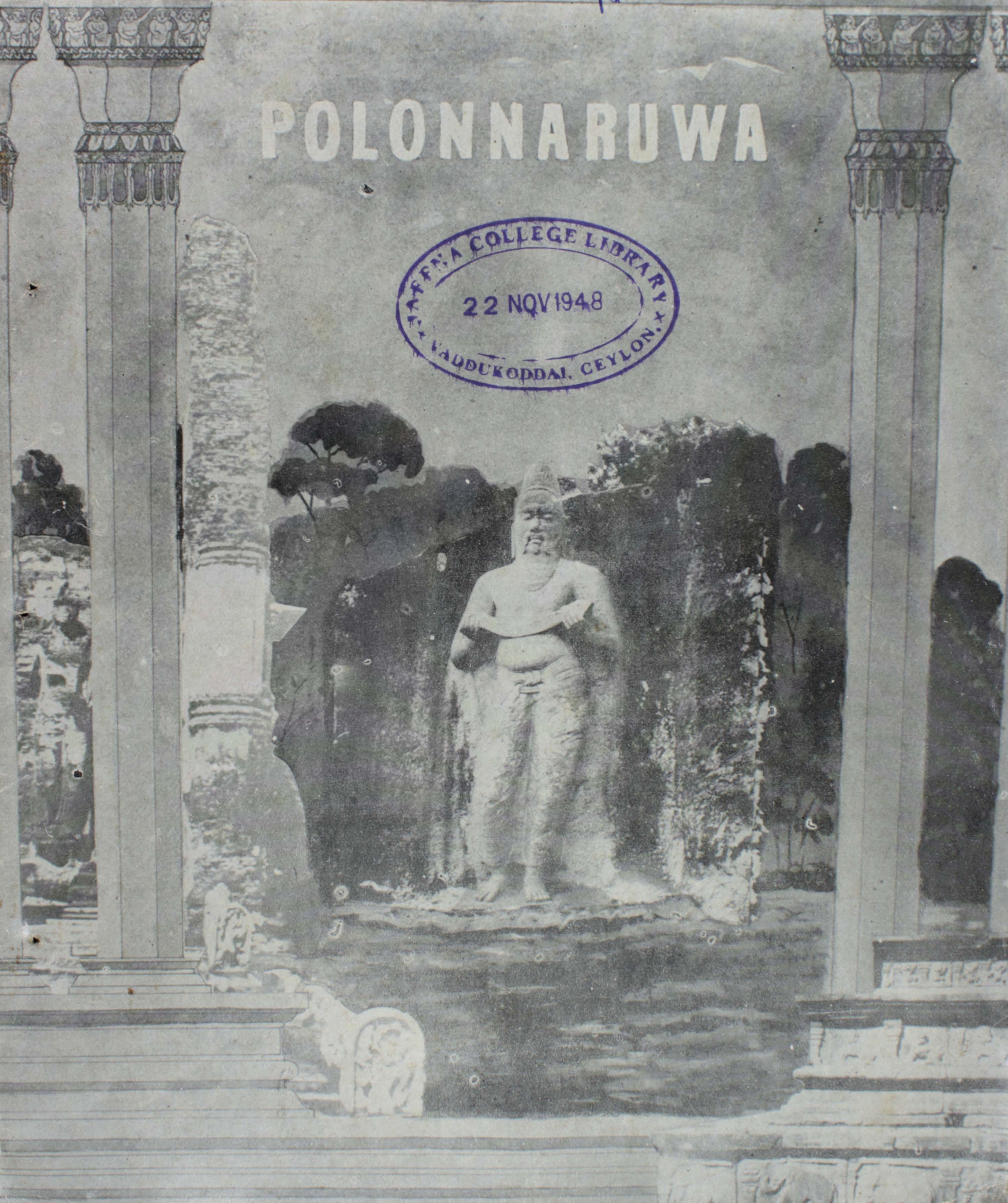
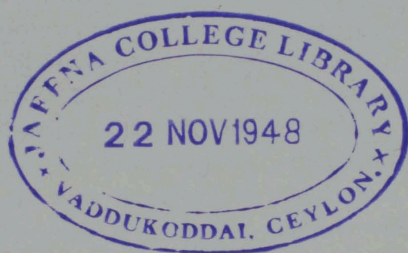


Post

POLONNARUWA



Guide to ::: Polonnaruva



By S. Paranavitana

POLONNARUVA

AMONG the numerous sites of archaeological interest in which Ceylon is so rich, there is perhaps none which will better repay a visit than Polonnaruva, where one can see impressive examples of architecture and sculpture dating from one of the most glorious periods in the Island's long history of over two thousand years. This mediaeval city, now reduced to an insignificant village, is situated 158 miles to the north-east of Colombo and can be reached either by rail or by motor.

