



SEVEN WONDERS

THE 7 WONDERS OF ANCIENT LANKA

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
TO THE 7 GREATEST WONDERS OF ANCIENT SRI LANKA

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FOR
SIMON
TREASURE & GUIDE

“Not all who wander are lost.”

LEWIS CARROLL
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
1871



INTRODUCTION

Despite their iconic status, the original seven wonders of the ancient world come up short when compared to the seven wonders of ancient Lanka. The world's first Seven Wonders was assembled in the 1st century BCE by the historian, Diodorus of Sicily, albeit with help from Herodotus who began the tally 400 years earlier.

Their list, focused on the Mediterranean and near east, comprised a garden, two tombs, two statues, a temple, and a lighthouse. It featured the Pyramids of Giza, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, the Colossus of Rhodes, and the Lighthouse of Alexandria. Sri Lanka's list, though, is not all architecture with a nod to gardens – it is comprehensive, including as it does a painting, a monastery, a book, a piece of revolutionary new technology that enabled a treasured dish, a shrine, a tree, and a lake.

It covers around a thousand years of the island's first period of recorded history from around 500 BCE to 500 CE. Each item is more than a mere wonder for each helped set the abiding characteristics of the nation that has been called many magical names before settling on "Sri Lanka" – the Sanskrit words for shining island. This apparent lexical borrowing is no random thing - for Sanskrit, a Bronze age Indo-European language, is the lexis that has most influenced Sinhala, the language spoken by most Sri Lankans today. And its words, like the clues of an antique detective story, can be traced right back to many others that occur in European, Iranian, and North Indian languages.

Orphan language it is most certainly not. Its lexical connections demonstrate the astonishing antiquity of the island's culture, and, likewise, the seven wonders explored here connect the country not just to its past,

but also to its present.

Invaded, occupied, plundered though it has been so often, there was ever something inimitably robust and resilient about its culture that ensured that the island, with each new renaissance, was able to use the best of its past to inform its future - with deep and confident certainty.

The story starts, quite inappropriately, where it ends - when the ancient world itself came crashing to a bloody end around the base of a 1000-foot mountain in central Sri Lanka in 495 CE.

With it ended one of the most notorious parties the world had yet enjoyed, one that, at 22 years, totally outlasted even Cleopatra's Feast.

The party was Gatsbyesque in its exuberant excess. More opulent than the Rothschild's surrealist ball of 1972; more majestic than the Shah of Iran's 2,500-year dynastic celebrations the year before, this party, like the ancient world itself, raced to its corporeal end with all the aplomb of the last serving of the last martini on board the Titanic.

Of course, 500 CE is little more than a marker, a slender signal, a humble and iconic rounded-up figure that has been invented by historians eager to bring closure to the world of the Romans and Greeks, the Pharaohs, Assyrians, Hittite, Persians, or Han. But the date has stuck.

Thereafter follows the medieval age, the early modern age. And the later early modern age; even the later modern age, and our own post-modern age, an age shorn of parties, or glamour, decadent or otherwise.

Sri Lanka's 22-year end-of-history party followed exactly the dates of the reign of one of its most outrageous kings, an equatorial Nero with mesmeric hints, like the best of expensive wines, of other things - Vlad the Impaler; Nebuchadnezzar, Louis XIV.

In joy, as Mark Twain observed, is sorrow - and Kashyapa, king, party giver, gourmand, and libertine, knew that his moment of doom was due to come sooner rather than later.

Gazing across the plains from his high fortress walls in Sigiriya, he would have been presciently aware that his brother would eventually arrive to stop all the fun.

And so he did. Commanding a specially recruited mercenary army from nearby India, Moggallana had come to take back what he considered his by right - the throne.

The legitimate son of Dhatusena, one of the country's greatest kings, as his heir, Moggallana would have looked forward to a reign of plenty after this father had chased the occupying Dravidian Tamils from the kingdom, and rebuilt the country, tank by tank, temple by temple. It was years of milk and honey (or Kittel) he had in mind - not penurious exile.

But it was not to be.

His half-brother, Kashyapa played family politics with a cardsharp's skills. He out manoeuvred his brother, and, with the help of the head of army, deposed his father, Dhatusena.

Had things ended there we may never have heard of Kashyapa. He would just have been yet another one of the island's numerous coup d'état kings.

But with Oedipean or Macbethian instincts, Kashyapa went further. Much further. He began by entombing his father alive in his palace walls. For so distinguished a king, to be reduced to mere bricks and mortar was a shocking way to end a reign.

And, to escape the widespread disapprobation this would have created, Kashyapa abandoned his capital of Anduraupura in much the same way as Tiberius had abandoned Rome for Capri; and headed for Sigiriya.

Twenty-two years later he was to watch his sibling nemesis gather on the plains below him, his army spilling out across the water gardens and pleasure terraces of his Alhambra-like palace.

