Re-Imagining/constructing Anuradhapura civilization

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Introduction

The end aim of the archaeology exercise is to reconstruct ancient society helped by physical archaeology, textual material and the sociological imagination. Such constructions included chronicle and other descriptions from a Buddhist perspective. These were later added to by Western visitors from Portuguese describing a "Roman city" (Abeysinghe 1995), to the formal beginnings of descriptive archaeology in the 19th and 20th centuries which were again largely positive such as those of Bell and Paranavitana exemplified by the latter's *Sinhalayo*(1970)to 20th century British visitors describing "lost cities" (Swaan1966). With the coming of formally trained archaeologists using physical techniques (stratification, Carbon 14, et cetera) and the LTTE war, the focus shifted. Thus Conningham's "theocracy"(2007),Seneviratne's(2007) "re-reading heritage for conflict resolution", toJeganathan, Ismail,(1995) ascribing Anuradhapura to a colonial discovery, to Anuradhapura periodsites in Jaffna declared to be either "by Tamil kings of the 7th century" (Mandawala 2011) or simply of "Tamil Buddhism" (Sitrampalamand Pushparatnam 2011);the conventional Buddhist descriptions of *Solosmasthana* and *Atamasthana*as well as early 19th and 20th century archaeological perspectives have shifted drastically sometimes to almost its opposite.

Methodology

The question is: what is the methodology to be used to imagine Anuradhapura society. Conningham had used remains of edifices without recourse to any descriptions of their users/uses and attempted to compare Anuradhapura society with Hindu worshiping Angkor Wat or with the Mayan cities indulging in human sacrifice. It appeared that through a broad stroke of Eurocentricism, Anuradhapura was being equated to its opposite (Goonatilake 2011).Seneviratne's"rereading" is again one of ignoring well established facts to fit into the current discourse in some NGO quarters in discussing the LTTE-inspired 20th century conflict. Similarly, the attempt to give a non-existent Tamil Buddhist slant to remains in Jaffna and its environs is a similar questionable exercise going against facts.

The best and obvious comparisons would be of past societies with monumental remains and adequate written material. Easy examples would be ancient civilisations of Egypt, Greece and Rome. All three have extensive remains, comparable to that of Anuradhapura as well as descriptions of their societal functions and of theircultures. The methodology should be to compare these with Anuradhapura. The easiest to compare would perhaps be with Rome as the two cities were contemporaries.

First some commonalities: although both would be characterised by their civilisations as "Roman" or "Sinhalese" their populations would indeed have had genetic diversity (as for example Illeperuma2013 has shown for Sinhalese). So the characteristics we should examine are primarily cultural and behavioural and above all, the objectives of their rulers as well as their associated belief systems.

Rome depended mostly on surplus extracted through extensive slave labour and military conquests. Initially, Rome was small, limited to a city. Gradually, circa from 200 BCE as a warrior state, it embarked on continuous military expansion, finallyconquering the whole of the Mediterranean basin and a large part of North-Western Europe.

A key instrument to keep the conquered population as well as Romans happy violence was as a central used element in Roman culture and belief. The largest Roman edifice equivalent to Anuradhapura stupas was the Coliseum in Rome. It was a central arena for mass slaughter of domestic and wild animals and for large-scale execution of people. As a monument to Roman "sport as cruelty", there were literally thousands of people killed-including gladiators. The Coliseum capable of holding 50,000 spectators was only the largest of the over similar 250 amphitheaters in the Roman Empire (equivalent in our case to regional stupas). That barbarity was the height of Roman "civilization", venerating blood and gore providedtheindispensablehappiness for the population.

How does Anuradhapura compare? Anuradhapura which began in circa 10[th]CBE was older than Rome. But the period of Buddhism was from circa the 3[rd]BCE till the 11[th]BCE. The foundational economic basis of Anuradhapura was not military conquests of other lands but of agriculture, handicrafts and trade. It had equally large monuments, especially in the form of stupas and monasteries covering around 14 square miles, the stupas being among the tallest buildings of the ancient world.

The ideological basis of the rulers of Rome was "bread and bloody circuses". In Anuradhapura, Buddhism supported by the Royal family, nobility and masses substituted for blood sports. The ideological aim of Anuradhapura rulers - transliterating the words of the *Mahavamsa* onDutu Gemunu was to be "well versed in the duties of Kings" the obligatory duties of *Dasa Raja Dharma*. The Anuradhapura monasteries were unlike temples in Rome or those with the same name in Christianitywith their prime function of "prayer" to a God or gods. In Anuradhapura, almost no remains exist of gods. The colossal edifices were not for royalty (hardly any remains of palaces) but of places and spaces to practise the end goal, namely cultivation of the mind and meditation.

Practiceslike the stanza in lighting a lamp "may my ignorance be dispelled" or of offering flowers stating "as these flowers fade, so will our body undergo decay" were contrasts to Roman blood cries or prayers. Or,the stanza at death "all compounded things decay" was a contrast to the Roman blood cry "Those who are about to die salute you".

Conclusion

The general mood of the population in Anuradhapura as happyand calm is perhaps given in recent research (Segal et al 2002) on*Visudhdhimagga*-derived Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. This mood would be a contrast to the restlessness and anger of Rome. This Asian 21[st]century demands new non-Eurocentric approaches.

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