

SLNHS ARANKELE TRIP REPORT – 22nd March 2014



Arankele Monastery “This is a monastery in Padanagara style for the monks who devoted themselves to meditation. According to literary evidence, this monastery belongs to the early Anuradhapura period. Remains of buildings can be dated to 8-10 centuries A.D. This monastery was properly functioning during the Gampola period. Jantagara, Chankamanagaraya, ponds, Bodinigara, pathways, flights of steps made of polished stones and urinal stones are found here. This site has been declared an archaeological reserve.” (*Verbatim from a plaque at the site*)



Malik Fernando, Kamini de Soysa, Cheryl Silva, Kamalika Pieris, Nandalal Ranasinghe, Nirupa Ranasinghe, Shevanthi Jayasuriya, Sasshaka Jayasuriya, Chandanie Wanigatunge, W. P. Somasundaram, Chris Corea, Enoke Corea, Shenuka Corea, Sena Fernando, Ninel Fernando, Vasantha Dias – in all 16 participants ventured out to Arankele. We were joined at the venue by Marissa Fernando and three year old Anya and Keren and Rohan.

Departure was a few minutes late from Hyde Park Residencies, unfortunately leaving behind resident Dr Asoka Thenabadu, whose wife had fallen ill.

It was a much larger bus this time – and able to accommodate more people (in fact, still more could have joined and as empty seats cost money, we may need to take a smaller vehicle next time).

Travel was via the Airport Expressway which afforded our first sighting - a very long flight of bats – making us wonder where all the fruit came from

to feed these guys (since they are not birds, guys may be an appropriate collective noun).

Daybreak gave us lovely views of the Muthurajawela marsh and the Negombo lagoon. Almost before we knew it we were beyond the airport and heading to Kurunegala via Dambadeniya. We saw the Dambadeniya rock with steps cut along its sheer face making it a suicidal climb.

Passing Matiyangane, Chandanie informed us of the presence of the Panavatiya Ambalama a kilometre or so down the Dangolla road and we resolved to drop in there on the way back, time permitting.

Nearing Kurunegala there was a chorus of demands for a comfort stop and stop we did at a nice P&S where discharge and recharge was duly attended to.

Thus fortified we admired the Kurunegala rock (resolving to drive up to the top on the next available opportunity) and proceeded toward Ibbagamuwa on the Dambulla Road. Turning off here we reached Arankele guided by helpful people along the way.

Just before Arankele the little road crosses a beautiful swathe of paddy fields bordered by a range of steep hills which include the Arankele monastery. We reached the temple area, disembarked and headed out into the forest.



Shenuka Corea

As soon as we reached the forest a shama welcomed us with a lilting, liquid call and flew across the path ahead.

Moving further we reached the beautiful stone walkway reminiscent of Ritigala. We took a right turn and reached a perfect circle of stone, with the path extending beyond and a ruined stone structure to the right. Huge masses of granite formed the basement of the structure. After spending some time here we moved further down the path and passed a magnificent stone staircase which was in excellent repair. In fact a member of the party was lead to believe that it had just been built in view of the forthcoming elections !!



Chandanie Wanigatunge

This staircase now leads straight into the jungle. The stone wonders beyond had been reclaimed by the wilderness. By now, those who had not been to Arankele before had forgotten all about birds and natural history and were in awe of the architectural marvels of our ancestors !

Moving further we came to an enormous stone lined bath. Very much like the Kuttam Pokuna in Anuradhapura – only there was just one of them.



The stone staircase leading down to the water was in good repair. Further on we came to an open area with the remnants of a large audience hall. By now we had acquired a guide from the department of archaeology. This earnest chap gave us many theories and explanations pertaining to the structures and their uses. Kamalika made copious notes and also chipped in with her expertise when the discussion went round to weights and measures.



Chandanie Wanigatunge



From here we moved on to the hot medicinal baths !! Not for us but for the monks who once occupied the place. It is theorised that this was a monastery which housed monks at the closest plane to nirvana. As such there were no statues to be found here – the residents were already on a higher plane and did not have need of such visual stimulation to perform their meditation. However, they seem to have appreciated a hot bath !