The day was to end with the death of Kashyapa and the extinction all that Sigiriya stood for - one of Asisa's most remarkable pleasure palaces; the venue for a lifestyle that made living one long spectacular party.

Its like, anywhere in Aisia, was probably not seen again until the Kangxi Emperor built the Gardens of Perfect Brightness in the Old Summer Palace, outside Peking some twelve hundred years later, in 1707.

A capital for just one reign, Sigiriya was a cross between the Tivoli, Akhenaten's Amarna, and the Brighton Pavilion. It enjoyed every last innovation and refinement available – and there were many.

The most advanced water technology in the world powered its fountains, lakes, wells, streams, and waterfalls.

Artists whose frescos equaled those of the later and faraway Leonardo da Vinci painted its perfumed inhabitants. Nothing was denied it – nothing until the Moggallana denied it everything.

The victorious brother returned the seat of government back to the old capital, Anduraupura, like some brow beaten and repentant deserter; ensuring that power was once again exercised with appropriate and demure propriety.

Even so, the world that ended in that sibling fight fought just five years before the official end of the ancient world, would have felt more like a bump than an earthquake to the Anduraupura kingdom's subjects.

Quite what these subjects numbered is the matter of modest academic dispute. It is likely to be far south of a million – which was the island's population in 1800 CE.

Few though they were, the kingdom's subjects had, by 495 CE, already chalked up nearly 1,000 years of recorded history since 543 BCE when they began their documented life as a small migrant township near Kuradamalai on the western coast of what is today the Wilpattu National Park.

Even after the fall of Sigiriya, the kingdom had almost five hundred years more life ahead of it. But they were years that became just little bit worse each Vesak.

Despite an embarrassingly few number of luminous monarchs such as Manavanna or Sena II, dozens of more regicidally minded Anduraupuran kings drove their kingdom onto the hard shoulder of nationhood, setting it up perfectly - and fatally - for the annihilating invasion that was to destroy it in 993 CE when India's Chola emperor, Rajaraja the Great, crossed over Adam's Bridge.

But long before this moment – indeed almost at

the very point at which Sigiriya itself fell - many of the island's greatest monuments had already been built; its most important technical, religious, cultural; and artistic advances and inventions had already been made.

In many senses, Sri Lanka, by the time of the fall of Sigiriya, was pretty much done and dusted. Until the Portuguese arrived in 1505, much of what was to follow was something of an anticlimax.

But then this is to begin this account of ancient Lanka's Seven Great Wonders the wrong way round: at the end with the ancient world of Sri Lanka's seventh wonder, and not the beginning.

ONE

AQUA TECH

“There will,” stated Stephen King deferentially, “be water if God wills it.” But as any ancient Sri Lankan would have told him, this is only half the truth of the matter. Water, uncollected, undistributed, unpurified, is all but useless however much the good Lord has allowed.

And water was what the island needed - especially in those areas first settled by migrants; for despite abundant monsoons, the water, uncollected, soon vanishes.

Ancient Sri Lanka was settled by its later migrants mostly from the north to the south - and the north and central part of the island is dry. Often, even, waterless. Which is why almost the first thing the new settlers did was to assemble around this most precious of resources every possible innovation, and resource, from tanks and reservoirs, dams and canals, slice gates and the planting of different types of vegetation to promote purification or reduce evaporation.

All this started when, within 39 years of the arrival of Prince Vijaya, the founding father of the Singhala nation, its third – and still modest – king, Panduvasdeva, created the first notable man-made reservoir on the island: Panda Wewa. Indeed, if historians and pundits are to be believed, Panduvasdeva’s tank was one of the world’s most notable man-made reservoirs. Unlike any of Diodorus’s wonders, its importance lay not simply in its pleasing visual beauty, but in the fact that it, quite literally, gave life to the land. Without it, there would have been few if any other later wonders, structural or otherwise, to commend.

What mattered was not whether Panda Wewa was earth’s first man made reservoir – but what it

represented; and what it enabled. Hydrologists and historians, who have studied the remote and subdued landscape around it, believe that the king dammed a small river, the Kolamunu Oya, to create the reservoir, at one end of which he had situated his nascent capital, not far from present day Chilaw.

Unlike all other ancient reservoirs, not least the great pharaonic ones, this one was not created by simply filling a natural hollow with water – but by forming a dam to hold the water in and regulate its distribution.

To get to this point, the industrial and engineering expertise possessed by the kingdom would have had to have been considerable. A capability to make bricks and cut stones would have been essential; and the understanding of how then to use these things to create a sluice to regulate the flow of water to the city and the paddy lands. Construction, engineering, hydrology, mathematics, agriculture, project management: all would have had to fuse with seamless genius.

Spanning one and a half miles at a height of 24 feet, the dam is cunningly part-made by utilising the natural rock to reduce the amount of stones and bricks required to hold back what was, for the time, a colossal amount of water - 416 million cubic feet within an area of 1,360 acres. Its slopes were protected by stones to minimise erosion, and the overall structure was sufficiently robust to withstand and release the immense quantities of water that gathered during monsoon times; its ability to absorb pressure cleverly maximised by the design of an unusual twisting embankment that skirted low ground.