The visitor to Polonnaruva by motor from Colombo can choose either of two routes, one passing through Kandy, the hill capital of the Island and itself a place of varied charm, and the other by way of Anurādhapura, noted for its stupendous monuments of antiquity. Both these routes, as well as the road from Trincomalee, converge at Habarana, from which place the drive of twenty-seven miles up to Polonnaruva lies through a vast expanse of forest, abounding in varied forms of wild life, dotted at long intervals by a few small villages like oases in a desert.

This part of the island was not always the wild desolation that it is now, for scattered in the forest are hundreds of ancient irrigation works, some of them still in a serviceable condition, which, centuries ago, had made what is now unproductive waste into rich rice fields and gardens capable of supporting a dense population. The most important of the ancient irrigation works in this part of the island is the Minnēri-vāva which lies just off the road to Polonnaruva. This vast reservoir, covering 4,560 acres of ground when full, was constructed in the third century by the great Sinhalese king Mahāsena. Besides being an eloquent witness to the engineering knowledge which the ancient Sinhalese possessed, this artificial lake—for 'reservoir' as well as the locally current 'tank' are terms too inadequate to designate works of such magnitude—is one of

the beauty spots of Ceylon and possesses an indescribable charm to which very few visitors would remain unsusceptible. The Minnēri-vāva has been restored by the British Government some decades ago and the lands irrigated by it have, in recent years, become the scene of a colonising enterprise designed to bring back prosperity to these parts of the island.

The forest extends far beyond Polonnaruva on the other side of the Mahavāli-gaṅga—the longest river in Ceylon, which flows only four miles to the east of this ancient city. In fact, Polonnaruva, which was once the centre of a rich and populous country, is to-day no more than a small cleared patch in a vast extent of forest.

Even as late as the beginning of the present century, a visit to Polonnaruva was an adventure not to be undertaken lightly, for the journey had then to be done by bullock carts, along a road which was hardly more than a track, through forests infested with wild beasts. The ancient monuments at the place were all given over to the jungle, with trees centuries old thriving luxuriantly on the old masonry, and wild elephants, bears and leopards roamed unmolested amidst the remains of palaces and shrines.

After the work of a few pioneers had attracted attention to the monuments of ancient Polonnaruva, the Archaeological Survey of the Ceylon Government started work on this site in 1901 and has steadily continued it till, at present, all the important monuments have been cleared and excavated, repairs have been effected to them where necessary and adequate measures for their continued preservation have been adopted. Motorable roads have been constructed, making all the important monuments, which are scattered over an area of about four miles north to south, easily accessible to the visitor.

A well provisioned Rest-house, built on the embankment of the old artificial lake now known as Tōpāvāva, on a site commanding a very pretty view of the distant hills across the silvery sheet of water, and close to the most important group of monuments, contributes to the visitor's comforts during his stay at Polonnaruva.

History is silent as to when and by whom the city of Polonnaruva was founded. It was occasionally used as a royal residence by the Anurādhapura kings during the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries and some religious buildings are said to have been erected there during this period. No remains, however, of any of these monuments have so far been identified at Polonnaruva.

At the beginning of the eleventh century, the ancient kingdom of Anurādhapura was destroyed by the Cholas from South India and the greater part of Ceylon was included in the mighty Chola empire. The Cholas made Polonnaruva the seat of their Government and, for the greater part of the eleventh century, they held sway over the northern half of the island.

