunjari formed of a bull and elephant facing each other and heads merging together, and a liya kinduri.

### Women dancers

Perhaps the most interesting of the carved upper cross-beams is a panel of women stick-dancers carved on the inner surface of the right terminal beam close to the wall. There are six figures of which two pairs face each other crossing sticks, while engaged in the same action overhead with the single figures behind them. The breasts are completely crossed by the hands, but the curves of the body as well as the heave of the upper part definitely indicate the sex. They also wear heavy ear-ornaments such as are not generally worn by males. On the corresponding beam-end is a completely different design, as is the case everywhere at Embekke.

From this Maha Dig-ge is entered a narrow passage which may be entered from outside too. This is the Chamber of Fragrance or handun kudama. Next is another long section styled Meda Dig-ge, a storehouse for various belongings, a huge chest, a palanquin, and other items. It is dark and has no windows. Here are two pillars of which one is carved. Beyond this is the place used for the chanting of pirith during the perahera days. Last of all is the storeyed sanctum, the Vedahitina Maligava, where has been installed the image of the dread god with six faces. No worshipper may enter herein. In this hall are said to be found thirteen pillars.

Unique as nearly all the features indicated are, the roof of Embekke holds unrivalled position among all our works. The rafters are of the three curved remarkable type, all along the great length of the roof. They terminate in long "frilled" eaves and through their ends

are thrust the long wooden pin (idda) in accepted Kandyan style, which holds them together in position.

### Remarkable Screw-pin

A remarkable and huge wooden screw-pin holds together 26 rafters at one end of the main beam close to the porch entrance. It is of a unique type and appears suspended from above. It is known as Madol Kurapava.

A miniature of the screw-pin for the roof, though not decorative to the extent of the main arc, may be seen at the shrine of the godling, the Devata Bandara, minister-attendant to the major god. This temple and the Buddhist fane contain wooden doorways said to have been transported hither from the Gampola palace of Vikrama Bahu. In passing, the latter shrine is an anomaly. The position here is reversed, the god's shrine generally being subservient to the Buddha temple.

A lateral view of the main devale shows its great length. At the end of the sanctum it is storeyed. The roof is crowned by a gilded finial with, directly below on the four pyramidal faces, gilded reliefs of gods. Exteriorly, the lower wall is severely plain, containing no more than rectangular pilasters as if laid in strips. There are not the usual niches and ornamentation. This is in proper harmony with the artistic scheme. Otherwise, attention would be diverted from the artistry of the pillared hall to the architecture of the temple.

At one time this unique structure was in grave danger of being totally destroyed by white-ants and beetles. The Archaeological Department undertook its conservation under severe handicaps during the last World War (vide Archaeological Commissioner's Report for 1948). These efforts have ensured the preservation of this monument for the nation. It is

a matter of pride that local craftsmen, with claims of lineal succession from the original masters, have played their part in this work.

Though the best example of woodwork, Embekke Devale is but one of many buildings which show the skill of the ancient worker handling the medium of wood. If some of these wooden buildings have perished, quite a number still survive. Some of these are not generally known or recognizable. They are mostly of small proportions and lime-washed; often they are in odd corners, in remote places known to the local folk but by-passed by the sophisticated who, however, have the means to visit them but who miss them all the same. Indeed, one may even find that the number of such surviving shrines even reaches up to the tally of ancient paintings, although less favourable than the latter in a chronological assessment.

Two wooden shrines may be mentioned as typical instances. On the summit of Devanagala Rock (off Mawanella or Hingula junction) there is a wooden shrine enclosed by the viharage. The second shrine is close to Hettipola at Panduvasnuwara Vihara. Another example of heavy timber construction is furnished by a wooden bridge at Bowala near Ella. These and the many unnamed works show that heavy timbers do last, provided they are of the proper wood and carefully selected—which gives rise

to the question whether the borer beetle (*Ambalam-paluva* in Sinhalese), which in Kandyan areas have started attacking the heavy wooden beams in the ancient shrines, is indigenous. Perhaps it is not, to judge from the number of shrines which are still left. Further, the Sinhalese name of the insect implies that Ambalams had also been made of heavy timber.

The Sinhalese were talented wood-workers; and we know what admirable works they executed when properly inspired, as the carpenters of Moratuwa were under the Dutch Government. The earliest extant specimens probably do not go farther back than the sixteenth century, but the important thing is that wood was just as much a medium to the artist and workman as stone was.

It is interesting to speculate as to what led to the adoption of wood. Probably many of the wooden shrines were the result of localized effort, as distinct from the more grandly conceived works of disa<sup>1</sup>pathis and kings. They could thus have been in times when the land was too disturbed for the undertaking of big works in stone. Besides, the area was thickly forested (as we know from descriptions by European writers after the seventeenth century) and lasting wood such as gammalu or milla was easily obtainable. These were the kinds used both at Embekke Devale and the Kandy Audience Hall.