The tank was to last for over 2,300 years before finally being breached by monsoon rains in 1805. Parts of its structure can still be seen today as you travel from Bingiriya to Wariyapola. Just past the Detiyamulla Sri Jettathissa Rajamaha Viharaya you come across a lane

paved with concrete blocks, known as Gota Keta; and here are found the partial remains of the ancient embankment, disappearing into the jungle.

Many far greater tanks, with much more advanced sluices, subtle canals and structural designs that engaged the most brilliant attributes of engineering were to be built across the island in the hundreds of years that followed. But this was the first one, the mother tank, the one that ignited Sri Lanka's aqua power – a faculty that today not only still waters the land but also powers almost 60% of the country's energy needs.

TWO

THE TREE OF
ENLIGHTENMENT

It was 250 years after this that Sri Lanka's second greater wonder appeared, an import that, in going native, came to symbolise everything about the land, then as now. No building this, nor even a book or garden, but a tree, a single tree – the Sri Maha Bodhi, The Tree Of Enlightenment, an A list celebrity tree to outshine anything anywhere else in the world; not just Sri Lanka's oldest living tree, but also the oldest recorded tree on earth.

As a tree, it gained its bloodline from the bodhi tree in Bihar under which Lord Buddha sat sometime around 500 BCE prior to attaining his enlightenment, a nirvana of not inconsiderable benefits, including a full understanding the true nature of everything. Its illustrious history aside, the near relatives of bodhi trees are arguably more beautiful, including, as they do, figs, banyans, breadfruits, jacks, mulberries. But history is rarely written by the beautiful. It is the survivors that get to tell the story and although there is no such thing as an average life span for a tree, the bodhi tree squats confidently at the extreme end of the spectrum, living for anything up to 3,000 years. It can tell stories that would put Scheherazade herself to sleep.

The bodhi still growing in Anuradhapura dates back to 236 BCE. At the time of its arrival, the country was still making tentative if immutable steps as an embryonic nation; and its appearance was to coincide with the reign of the island's eighth recorded king, Devanampiya Tissa. It arrived just a few years after Buddhism itself arrived on the island, protolyzed by Mahindra, the son of the Indian Emperor Ashoka.

Clearly, the young missionary had painted a compelling picture of his new island abode in his letters home for he was soon joined by his sister, Sanghamitta. She brought with her a golden vase in

which grew a sapling of Lord Buddha's original Bodhi-Tree. Accompanied by nuns and an entourage of useful craftsmen, Sanghamitta landed in the north of the island and was met by King Devanampiya Tissa himself.

With some ceremony, he escorted the party to Anuradhapura along a road said to have been softened with white sand (an enhancement that the present day Road Development Agency might take note of); and the Bodhi sapling was planted in the city's Mahameghavana Grove.

The world that this tiny tree then looked out upon was already more than a little magnificent. From its plot stretched a new and constantly enlarging city, the creation of Pandukabhaya, a staggering construction by any measure. As the ancient Athenians were putting the finishing touches to the Acropolis and the nascent Roman Republic issuing its first tentative laws, the palaces, and structures commissioned by Sri Lanka's first great king rose up through the jungle, a tropical Versailles. Beyond its walls and moats stretched the Rajarata, the land ruled by the king, extending from the northern tip of the island to incorporate most of the island with the likely exception of the impenetrable hill country and the far south – Ruhana.

The small bodhi tree's very survival depended on all the components of a flourishing nation – a caringly and calibrated civil service, and phenomenally effective water management to feed the growing state. This in turn was enabled by international trade, culture, writing and an evolving new language – Sinhala; by roads, hospitals, horticulture, and an engineering capability that was able to assemble large stone palaces and temples. Surrounded by such professionalism, it is little wonder it flourished, and, in a sense, arrived just as the party began.

t grow in temples in Colombo, Nuwara Eliya and

Monaragala.

One was planted near Kandy in 1236 by a minister of King Parakramabahu II, and several others by early Kandyan kings around 1635. Another, in 1472 near Colombo, was planted by a somewhat overwrought King of Kotte, Bhuvanaikabahu VI. Four in Trincomalee, planted in 1753, mark the moment Buddhism began to recover from the onslaught of colonization.

Two even have British associations. The future King Edward VII planted a bo tree in 1875 in Peradeniya Gardens during a state visit more associated with big game hunting and dancing girls; whilst in 1803 a British officer, Davy hid in one to (briefly) escape a massacre in Kandy. The saddest though is one planted around 522 CE by a poet loving king, soon to kill himself in grief for the murder of his friend, Kalidasa, a writer with a finer sense of poetry than he had for women.