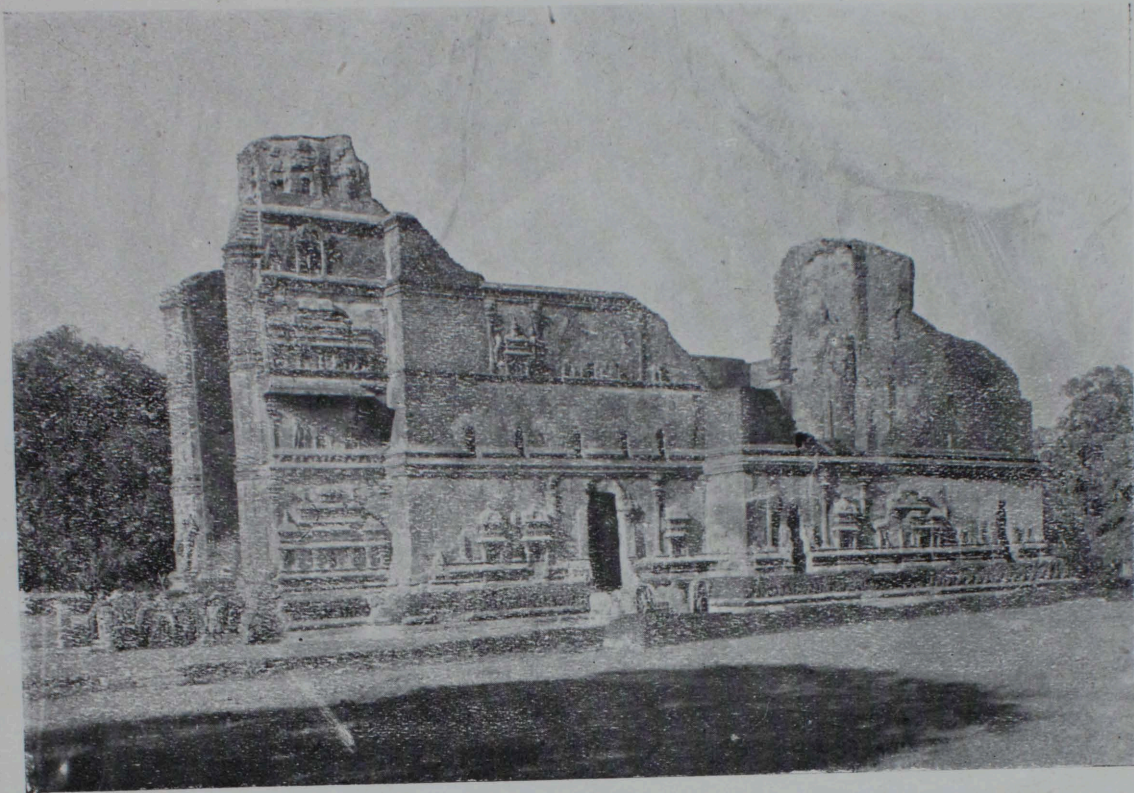
The Cholas were eventually driven out and Sinhalese sovereignty restored by Vijayabāhu I. (1056–1111). This monarch, though he had his coronation ceremony performed at the ancient capital of Anurādhapura, did not restore that city to its former pride of place and, thenceforward, Polonnaruva continued to be the capital of Ceylon till the middle of the thirteenth century. Vijayabāhu I. is said to have built a temple of the Tooth and other religious and secular structures at Polonnaruva; but, till the accession of Parākramabāhu I. in 1153 A.D., the city could not boast of many buildings of outstanding architectural merit. Parākramabāhu, during the course of his reign of 33 years, adorned Polonnaruva with a series of splendid buildings, both religious and secular, provided the city with strong fortifications and laid out parks and ornamental gardens. Niśsaṃka-Malla (1187–1196), who followed Parākramabāhu, tried to emulate his predecessor and the magnitude and number of

the monuments for which he claims credit leave one in doubt whether he could have accomplished all that within his brief reign of nine years. However that may be, it is to these two monarchs that Polonnaruva owes much of the architectural grandeur it possesses, and wherever one may roam in this mediaeval city, one is bound to come across a memorial of one or the other of these two remarkable rulers. After Niśsaṃka-Malla, the architectural history of Polonnaruva is almost a blank and in the second decade of the thirteenth century, the city was sacked and plundered by raiders from the mainland. After a further period of Tamil domination, attempts were made by Vijayabāhu IV. (1267–1270) and Parākramabāhu III. (1302–1310) to revive the glories of Polonnaruva, but met with only temporary success, and from that time for over five hundred years this royal city was consigned to oblivion.

