

Isurumuni Rock Temple

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Photo Artist

Panduka De Silva



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Isurumuni Rock Temple

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Preface

Sri Lanka has a cultural history that spans over two and a half millennia. It is one of the richest and most colourful island cultures in Asia. It is a culture enriched by four ethnic groups, - the Sinhalese, the Tamils, the Muslims and the Burghers; by four of the major religions of the world – Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam; by two modern national languages – Sinhala and Tamil; and by two classical languages - Sanskrit and Pali, the language of sacred Buddhist scriptures.

Sri Lanka has ten UNESCO heritage sites and Anuradhapura ranks first among them. It was the first royal capital of the island kingdom, and is the most sacred pilgrim centre of Buddhists. Among the most sacred sites in Anuradhapura are the oldest tree in recorded history, Jaya Srī Mahā Bōdhi, and the three tallest brick buildings of the Old World, Jetavana Stūpa, Abhayagiri Stūpa and Ruvanvāli Sāya.

One of the most picturesque sites in Anuradhapura is the Rock Temple known as Isurumuni, located by one of the oldest reservoirs, Tisā Vaeva. Among the most valuable sculptures here are the so-called ‘Isurumuni Lovers’ and the sculpture of the Man and the Horse.

Archaeologists, historians and critics of art have expressed different opinions about their meaning and significance.

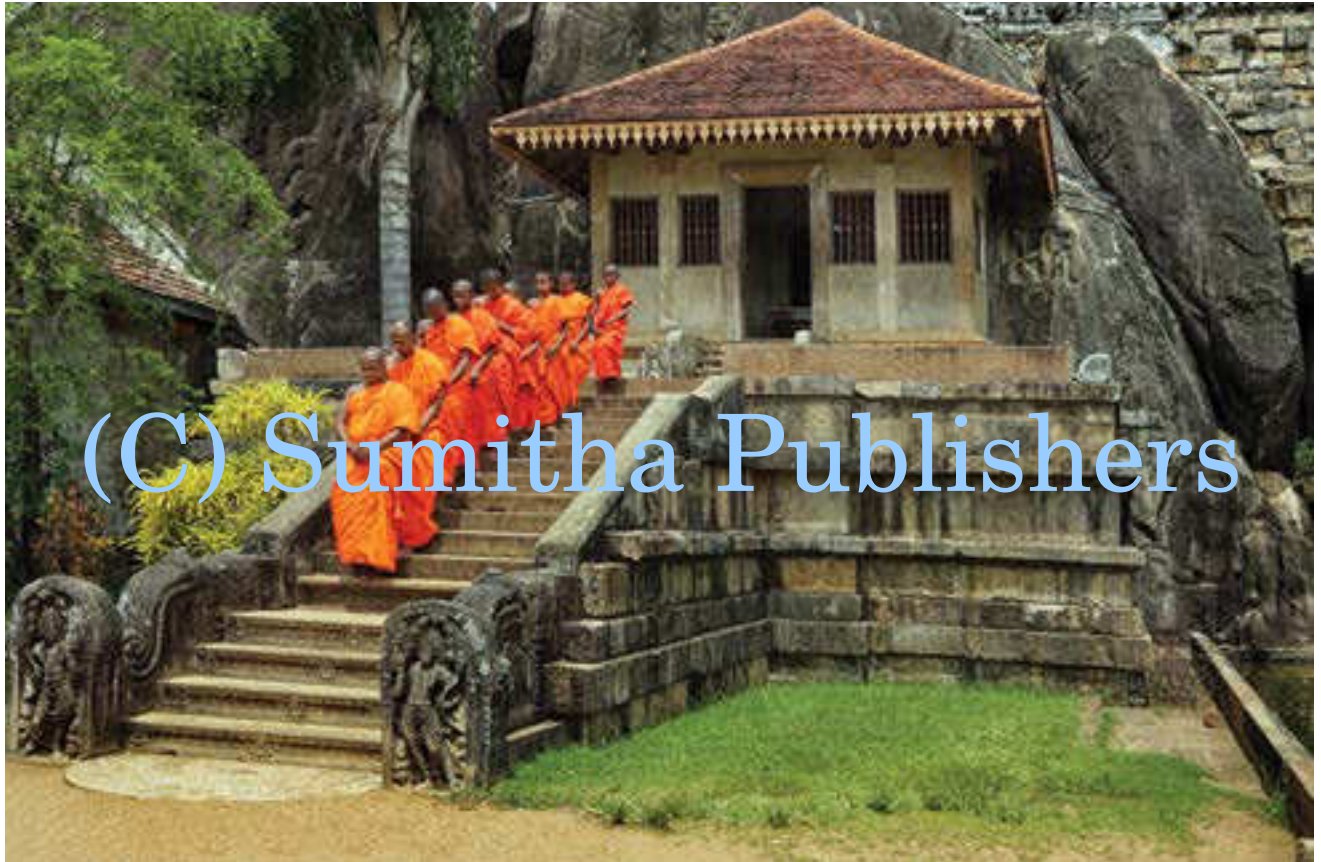
Adjoining the Temple is the famous royal park, known then as ‘Ran Masu Uyana’ (Gold Fish Park) where you will see not only baths decorated with sculptures of elephants playing in water but also natural caves.