And although the Sri Maha Bodhi is in many respects a tamed and urban tree, it is also, by virtue of being a plant, an iconic symbol of the island's remarkable biodiversity. Its very existence infers the exceptional quantity of Sri Lanka's endemic species; its wide array of climatic zones; and ecosystems that include vast forests that still cover almost a third of the entire land.

THREE

THE THREE
GREAT STUPAS

Almost 100 years later a start was made on ancient Sri Lanka's third great wonder – one that was to comprise Asia's equivalent of the three great pyramids of Giza – the three great stupas of Anduraupura: the Ruwanweliseya; the Abhayagiri; and the Jetavanaramaya.

Stupas are a structure exclusive to Buddhist countries. The shape is made for perfect skylines. Bells, bubbles, pots, lotuses – even heaps of paddy: Sri Lanka's many thousands of stupas were built in a range of related shapes, and in such numbers that it is unlikely that a five-minute car journey anywhere in the country will fail to take you past one. They are still being constructed to this day – in Kandy, Kalutara and Kotmale, to name just three.

Whatever their shape or age, they are outstanding architectural creations, mesmerizingly graceful as they rise over their visiting pilgrims, providing them with a place to meditate and a home for the relics and religious objects they venerate.

And its three most important ones are found in the island's heartland - Anuradhapura.

The oldest of the tree is the Ruwanweliseya, built between 161 to 137 BCE by King Dutugamunu, with a height today of 103 meters. The first steps in its construction are told in extraordinary detail by the Mahavamsa Chronicle which started "on the full moon day of the month of Vesak. King Dutugamunu had the workers dug a 7 cubit deep excavation. He had soldiers brought in round stones and had them crushed with hammers. Crushed stones were placed at the bottom of the excavation and compacted using elephants. The Elephants had their feet bound with leather to protect their feet. Fine clay was brought in

from a nearby river. This clay was known as butter clay since it was very fine. King Dutugamunu ordered to spread butter clay on top of crushed stones. After placement of the butter clay layer, King ordered to bring bricks. Bricks were placed on top of the butter clay layer. On top of bricks, mesh of iron was placed. Mountain crystals were placed on top of iron bars. Another layer of stones was placed on top of mountain crystals. On top of stones, 8" thick copper plate was placed. Copper plate was sprayed Arsenic and Sesame oil. On top of the copper plate, seven inch thick silver plate was placed."

And that was just the beginning. The king was to die long before the stupa was completed and the Mahavamsa retells the story of the dying monarch being carried on a palanquin to see the works.

Standing for centuries, and now much restored, its fabled relic chamber has yet resisted all attempts at excavation. Within it is said to be a vessel filled with Lord Buddha's artifacts, placed atop a seat of diamonds, encased in a golden container adorned with gems, and set inside a room decorated with murals and a silver replica of the Bo Tree. The Mahavamsa Chronicle notes its sovereign importance: "The relic-chamber shall not shake even by an earthquake; flowers that were offered on that day shall not wither till the end of Buddha Gotama's Dispensation; the lamps that were kindled shall not be extinguished; the clay that was mixed with perfume and sandalwood shall not dry; even a single scratch shall not appear within the relic-chamber; stains shall not appear in any of the golden goods that were offered.'"

Just decades later the stupa was to be joined by another, the Abhayagiri Stupa, built by King Valagamba in the 1st century BCE.

Although today it is just 70 meters high (having lost part of its pinnacle), it once towered above its older sibling at 115 meters.

But it was controversy not size that really marked out its creation, for the structure was built for the use of the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist sects whose teachings were seen as profane by the competing and dominant Theravadin sect. Appalling though the views of Mahayana monks were to Theravadins, for their habit of putting the enlightenment of others before oneself, those of the Vajrayana was so far beyond the red line as to be heretical - for the Vajrayanas put great faith in mysterious and super-fast ways paths to enlightenment – including mantras, mnemonic codes, symbolic hand gestures, spiritual diagrams, and divine visualizations.

Made partially from material removed from the buildings of the Theravada practicing Mahavihara monks, the stupa's bricks were plastered in lime mortar and sat on a vast platform enclosed by a rampart, admittance to which was guarded by 4 guard house entrances. And when the Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha first came to the island it was housed here in the complex of this stupa.

Centuries later, the well-travelled Chinese monk, Faxian was to describe the site as hosting a 30 foot high jade statue of Lord Buddha: "it glitters all over with those substances and has an appearance of solemn dignity which words cannot express. In the palm of the right hand there is a priceless pearl."

Both these two stupas however were put into the shadow over 400 years later by the Jetavanaramaya. Commissioned by King Mahasena sometime between 273 to 301 CE, this is the stupa that put Sri Lanka on

on the map, the stupa of all stupas, and at an original height of 122 meters, the world's third tallest building, eclipsed only by the Great Pyramid of Giza and Pyramid of Khufu; and much later by the Eiffel Tower.