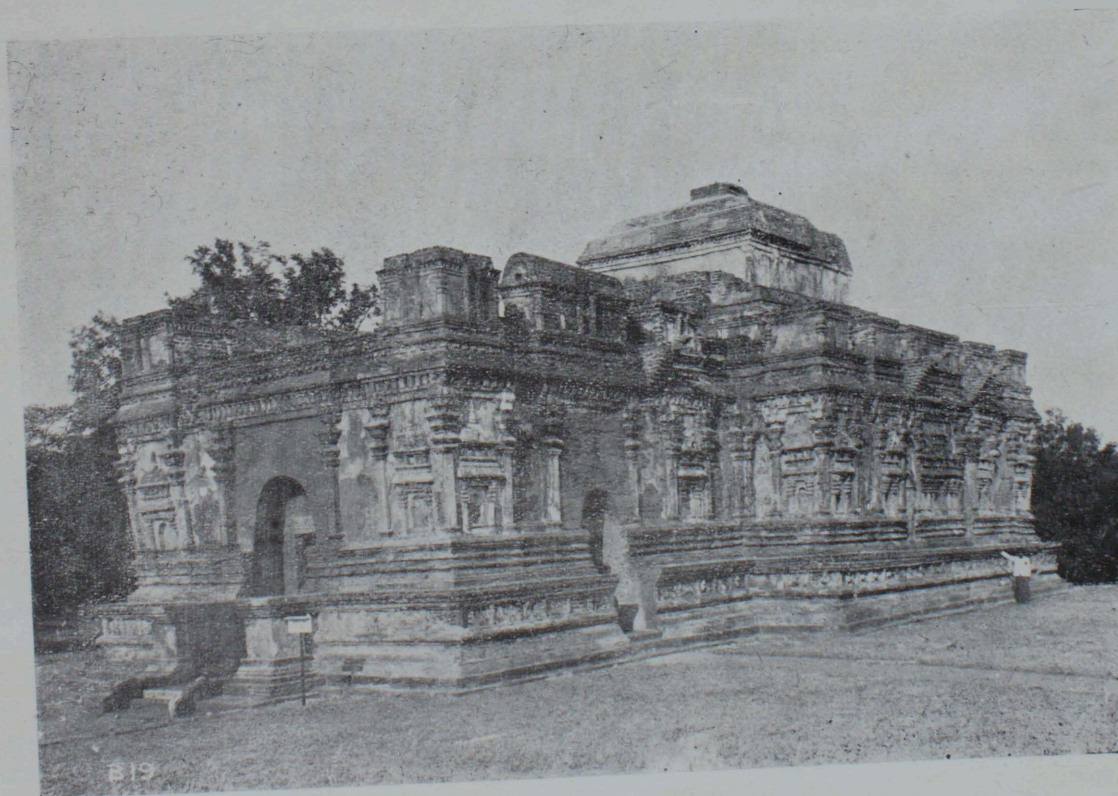
With this short historical survey, we may now proceed to give a brief description of the more important monuments still to be seen at Polonnaruva.

Only a few yards to the north of the Rest-house, which doubtless will be the starting point of most visitors in a tour round the monuments, there are the remains of some structures built on a piece of artificially raised ground jutting into the Tōpāvāva. These are the ruins of the palace of Niśsaṃka-Malla which was built, as that monarch says in one of his inscriptions, because he thought it was not in keeping with his dignity to reside in a palace erected by another king. It is also said that Niśsaṃka-Malla, in order to prove his superior prowess, had his palace completed within seven months. An examination of what now remains of this royal residence definitely proves that the aim of its architects was more to achieve a speed record in palace building than anything else.

The only interesting feature here is an oblong pillared hall on a high platform, which is known from inscriptions to have been the king's Council Chamber. In this hall there



LANKATILAKA



THUPARAMA

was a stone lion, now in the Colombo Museum, which supported the king's throne. Many of the pillars in this building bear inscriptions indicating the places reserved for various officials when the king was seated on his throne. These inscriptions are of great interest in that they give us an idea as to how the Council of the Sinhalese king was constituted in the twelfth century.