Chandanie Wanigatunge

The bathing area is a large (10x30 foot at a very rough guess) rectangular stone lined basin with outlets for the water to flow out so it did not fill up. All around the inner side was a stone ledge where hot water pots were placed for the monks to bathe (the ledge was worn down in the particular places where the pots used to be placed). Outside and

surrounding the basin was a series of fireplaces for heating water arranged in a rectangle around the basin. There were also several enormous grinding stones – probably where herbs were ground before application on the bathers. So it seems to have been something reminiscent of the Roman baths and probably at around the same period in history.

From here we back tracked and climbed a long flight of stone steps to the piece de resistance - the foundations of a stone pavilion the base of which was about 30 by 30 feet, surrounded by a stone moat. A solid stone bridge spans the moat. For this structure, enormous stones have been precisely worked, each to fit its neighbour. Some of the joints even appear to be interlocked. Considering that each of these slabs of stone must weigh as much as an elephant this would have been quite a feat indeed. The joints are so precise that there is no space even to insert the blade of a knife. Most of the stonework is still absolutely level – after a thousand years.

The perfection and grandeur of this place, not a palace but “only” a monastery, makes the mind boggle. It is said that the complex once housed over six hundred monks.

To build such structures there must have been in those days an enormous concentration of financial wealth and a wealth of technology as well.



Sri Lanka and her people have lasted a thousand years and this, indeed, must have been their finest hour (with thanks to WSC).

It was here that we enjoyed the company of a pair of pied shrike. Appropriately described in the bird book as “dapper little birds” and now known as the bar winged flycatcher shrike.

Coming down the stairway once again we crossed the stone walkway and went down to have a look at the water supply which never runs dry. A series of stone steps going downward from a square of about 30 by 30 feet at the top. The steps lead downward to a square of six feet by six feet at the deepest point. There were some snails in the water and Dr Malik lost no time in examining them and recording the GPS coordinates. Vasantha was called in to hold on to him just in case he missed his footing and somersaulted into the water supply in the cause of science.



Chandanie Wanigatunge

We then made our way back to the main stone path and proceeded to the other end. Here was a rock cave containing a stone shrine and sleeping quarters for a couple of monks. It was under a drip ledged boulder and was incredibly cool inside

despite the midday heat.



Chandanie Wanigatunge

Some large tree snails on a tree near the cave were duly photographed for later identification.



Chandanie Wanigatunge

We made our way back to the stone circle where our patron was lying down – reminiscent of Rip Van Winkle as chirpily observed by one of the party. Some of the group had already settled down to lunch. Enoka, Shenuka and I put down our mat on a bed of leaf litter (after a cursory check for reptiles).

The Fernando party including Keren, Rohan, Marissa and Anya had also completed their tour and were sitting down to a picnic lunch in a most picturesque fashion.



Meanwhile around the stone circle Dr Malik was leading a discussion (now in the manner of Getafix the druid) on whether or not it was ethical to feed stray dogs on archaeological monuments (a practice resorted to by all those with left overs from lunch).

Lying here after lunch in the dappled shade one could imagine the original builders and users of the complex going about their tasks. We were surrounded by enough material for several PhDs in architecture, history and possibly anthropology. In fact, NHS past president Lal Balasuriya told me last week that he would not be coming on the trip as he had been to Arankele many times with his architecture students (he is the Dean of the City School of Architecture).

By and by a marching column of ants emerged from the leaf litter and indicated in no uncertain terms that it was time for us to leave their territory.

On the way out of the monastery we spotted a bronze backed snake. It looked very smart and

gave us a brief photo opportunity (not successfully seized) before slipping away into the forest.

Getting back to the vehicle we headed for the Panavatiya Ambalama at Metiyangane. Here we disembarked once more to admire this little wonder. It was made of very large wooden timbers and raised off the ground by four small boulders. The pillars holding up the roof were intricately carved and were compared with those at Embekke by knowledgeable members of the party.



Shenuka Corea

Chandanie used the ambalama for its intended purpose by sharing out some cake. We then posed for a trip photograph next to this quaint and ancient structure and headed for home. We returned to base by about 5pm.

On the way the possibilities regarding the next trip were discussed – perhaps an overnighter in the Knuckles ! Let's see how it goesChris

Photographs not taken by me are acknowledged



Shenuka Corea