It is the class of building to which superlatives and statistics cleave like clams. Together with its compound and related buildings the site covered nearly 6 hectares, housing over 10,000 monks and sitting tight on foundations that reached down almost 10 metres.

Even the relatively simple act of manufacturing the almost 100 million bricks used in its construction was to turbo charge ancient Sri Lanka's building capacities. Within its vast and elegant bulk, lies buried part of a belt tied by Lord Buddha.

But Mahasena's blatant favouring of the Mahayana sect set the kingdom on a perilous path. Indeed, it even promoted a civil war, the fighting only abandoned when the recalcitrant king recanting his errors and re-empowered the much disgruntled Theravada monks. Thereafter, however, all, or nearly all, was sweetness and light in the kingdom, and the old king was to end his days having earned the sobriquet as Minneri Deviyo – the God of Minneriya, for building, no doubt in further repentance the 4670 acres Minneriya Tank whose 230 billion gallons of water turned the dry east of the kingdom in a paddy paradise.

Quite apart from their sheer seismic might and beauty, these 3 great stupas stood as a reminder, if ever it was needed, of the dominance of Buddhism across the island. When the religion first arrived its royal adoption ensured that it caught on fast, rapidly replacing the Hindu, animist and Aboriginal cults of the original or other early islanders.

But as Buddhism spread, it took with the ever-stronger

political reach of the Singhala kingdom, expanding its authority and character, embedding a common language that would become known as Singhala, and a common script that evolved from ancient Brahmi. Religion became the glue of an unusually early unified state that for well over a thousand years would reach right across the island, invasions, rebellions, and occasionally competing statelets notwithstanding. Four hundred years of later colonialism may have dented it, but it failed to stop it. As the centuries pushed Buddhism into the corners of Asia leaving it survive in just a handful of countries such as Bhutan, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Mongolia, and Laos – in Sri Lanka it stayed fast, a flourishing rarity.

FOUR

HEAVEN'S
PALACE

Ancient Sri Lanka's fourth great wonder is a palace built to escape death and suffering. Built by the self-same great king, Dutugamunu, who commissioned the Ruwanwelisaya, the oldest of Aurnadupura's three great stupas, the Brazen Palace, or Lowamahapaya, was built between 161 BC to 137 BC. Its name "brazen" comes from the brass or copper roof tiles that covered it.

For centuries this was the island's most magnificent building. The king had his architects draw up no-limit plans for an opulent palace monastery, two hundred feet long, rising up nine stories and a further two hundred feet, each story punctured by a hundred windows. Observers spoke of the entire edifice containing a thousand rooms – an obvious exaggeration, but one that was not really required. For the building was, by any standards anywhere in the ancient world, a masterpiece.

Inside the vast structure golden pillars held up the roof of a special throne hall, its centerpiece an ivory throne centred between the titanic images of a golden sun; and a moon and stars picked out in silver and pearls. The gilded roof glinted so fiercely in the sunlight that it could be seen from miles away. No expense was spared in its furnishings either. Even the water basins positioned for the washing of feet and hands at its entrance were said to be of gold.

Each floor of the building was given over for the use of monks in varying stages of sanctification as they travelled the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment. Naturally, the lowest floor, the Buddhist equivalent of Perfumes & Make Up in a Department Store, was reserved for those who had yet to achieve anything. If not quite the habitat of the hoi polloi, it was not that far off either. The second floor, however, was allocated for those who had mastered the Tripitaka – three texts in the Buddhist

Pali Canon, mostly concerned with doctrinal requirements and monastic rules.

It was only on reaching the third floor of this extraordinary structure that you could encounter monks who had made a real step change, for these ones had attained Sotapatti, the first stage of sanctification – an achievement made possible by having trounced indecision and an obsession with individuality, and rituals.

The fourth floor was populated by monks who had added to this achievement by making serious inroads to eradicate all tendencies towards ill-will. And, more importantly, any thoughts of sensuality.

On the fifth floor lived the Anagamin monks – those who were now seeking to overcome pride, restlessness, ignorance, fine things, and immaterial cravings in order to become an arhat. And above them all, in the upper stories of this temple of gold, lived the Arahats themselves. This lofty station, the goal of all practicing Buddhists, was reserved for those who have finally achieved Nirvana. Not for them the irksome and interminable cycle of rebirth.

Despite the building burning down, it was faithfully rebuilt in all its brilliance by King Saddha Tissa, Dutugemunu's brother. Further repairs were carried out a hundred and twenty years later and a pavilion decorated with gemstones was added. But by the time of King Siri Naga I, sometime after 195 CE, the repairs carried out on this and other buildings in

Anuradhapura were noticeably more modest in their goals. Buildings such as this one, were made good, but reduced in size and scope, the easier for maintaining perhaps – or maybe because there was just insufficient money to keep them as they had been first envisioned.

It was, in its own grey and mildly dispiriting way, a metaphor for its time.