Bordering the high road, near the turn to the Rest-house, is the Citadel or the Royal Enclosure, about twenty-five acres in extent. This area is on a higher level than the surrounding ground and was enclosed by a high wall with a gateway in the middle of the northern side. Towards the southern end of the Citadel are the remains of the palace of Parākramabāhu I. The chronicle gives a glowing description of this edifice and tells us that it had a thousand chambers and was seven storeys high. Much of this description is conventional and is in some particulars highly exaggerated; but the remains which we see to-day show that it was undoubtedly a building of impressive grandeur. The central block of this palace consists of a massive brick structure measuring 150 feet square with porticoes on the west and the east. The walls are extraordinarily thick and still stand to considerable height; indications of two upper storeys still exist. On the ground floor is a great hall, measuring 102 feet by 42 feet. Its roof was supported by 30 wooden posts, the stone sockets of which are still in position. There is another smaller hall and several passages and over fifty rooms which are of very small dimensions. A broad flight of stone steps leads to the upper storeys.

To the east and south of this main block have been excavated remains of edifices, built mainly in the form of pillared open galleries round a central courtyard. The pillars and the superstructures of these subsidiary buildings seem to have been of wood and have therefore disappeared without leaving any traces.

To the east of the palace there is a beautiful pavilion built on a stone platform of three tiers. This building, round the base of which runs a frieze of elephants in bas-relief, carved wonderfully true to nature, and of which the pillars are adorned with chaste designs, is known to have been originally constructed by Parākramabāhu, but has been considerably altered in design at a later date, probably in the reign of Parākramabāhu II.

In and near this palace there were, according to the chronicles, various subsidiary buildings such as theatres, picture galleries, fountains, baths, &c.; and outside the walls of the citadel were extensive pleasure gardens. These descriptions, as well as the actual remains that we still see, bespeak a luxury and refinement in living which was indeed remarkable for that age. To the south-east of this pavilion a flight of stone steps descends from the citadel wall to the Royal Bath, which has recently been restored. This Bath has a recessed ground plan, and its stone-faced sides are built in three tiers with three gangways going round it. The bases and the cornices of the various tiers are moulded and the whole design is of a very pleasing character. In the recent restoration, the underground passages through which the Bath was filled and emptied have been traced. By the side of the bath are the remains of the moulded platform of a small pavilion.

Leaving the Royal Citadel through its northern gate, and passing a fine slab inscription of Niśsaṃka-Malla, in which that monarch gives political advice to his subjects, we arrive at a shrine which used to be known as the Temple of the Tooth. In reality, this is a Saiva shrine in the South Indian style of architecture of the thirteenth century, and probably dates from the second period of the Tamil domination of Polonnaruwa. The upper part of the structure which was of brick has disappeared but the stone built part of this shrine still extant, is remarkable, both for its harmonious proportions and the extraordinary finish of its architectural details. When this shrine was first cleared in 1907, a number of

bronze images of exquisite workmanship were discovered in the debris. They may now be seen at the Colombo Museum.

Adjoining this shrine to the north is an artificially raised quadrangular terrace, banked by retaining walls of rubble, on which there is a group of buildings which together formed the establishment for the Tooth Relic. At the south-west corner of the terrace is a vaulted image house of brick construction now known as the Thūpārāma. The name is of modern origin and the history of this particular shrine is not known. It is the best preserved example of its type to be seen anywhere in Ceylon. The central tower and much of the vaulted roof have been preserved. The walls are extraordinarily thick and hence the internal space of the shrine is small in comparison with the outward size of the building. The facades are ornamented with representations, in low relief, of shrines, and friezes of animals.

To the north-east of the Thūpārāma is the Vaṭadāgē, the most interesting of the shrines in this area. It consists of two circular terraces, one above the other. Access to the lower terrace is through a porch on the northern side; from this terrace four flights of steps at the four cardinal points lead to the upper platform in the centre of which is a small *stūpa* with four Buddha figures facing the four entrances. There were concentric circles of pillars round the dāgāba. A circular brick wall runs round the second circle of pillars and a profusely carved stone railing encompasses the whole shrine. The stonework is effectively decorated with floral designs and figures of dwarfs and animals. Inscriptions on its walls ascribe this building to Niśsaṃka-Malla; but it is probable that he was not responsible for the entire work, or that he used material from previous buildings.