One of these caves exhibits a diagram that contains pictures of animals and symbols of geometric design. Archaeologists think that this may be the oldest map of the world or the universe.

This book tells you in simple terms the significance of this Rock Temple, and will give you a taste of Sinhalese Buddhist culture.

Two roads from Colombo will take you to Anuradhapura. One of them will go past Negombo and Puttalam. The other will take you through Kurunegala, where you will have a choice. You may either go via Padeniya and Galgamuwa or via Dambulla. May your visit to Isurumuniya be memorable.

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Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.



The Old Cave Shrine



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The sacred *bōdhi tree*



The Reclining Buddha image in the New Shrine

1. Anuradhapura

About 200 km north of Colombo is Anuradhapura (*a-nu-rā-da-pu-ra*), the first royal capital of this island kingdom. Sri Lanka was a land of kings for over two millennia, from the 4th century BCE to 1815, when the last king was captured by the British, making the island a colony of the British Empire.

The glory of Anuradhapura as the royal capital lasted for a millennium and a half, from the fourth century BCE to the end of the tenth century. This phase is called the ‘Anuradhapura Period’ in Sri Lankan History.

Anuradhapura was a capital that saw the rise and fall of 113 kings, beginning from King Pandukabhaya, who founded it four centuries before Christ, and ending with King Mahinda V (981-1017 CE) who fled to the south to escape the wrath of South Indian kings.

The South Indian king, Rajaraja I (958-1014 CE) who was extending his Chola Empire, invaded Sri Lanka in 993 CE and occupied Anuradhapura and made it a part of his South Indian empire. He shifted the capital to Polonnaruva.

“Though the Sinhalese had held their own against the Cholas in the tenth century,” observes Prof. G.C.Mendis in his ‘The Early History of

Ceylon’, “ they found the mighty power of the Chola Empire under Rajaraja I too strong to resist. Hence Ceylon for the first time came under the direct rule of a foreign power” (p.52).

“At its height, Anuradhapura was one of the greatest cities of its age, functioning as the island’s centre of both temporal and spiritual power, dotted with dozens of monasteries populated by as many as ten thousand monks – one of the greatest monastic cities the world has ever seen. (Rough Guide to Sri Lanka,p.356)

Anuradhapura was one of the carefully planned cities of the Old World. The chronicle, *Malāvamsa*, composed in Jāla poetry in the fifth century, records how this city was built with such precision.

Prof. G.P.Malalasekera, in his ‘Dictionary of Pali Proper Names’ describes this city, as outlined in the *Mahāvamsa* thus:

“Pandukabhaya beautified the city with the artificial lakes Jayavapi and Abhayavapi. It was round the last-named lake that the king laid out the city, including four suburbs, a cemetery, special villages for huntsmen and scavengers, temples to various pagan deities and residences for the engineers and other officials. Abodes were

also provided for devotees of various sects, such as the Jains, the Ajivakas, wandering monks and brahmins. There were also hospitals and lying-in-homes. Guardians of the city – Nagaraguttika - were appointed, one for the day and another for the night” (p.83).

The fame of the city spread to China, Greece, Rome and the Middle East.

Monks from China visited Sri Lanka and Sinhalese monks visited China as early as the 5th century. “One of them, Fa-Hsien, visited Ceylon around AD 412 and spent two years in this country. Sinhalese kings such as Mahanama sent embassies to Chinese emperors owing to their common interest in Buddhism from early in the fifth to the middle of the eighth century when China reached the zenith of its power under the Tang dynasty (618-907)” (G.C.Mendis, ‘The Early History of Ceylon’ p.58).

A century later Sinhalese nuns were sent to China to establish an order of nuns.

“Traders from Egypt, subjects of the Roman Empire, visited the country, and small Roman copper coins of the fourth century at one time formed the bulk of the currency; they are found in quantities not only at almost every small port, but even at Sigiriya itself” (H.W.Codrington, ‘A Short History of Ceylon’ p.32).

Sri Lankan ambassadors were present in the Roman court as early as the third century BCE. The Romans called the inhabitants of this country, Salike or Salai, which appears in the writings of Pliny, the Romans who arrived in the island by accident.

Greeks came to Sri Lanka as early as the first century BCE in search of spices like pepper, ginger, cinnamon, muslins, pearls and precious stones, which they conveyed to Rome. King Pandukabhaya provided a living quarter for the Greeks in Anuradhapura.