Today you need a rich imagination and a keen sense of history to imagine how the Brazen Palace would have looked – even in Siri Naga I's time. Destroyed eight hundred years later in the tenth century by Tamil invaders, it is today reduced to one thousand six hundred granite columns set in forty rows – all that survives of its once colossal walls. As Shelley might have said had he added Sri Lanka to his well-documented French, Swiss, German, Dutch, and Irish holidays: "nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare," stretch yet more ruins, scrub, and jungle.

FIVE

LET'S EAT

Sri Lanka's fifth great wonder is a mystery. Perishable, yet still found in almost every island household at some point in any week, its origins may be obscure but historians appear to agree on one thing: it is uniquely Sri Lanka, originating here at some very distant point in the remote past before being adopted in many other parts of South Asia, and even further afield. Uniquely, it is also a wonder that can be constructed by almost anyone who knows how to boil rice. The recipe is simple. Once boiled, you add coconut milk to the rice for 5 more minutes of cooking until no liquid is left. Then slice it into shapes – diamonds are a favourite – and leave it to cool and dry a little more.

Kiribath, the name of the dish, is the ultimate comfort food. And yet like Dior's little black dress, is immensely versatile too. It can be served with anything: poached eggs, Foie gras, curry, marmalade – but by far the best consumable accessory is Seenī Sambol, a sweet, tangy, caramelized onion flavoured with all the spices for which the island is so famous – tamarind, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, curry and pandan leaves, chilli and turmeric.

Most, if not all the food made on the island, can be found elsewhere: in India of course, but also the Maldives, Malaysia, the Arab world, Portugal, Holland, and Britain. These shared dishes have, over the centuries, evolved to become distinctly Sri Lankan but only kiribath seems to have started its world journey from this island.

It is also the only food item to have inspired a stupa – the Kiribath Vihāra in Anurādhapura, a small, barely standing and much overlooked stupa of almost unimaginable antiquity that once was said to house the sacred tooth relic itself, whose own origins, like the dish itself are equally opaque.

Yet kiribath's very existence signifies several fundamental things about Sri Lanka that reach far further than mere corporeal cravings.

Like so many other Asian countries, rice is the country's staple food, more so even than bread in the west. Sri Lanka devours over 2.4 million metric tons of it annually.

A semi aquatic plant, rice needs water to grow – around 2,500 litres of it for every kilo of harvested rice. Had ancient Sri Lanka rested on the calibre of those distant aquatic laurels that gave rise to Panda Wewa in the 4th century BCE, the country would have evolved little further than a few modest kingships. To grow the vast amounts of rice that were needed then, as now, huge advances in water technology were needed.

And these are best epitomised by bisokotuwas – cutting edge sluices, their design and position modified and perfected by the kingdom's hydrogeological engineers, the Quantum Computing scientists of their day. Their revolutionary innovations were far in advance of anything anywhere else in the world; and ensured that water could exit a reservoir without putting so much pressure on the dam embankment that it would collapse. But at scale – for this was the breakthrough. The new sluice designs green lit the possible size of reservoirs, allowing them to scale up to unprecedented levels; and water of unimaginably large quantities could be collected to extend agriculture, support ever larger and more urban populations and produce crops whose surplus would rapidly and exponentially enrich the young state.

One of the very oldest bisokotuwas can still be seen at Kudawilachchiya, an ancient, abandoned tank located

inside Wilpattu National Park. It was constructed here sometime after 67 BCE by the first Lambakanna king, Vasabha. The stone slabs used on its inner face fit so perfectly together that there is no room for even the modest weed to grow. Rising above it the sluice tower itself can still be seen.

At the time, it would also have sported many other refinements that maximized water availability - inceptor zones, for example, created between the tank and the paddy fields by planting 77 types of trees and plants whose well-developed root systems would absorb the salts and heavy metals from the water before it reached the paddy. Tree belts were planted well above the water tank to stop wind, waves, and evaporation. Sedges, grasses, and special shrubs were planted to purify water run-off. Large catchment forests were planted to improve the groundwater table and regularise the supply of water to the tanks in the dry season. And in the nearby upper catchment areas small dams and miniature tanks were constructed to deliberately make the land marshy and capture silt that would otherwise run into the tanks.

Vasabha is also credited with building lengthy canals to transport water over very long distances, using natural gravity to propel the water along its course by creating a gradient of 10 centimetres per kilometre. "It is possible," wrote a Mr Bailey, Assistant Government Agent of the District of Badulla in 1885, "that in no other part of the world are there to be found within the same space, the remains of so many works of irrigation, which are at the same time of such great antiquity and of such vast magnitude as in Ceylon. Probably no other country can exhibit works so numerous and at the same time so ancient and extensive, within the same limited area, as in this Island."