Facing the Vaṭadāgē is the Hāṭadāgē, a shrine identified as the Temple of the Tooth built by Niśsaṃka-Malla. By its side is a large inscribed slab, 27 feet in length, known as the

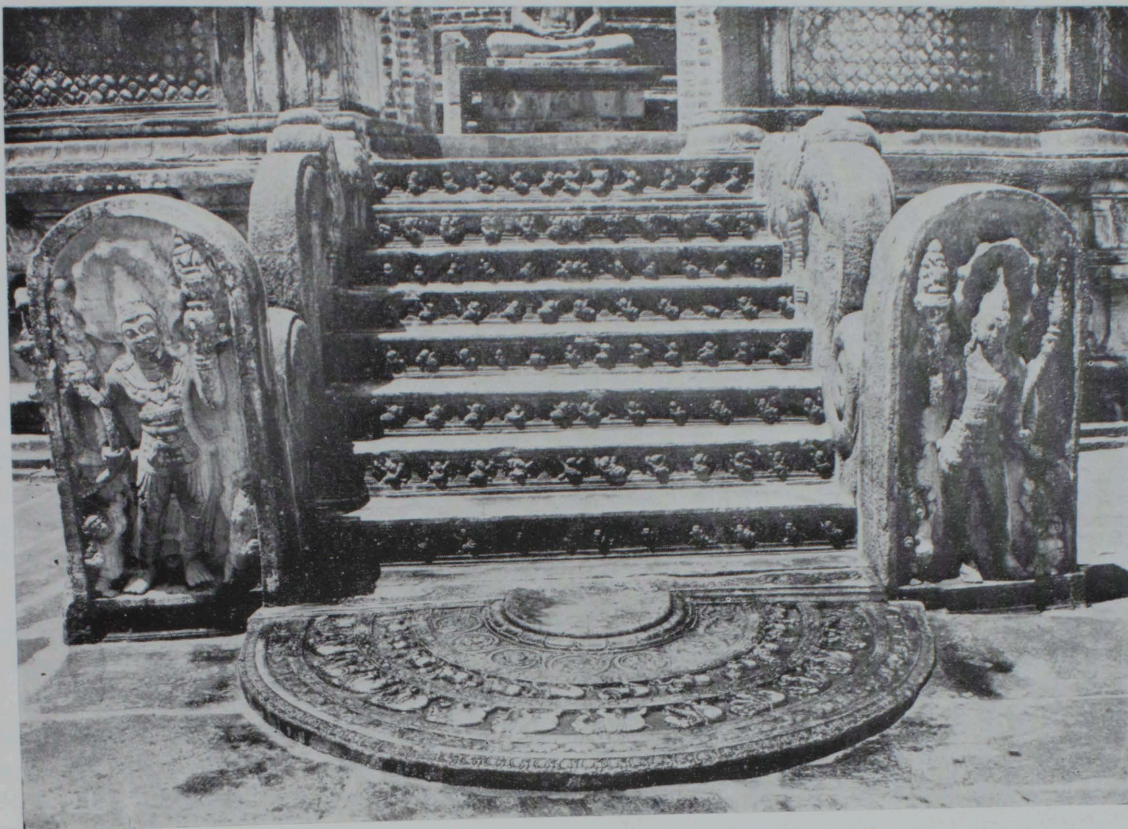
Galpota or Stone Book. The record is mainly concerned with a bombastic account of the deeds of Niśsaṃka-Malla and it is also said that this huge block of stone was removed by that king's order from Mihintalē, a distance of nearly sixty miles. To the west of the Hāṭadāgē is another shrine, most probably the Tooth Relic shrine built by Vijayabāhu I. Another structure on this quadrangle for which Niśsaṃka-Malla was responsible is the Latāmaṇḍapaya. It consists of a stone platform on which are stone pillars in the shape of lotus stems surrounded by a stone railing.