The first map of Ceylon was drawn by a Greek named Ptolemy. Writes Codrington “The earliest map of Ceylon which we possess is that of Ptolemy in the first century after Christ... and the two chief cities were the ‘Royal City’, Anurogrammon or Anuradhapura, and the ‘Metropolis’ Maagrammon (Sanskrit Mahagrama) on the Mahaweli-ganga” (p.3).

The Arabs also came to the island in search of precious stones and spices. They called this island ‘Serendip’ after the Sanskrit name ‘Svarnadvipa’ meaning ‘Golden Isle’. ‘Serendip’ later gave rise to the English word ‘serendipity’ which means “an apparent aptitude for making fortunate discoveries accidentally”. The word was coined by the 18th century English writer

Horace Walpole, the author of ‘The Three Princes of Serendip’, in which the princes made such fortunate discoveries.

The Anuradhapura Age saw the efflorescence of its literature, art and architecture and the glory

of its hydraulic civilization. The modern city of Anuradhapura is divided into two: the Sacred City and the New Town. The Sacred City includes the so-called ‘*A ta mas tā na*’ (The Eight Sacred Sites) and *I su ru mu ni* Temple, the subject matter of this book.



2. The Eight Sacred Sites

The Eight Sacred Sites of Anuradhapura include a sacred tree, six stūpas and a chapter-house :

The sacred tree is called *Jaya Srī Mahā Bōdhi*, a branch of the Sacred Tree under which Prince Siddhartaha attained Enlightenment in Bodh Gaya in India six centuries before the birth of Christ. This branch was brought to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE and survives as the oldest historical tree in the world.

Ruvanvæli Sæya, is the great stūpa of the Mahavihara fraternity, built by King Dutugæmunu, the hero of the epic poem Mahavamsa. It rises to 300 ft. and is the third tallest stūpa in Anuradhapura and third tallest brick-building of the Old World.

Thūpārāma, is the first Buddhist stūpa and first Buddhist building in Anuradhapura. Built by Devanampiya Tissa, the first Sinhalese Buddhist king, this stupa enshrines the collar-bone relic of the Buddha. It has circles of stone pillars which suggest that they once supported a roof.

Abhayagiri Stūpa, is the great stūpa of the Abhayagiri fraternity, is 370 ft. tall. It is the second tallest stupa in Anuradhapura and second tallest brick-building of the Old World. It was built by King Vatta Gāmani Abhaya in the first century before Christ.

Jētavana Stūpa, is the tallest stupa in Anuradhapura and tallest brick-building of the Old World. Its original height was 400 ft. It was built by King Mahasena in the third century BCE. He was the first Sinhalese Buddhist king to patronize the Mahayana school of Buddhism.

Mirisavæti Stūpa, is the first stupa to be built by King Dutugæmunu, has four attractive structures called *vāhalkada*, frontispiece, facing the four directions. They are in different states of preservation and the sculptures of the western *vāhalkada* are among the best preserved.

Lanāīrva Sūpa, is the smallest of the stupas in Anuradhapura, is similar to Thuparama, in plan and layout. It also has circles of pillars which suggest that it was also a *cētiya-ghara*, a building that houses a stupa. Its name means ‘the Monastery of Lanka’.

Lōvāmahapāya, is the Brazen Palace and was the chapter house of the Mahavihara. It has a collection of 1600 stone pillars, arranged in 40 rows each having 40 pillars. The original building had 9 storeys, with more than 1000 rooms and a roof covered with copper mixed with bronze, hence the name ‘Brazen Palace’.



Ruvanvæli Sæya

3. Isurumuniya

Bordering on the southern outskirts of the sacred city of Anuradhapura is the ancient rock temple known as Isurumuni (pronounced *i-su-ru-mu-ni*). It centres around a cluster of gneiss boulders lying below the bund of the gigantic reservoir, *Tisā Væva*, constructed by King Devanampiya Tissa in the 3rd century B.C.

For the Buddhist pilgrim, it is a sacred temple that has two cave shrines, the one with a seated Buddha image in stone and the other with a reclining Buddha. For the tourist, it is a site that has many outstanding stone carvings of aesthetic appeal and mythological value.

This monastery was built three centuries before the dawn of the Christian Era by Devanampiya Tissa, the first Buddhist king of this Island. In the past, it covered a larger area than at present. It also included the area known today as *Vessagiri*, about a mile away to the south.

In the past, it was called '*i-si-ra-ma-na*' or '*i-su-ru-me-nu*' which was translated into Pali as '*is-sa-ra-sa-ma-nā-rā-ma*' meaning 'the monastery where many princes and wealthy men were ordained'. Among the princes was Ariththa, a nephew of the king, who was a minister in the king's court.

It was one of the largest monasteries of Anuradhapura.

