

An Archaeological study on Menikkadawara Rajamaha Viharaya

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Introduction

This research paper is a preliminary investigation on an ancient *Rajamaha Viharaya* located in the village named *Menikkadawara*. The village of *Menikkadawara* (altitude 1150 ft from MSL) is located in the *Warakopola* divisional secretariat in *Kegalle* district, *Sabaragamuwa* province in Sri Lanka. According to the evidences *Menikkadawara* and its adjacent area had very long history, including prehistoric period to up to date. *Dorawaka Kanda* cave, a cave shows the prehistoric evidences, located near the *Menikkadawara*. (Wijeyapala 1997:417 - 445). After the prehistoric period, the early Brahmi inscriptions can be seen with drip ledge caves located at the bordering area of *Menikkadawara*, namely *Salgala*, *Lenagala*, *Mampita* and *Hunuwala*. All of these inscriptions related to the early historic period. (Paranavitana 1970). The above area was also important in the medieval period because *Dedigama*, a place quite close to the *Menikkadawara* was the birthplace of *Parakramabahu* the great, in *Polonnaruwa* period. (Godakumbura 1969:06). Historical texts like *Alakeshwara Yaddhaya* and *Rajavaliya* as well as Sinhalese war poetries like *Rajasiha Hatana* and *Kustantinu Hatana* also provide some information about this village in different angles.

(Suraveera 1965:29, Gunasekara 1926:50-52 Dunusingha 1997, Somaratne 1966). In addition number of Portuguese writers mentioned about the *Menikkadawara* in their records considering the strategic value of this place. (Perera 1930:751, Pieris 1909:82) According to the literary evidences, the history of the *Menikkadawara Rajamaha Viharaya* can be trace back to the *Gampola* period. Road commendation in *Tisara Sandesha* described about an ancient *Bo* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) as '*Ella Kola Himi*'. (Suraveera 1991:55). The *Sandesha* mentioned that this *Bo* tree was located between *Dorawaka* and *Dedigama*. Sometimes it may be the *Bo* tree of this temple. Former commissioner of Archaeology H.C.P. Bell Esq. also had examined this temple archaeologically for his famous *Kegalle* report. (Bell 1904:30).

Methodology

Examining the archaeological importance of the *Menikkadawara Rajamaha Viharaya* is the main research objective of this paper. Field exploration, literature review and personal communication are the main data accumulation methods in this research. Data analysis and conclusions in this research paper had been done in accordance with a comparative approach. In this study eye observation method played a vital role to

examine the artifacts and other architectural characteristics of the site.

Conclusion

Field observations proved that the *Menikkadawara Rajamaha Viharaya* had several archaeologically important aspects. *Tampita Viharaya* and Ola leaf library of this temple is vital in this matter. *Tampita Viharaya* means the temple which has been erected on the pillars. This tradition belongs to the Kandy period. In *Menikkawara*, there is a well preserved *Tampita Viharaya*. According to the Field observation it was built up on the wooden foundation which placed on twelve stone pillars. Total weight of the structure is based on these stone pillars. Wooden pillars and roof of this temple represents an ancient Sinhalese wooden arts and craft specialization. *Dharmapala Jataka* story was painted around the circumambulate track of the temple. These paintings belong to the Kandyan tradition and traditional painting techniques and colors also used for it. However these paintings are vital in social and art history, because they represent some Portuguese features through the images. For example costumes of the figurines, architectural features, furniture and other household items which painted in the *Jataka* story reflect these characteristics. Sometimes contemporary political situation of the area may be affected to the painter to create these dynamics. Observations suggest that these paintings are gradually deteriorating due to the rain water activities. Considering these disturbances department of Archaeology had conserved these paintings and roof of the *Tampita Viharaya* in few occasions during past few years. Inside the chamber there is a seated Buddha statue which belongs to the Kandy period. Wooden ceiling and lime plastered walls of the chamber decorated within various traditional paintings.

There are some ancient Ola leaf books in the library of this *Rajamaha Viharaya*. Most of them contains religious themes. Wooden covers of the books are decorated within ancient Sinhalese engravings and metal works. Some covers are decorated within small gems. It indicates that there was a specialized traditional knowledge on the Ola leaf industry in ancient times. In addition to Ola leaf books some ancient reliquaries and few sculptures can be see inside the temple. Some of them are made by wood and some are made by metal. Traditional decorations are also available in these artifacts. In addition, this temple had some ancient coins related to the colonial period. Majority of them are belongs to the British period. Chief incumbent of this temple Rev. *Menikkadawara Dhammaratana* thero mentioned that the *Bo* tree (*Ficus religiosa*) of this temple is very old, approximately several hundreds of years. According to the above mentioned details it is clear that *Menikkadawara Rajamaha Viharaya* is a one of the oldest temples in the region during the Kandyan period and its artifacts suggest that this place is significant in both archaeological and historical contexts.

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