The most curious building of this group is a solid pyramidal structure of seven stages known as the Satmahal-Prāsāda. Various conjectures have been made regarding the purpose of this strange building, but it is now established beyond doubt that it was a dāgāba of an uncommon type.

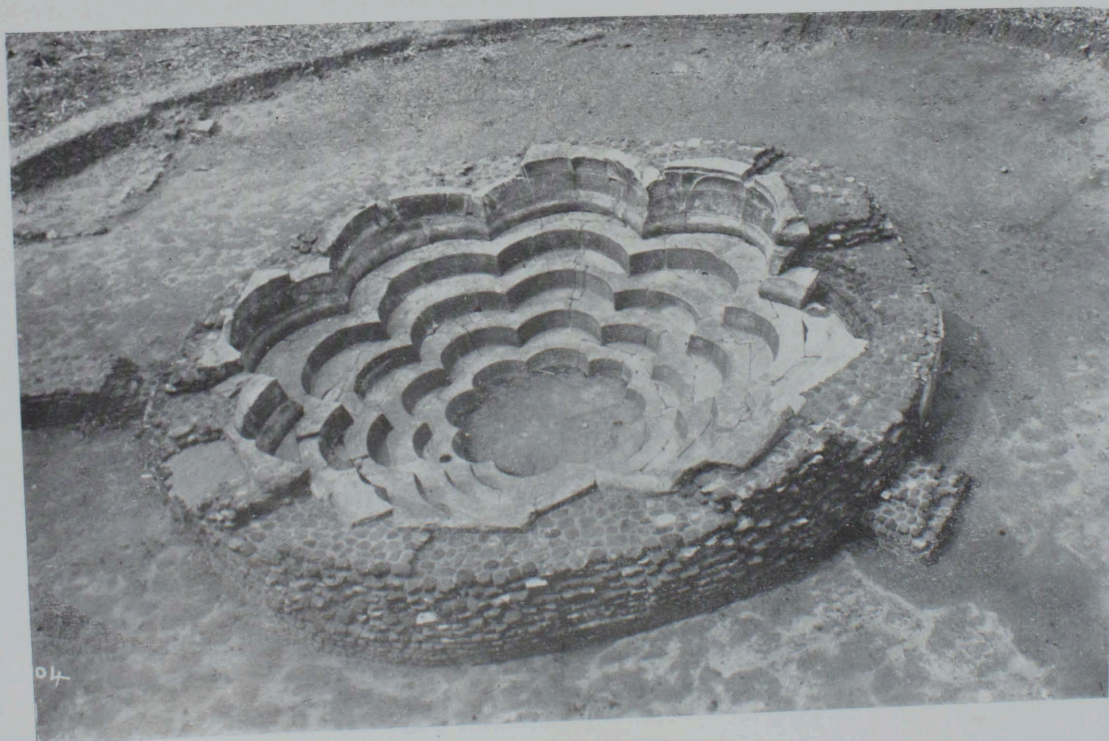
Proceeding northwards from this group, there are two other monuments to be visited before leaving the intra-mural area of the ancient city. These are the Pabalu-Vehera, possibly the dāgāba said to have been built by a queen of Parākramabāhu I. and the Siva Dēvāle No. 2. The last named is noteworthy not only as the earliest monument to be seen now at Polonnaruva but also as the only shrine built entirely of stone. It is, moreover, in a very good state of preservation. In architectural style it resembles South Indian shrines of the eleventh century and on its walls are Tamil inscriptions of the Chola emperors.

Continuing our progress northwards outside the walls of the ancient city, the first monument of note we meet is the Rankot-Vehera. It is the largest completed dāgāba to be seen at Polonnaruva and, though smaller than the giant dāgābas of Anurādhapura, is a work of great magnitude, being 180 feet in height and having a circumference of 550 feet at its base. Inscriptions found at the place proclaim it to be a work of Niśsaṃka-Malla and that its original name was "Ruvanvāli".

1. A dāgāba or stūpa is a solid hemispherical structure on a circular platform and surmounted by an umbrella or conical spire built in order to enshrine sacred Buddhist relics.