These innovations propelled the modest Anuradhapuran Kingdom into the political stratosphere, creating such rice surpluses as to underpin an economy that would maintain a flourishing and confident international presence in South Asia and within the Indian Ocean trading zone. But of the many benefits water technology and the exponential expansion of paddy land created, none is so great a wonder as that most refined and delicious of rice dishes: kiribath, the country's fourth and only consumable wonder.

SIX

THE HIDDEN
ORDER OF LIFE

The fifth wonder of ancient Sri Lanka is a book, one that is still in use today, almost unchanged since the time in which it was first written - The Pali Canon.

Eighty times larger than the Bible, this textbook for Buddhism, reveals much more than the importance of the religion itself. It symbolises the island's enduring attachment to rules, regulations, and laws.

The country's legal system is a mixture of Roman-Dutch law, English law, Kandian law, Thesavalamai and Muslim law. Overwriting all this is its constitution. But overwriting even this is what is most commonly accepted as correct; and that is largely dictated by the mores of Buddhism itself, its paramount religion.

Even the most unwritten of a country's laws have a source somewhere that was at some time described in custom, on stone inscriptions, on paper or in art - and so it is here. The source for so much that goes as said on the island can be traced back to the Pali Canon - not simply to its many instructions and recommendations but as much to the spirit of the Canon that, like the air we breathe, influences most parts of Sri Lankan society, even those that are not even Buddhist.

And for this the country can give thanks to the remarkable Valagamba, known by some as the boomerang king for his amazing ability to bounce back from even the most disastrous encounters, and the very same monarch responsible for building the massive Abhayagiri Stupa.

Valagamba's older three brothers had been kings before him, but the last of the trio, Khallata Naga, managed to get himself murdered by his army chief, Kammaharattaka who did his best to marginalise and even kill Valagamba. He failed. Valagamba won the

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ensuing fight, killed the murderous army chief and took over the throne by 103 BCE.

But within months, the new king faced and was defeated by the armies of 5 Pandyan Tamil chiefs who had invaded the island from India. Deposed a second time, the king evaded capture, and his many escapes and hiding places were to illuminate the map of Sri Lanka like a Catch-Me-If-You-Can treasure hunt. His most famous hideaway was probably the Gunadaha Rajamaha Viharaya in Galagedera, just where the flat plains of the Anuradhapura Kingdom rise into the mountains that enfold the centre of the island, and with them, protection, and cover. From that time to the final routing of the invaders in 89 BCE, Valagamba carried out a guerrilla war that, month by month, won ascendancy.

Eventually grappling his way back to power in 89 BCE, Valagamba retook his crown through a series of small, successful incremental skirmishes - although, given the murderous incompetence of his Dravidian interlopers, it may have been like pushing on an open door.

His second reign was to last for over a dozen years, years in which, having taken stock of the risks to Buddhism by Tamil invasions, the ephemerality of Lord Buddha's teachings that were at time merely oral, and the increasing schisms within Buddhist orders as different monks set about interpreting Lord Buddha's teaching with every greater diversity, he decided it was time to write it all down, copy it and distribute it right across his kingdom

Under his patronage, in the Aluvihare Rock Temple 30 miles north of Kandy, 500 monks assembled to begin the task. It was to be momentous moment for the challenge they had set themselves was immense. Firstly,

they had to recite the doctrines that were, at best, only orally remembered. That would have taken many years. Then they had to agree on an acceptable version of the teachings before transcription. That must have taken even longer. Finally came the lengthy work of transcribing them, using ola leaves from talipot palms.

The resulting Pali Canon became the standard scripture of Theravada Buddhism's. It was written in the now extinct Pali language, an ancient Indian language, thought to be the language spoken by Buddha and used in Sri Lanka until the fifth century CE.

Scholars argue (as they do) about how much of the work can be attributed to one person or to Buddha himself – but believers are largely free of such elaborate debates. The Cannon lays out in clear and unambiguous terms the doctrines, and rules of conduct that Buddhists should follow. It is made up of three parts.

The first, the Vinaya concerns itself mainly with the rules for monks and nuns. The second, the Sutta Pitaka is the Cannon's practical heart, comprising around 10,000 teachings and poems of Buddha and his close companions that focus on the typical challenges of life. The last, the Abhidhamma Pitaka is where the higher teachings sit – the ones most focused around Enlightenment.

The monks were probably still hard at work on The Pali Canon when Valagamba died in 77 BCE, bringing his adopted son, Mahakuli Mahatissa to power. But under his patronage copies were despatched across the kingdom and to other Buddhist countries. Aluvihare Rock Temple still exists, its caves dotted with ancient inscriptions, but its great library was burned down during the Matale Rebellion in 1848.

No other religion, still less any other Buddhist chapter in any other Buddhist country has so immense and comprehensive a single document as the Pali Canon to govern its actions.

SEVEN

THE FLOWER
GIRL

This review of ancient Sri Lanka's 7 great wonders ends where it began – at Sigiriya. And it is hard to really know where to start so great is the site - 3 km in length and nearly 1 km in width, flanking its famous rock citadel.