Compared with the other sites in the sacred city, Isurumuni is modest: a small stūpa on the summit of a rock boulder, two cave shrines and an artificial pond.

Many English writers, some of whom were either members of the British civil service or scholars interested in the Orient, have written about Isurumuni.

Harry Williams

The English writer Harry Williams says in his *Ceylon, Pearl of the East*:

"Here is the Isurumuniya rock temple, to my mind the most interesting and certainly the most beautiful of the Ceylon rock temples, although not to be compared in importance with the *Kalugal vihara* in Polonnaruwa or the rock temple of Dambulla...I found Isurumuniya the most exciting and romantic spot in the island with the exception of Sigiriya, although I cannot say why. The place seems to reek of romance and of the past, with that particular atmosphere which clings to the rocks and caves and calls to something atavistic in the most prosaic of men" (p.151)

R. Raven-Hart

R. Raven-Hart says, in his 'Ceylon History in Stone' that "the Isurumuniya rock-temple is quite the loveliest spot in Anuradhapura,...It was the first of the many rock-temples in Ceylon" (p.19)

Henry W.Cave

Henry W. Cave, (Queen's College, Oxford) who wrote 'The Ruined Cities of Ceylon' in 1897 says:

"Another very ancient and interesting foundation attributed to King Tissa is the Isurumuniya Temple. This curious building, carved out of the natural rock, occupies a romantic position. Before and behind it lie large lotus ponds on whose banks large crocodiles are generally to be seen...To the right of the entrance will be noticed a large pokuna or bath. This is in good preservation and quite fit for its original purpose of ceremonial ablution...(p.47)

"Above the corner of the bath are the heads of four elephants, and above them is a sitting figure holding a horse" (p.49)

"The doorway is magnificent, and for beautiful carving equals anything to be found in Ceylon"(p.49)

"The temple is unique in many respects and worthy of a thorough exploration. It was discovered about thirty years ago entirely hidden by jungle, and, of course, in a worse state than at present."(p.49)

R. L. Brohier, The author of 'Discovering Ceylon' (1973) introduces Isurumuniya thus:

"In the loveliest part of old Anuradhapura, in a group of black granite boulders, there nestles the Isurumuniya cave temple. To be seen there at eye-level is a gallery of the finest pre-Christian rock-carvings in bas relief known to the world of international archaeology. One of them is a portrait popularly referred to as "The Lovers". The work is at least 2000 years old" p.84

Some scholars are of the view that Isurumuniya became a centre of Mahayana Buddhism in Ceylon. It may also explain why it is not among the 'Eight Holy Sites' (*Ata-masthāna*) at Anuradhapura even today.

It is well known that the world of Buddhism today is divided into two main schools of thought: Theravada or Hinayana (the Southern School) and Mahayana (the Northern School). Today, five countries constitute the Theravada School: Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

Sri Lanka was one of the earliest Theravada countries of the Buddhist world. Sage Mahinda, the son the great Indian emperor, Dharmashoka, was the one who introduced Theravada Buddhism to this country three centuries before the birth of Christ. It remained so until the days of King Voharikatissa (214-236 A.D.) when unorthodox Mahayana beliefs were also introduced into Sri Lankan Buddhism. As a result, several Mahayana monuments came into being at Anuradahapura, the first royal capital. Isurumuniya seems to be one of them.

There was, however, a continuous struggle between the two factions for survival. With the shifting of royal patronage, from the one to the other, the construction projects of the loser came to a stand still. This explains why most of the Mahayana monuments in Sri Lanka are in a half-constructed or half-finished state.

In the belief of some scholars, “this would account for the half developed nature of the Isurumuniya shrine. The sculpture of a man and a horse’s head seems to have been abandoned before it was given final perfection. This could be applied to all the friezes at Isurumuniya”

Dr. Nandadeva Wijesekera

Dr. Nandadeva Wijesekera, in his ‘Ancient Paintings and Sculpture of Sri Lanka’ makes the following observations:

“On a lighter theme are the stone carvings at Isurumuniya belonging to the earlier period of Anuradhapura. These resemble the Gupta style in India. The most famous example of this style is the carving of the pair of lovers at Isurumuniya which no doubt bring to mind the amorous couple painted at Ajanta caves. The material used is a variety of soft limestone.

Then there is another unique contribution, the moonstone. It is a gem of Sinhalese carving in stone. For its sheer beauty or its tastefully pleasing decorative design, it has no parallel anywhere in India or Sri Lanka. Semi-circular in shape, the moonstone resembles an open lotus flower cut into two and the carvings arranged in concentric circles depicting rows of lion, elephant, bull and geese... Stone carvings such as makara heads on the balustrades, series of leaf and flowers, and a variety of images – dwarfs, naga princes, guardians – indicate a wealth of beauty that is truly wonderful” (p.8-9).