VATADAGE : NORTHERN ENTRANCE



LOTUS BATH

To the north of this *dāgāba* is a group of ruins which formed one of the great monastic establishments of Parākramabāhu. The most important structures in this area are the *Laṅkātilaka* and the *Baddhasīma-Pāsāda*. The former, popularly called the *Jetavanārāma*, is the largest shrine to be seen at Polonnaruwa. It is built of brick and measures 170 feet in length by 66 feet in breadth. The walls are still standing to a height of 55 feet; but the vaulted roof has completely collapsed. In the sanctum is a gigantic image of the Buddha, now headless, in a standing posture. This splendid building, originally founded by Parākramabāhu, was later repaired by Vijayabāhu IV. In front of the shrine is a beautiful pillared mandapa. Adjoining the *Laṅkātilaka*, to the north, is the *dāgāba* known as *Kiri Vehera*, which is perhaps the shrine said to have been founded by Subhaddā, a queen of Parākramabāhu I. Though considerably smaller than the *Rankot-Vehera*, it is in a much better state of preservation; in fact it is the best preserved ancient *dāgāba* to be seen anywhere in Ceylon.

Still further north is the *Galvihāra*, also a work of Parākramabāhu I., which as its name implies, is a rockhewn shrine. Three colossal images of the Buddha, one in the recumbent posture and measuring 44 feet in length, another standing 22 feet high and a third seated image of slightly smaller proportions, have here been carved on the vertical face of a large rock boulder. The standing Buddha is popularly believed to be a figure of Ānanda sorrowing over the death of his Master. A fourth Buddha image in sitting posture and attended by various deities is found inside a shrine excavated in the same rock. Apart from the æsthetic qualities of these images, the colossal size as well as the picturesque background against which they are seen, tend to make them extremely impressive.

About a mile or more to the north of the *Gal-vihāra* are two interesting ruins. One is a stone Bath built in the shape of a full-blown lotus of eight petals, conventionalised in form to suit the architectural scheme. The harmonious proportions of this Bath and the

novel, though very appropriate, conception of its design, make it one of the most appealing sights at this ancient capital.

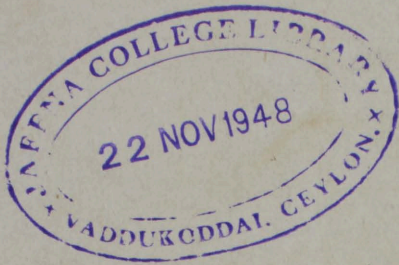
The other is a shrine of the same type as the *Thūpārāma* and *Laṅkātilaka*, and is noteworthy for its wall-paintings, depicting scenes from the sacred stories of the Buddhists. The Buddha image in the sanctum of this shrine, now headless, is of an unusual type, showing bends at the knees, at the waist and at the shoulders. The shrine itself was named *Tivaṅka*, after the image, and it belonged to the great monastic establishment called *Jetavana*, founded by Parākramabāhu I.

This *Tivaṅka* image-house is the northernmost point in our itinerary and we have to mention but one more monument in order to complete this brief survey of Polonnaruwa. This is the *Potgul Vehera*, situated below the bund of the *Tōpā-vāva*, about one and a half miles to the south of the Rest-house. Here are the remains of a monastery built by Parākramabāhu of which the only noteworthy feature is a Circular shrine, built of brick with a vaulted roof. Popular imagination identifies this building with a library; this belief which based solely on the interpretation of the modern name of the place, has no evidence to support it.

What makes this site worth a visit, however, is a colossal rock sculpture some distance to the north of the Circular shrine, between which and the former it is doubtful whether there was any real connection. The sculpture shows a bearded and dignified looking man, standing, holding in his hands an object which has been taken to be a representation of an old book. Popularly it is believed to be a portrait statue of Parākramabāhu. It is doubtful whether this is a genuine tradition and it has been suggested that the figure is a representation of a Hindu religious teacher or that of a legendary Indian sage named *Agastya*. But neither of these theories has definitely been proved and we are still in doubt as to whom the sculpture actually represents. Whatever the identity of the figure may be, it is undoubtedly one of the finest products of the plastic art of old Ceylon.

*Maps of Polonnaruva showing sites of archæological and
historical interest can be obtained separately.*

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