The fortress itself sits atop a massive lump of granite - a hardened, much reduced magma plug – all that is left of an extinct volcano. Lost in forests, inhabited by hermits monks between the third century BCE and the first century CE, it was exposed by colossal landslides and then selected by King Kashyapa I as the location of a new fortress capital in 477 CE.

Much of it is hard to identify today but, in its day, it set new standards for urban planning, the royal bastion surrounded by an elaborately laid out outer city, with a final circle of three types of gardens around it: water, terraced, and boulder gardens.

Ponds, pavilions, fountains and cut pools made up the water gardens. More naturalistic gardens were created around massive boulders that mimicked an artless park with long winding pathways to saunter down. Brick staircases and limestone steps led up to more formal terraced gardens.

Across it all stretch out double moats and triple ramparts, defensible gateways, and steps in perfect geometric symmetry, locking all the elements of the fortress city together with mathematic precision and elegance and pierced by the massive sentinel sculpture of a crouching lion.

The beast guards the staircase to the ancient palace six hundred feet above though all that remains now are the two animal paws, rediscovered in excavations in 1898. Built with bricks and limestone, the lion's full height

was 45 feet. The rest of the creature lies in dust around the site, but even so, it gave its name to the place, "Sigiriya" being the Singhala for "Lion's Rock."

Gazing at it, the most irresistible connection is, of course, to the legendary Egyptian pharaoh, Rameses II, recalled by Shelley in his poem Ozymandias.

When King Kashyapa died, having wisely chosen to drive a sword through his own body rather than be captured alive, the city sank into a desolate retreat for a handful of monks getting so overgrown by jungle through the passing centuries that its rediscovery in 1831 by Major Jonathan Forbes of the 78th (Highlanders) Regiment of Foot was the sensation of the year. Forbes was no ordinary officer.

His book, Eleven Years in Ceylon published in 1840, is regarded as a masterpiece and he himself was so obsessed rumours of Sigiriya that he dedicated himself to detection, writing later:

"From the spot where we halted, I could distinguish massive stone walls appearing through the trees near the base of the rock, and now felt convinced that this was the very place I was anxious to discover."

The whole site was fueled by a remarkable hydraulic irrigation system.

Rock-cut horizontal and vertical drains, underground terracotta pipes, tanks, ponds, interconnected conduits, cisterns, moats, and waterways channeled surface water to stop erosion and tapped other water sources to deliver water to the huge ornamental gardens, the city and palace - and harness it to help cool the microclimate of the royal residences.

And this is perhaps the place to pause and select the one thing that marks out the site as a wonder of the ancient Sri Lankan world. One wall – the 'Mirror Wall,' was so highly polished as to reflect back what faced it.

"Wet with cool dew drops," wrote one bedazzled tourist of the ancient world on the mirror wall itself, "fragrant with perfume from the flowers, came the gentle breeze jasmine and water lily, dance in the spring sunshine." But another was turned into a vast art gallery, plastered, and painted white and, it is said, covered with over five hundred frescos.

Twenty one frescos still remain, made from paints whose vibrant pigments came from plants and minerals: iron oxide reds, chalk and lime whites, ochre yellows, charcoal blacks. The king was said to have a harem of over 500 women and these images appear to be of them, large paintings made directly onto the rock, hovering appropriately above the heads of any passing and transitory people.

Few if any secular paintings from ancient Sri Lanka survive – but these. Their existence, so many hundreds of years on, despite monsoon rain and plunderers, is a wonder all in its own right.

The eyes of the women are decorated with makeup, their bodies are adorned with jewels, their clothes are diaphanous and almost wantonly luxurious. Lotuses fill their hands, and trays of other flowers and fruits are seen, presented to them. And in one, a consort or concubine, a precursor to Mona Lisa herself, can be seen looking on in silent debate over which particular frangipani flower to select for her hair: a frangipani princess now over 1,500 year old, and quite easily the last and most beautiful wonder of ancient Lanka.

DISCOVER MORE

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ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

"It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently; "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centred on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel is a secret to most and a companion to some. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Renovated and furnished with art & antiques, its hills and valleys keep safe a rare seclusion.

Its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts; and scores of trees – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Its healthy menus fuse east with west, street food with fine dining. It can be viewed at www.flametreeestate.com.

A GIFT FOR READERS

Of course, as a reader, you naturally qualify for special treatment should a holiday bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Drop the general manager a note to tell him how you came across us and to make arrangements to best suit your time and budget:
generalmanager@flametreeestate.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, writer, and hermit.

He was raised, with few concessions to modernity, in Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, and the Middle East.

He gained various degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

He launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online before running various homeless units at HarperCollins UK, India, and Hachette.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom divas and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers. The hotel is also the location for The Ceylon Press.

Besides running the Hotel and Press, he enjoys his hobbies of books, trees, dogs and, as a Cornishman, following the progress of the Cornish Independence Movement from afar.

