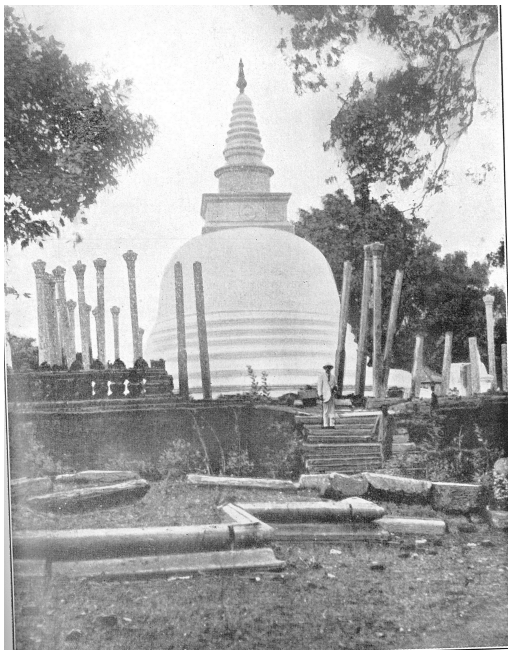
ANURADHAPURA AND MIHINTALE

C. W. Leadbeater

(Originally published in *The Theosophist*, August 1886. CWL helped Col. Henry S. Olcott in his work for the revival of Buddhist education in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, between 1886 and 1889. This article presents his impressions of his visit to ancient Buddhist sacred sites in that country. Pictures included in this article are from the February 1929 issue of *The Australian Theosophist.*)



Thuparama Dagoba, Anuradhapura

VERY little is known by the great majority of people about the early history of the island of Ceylon; and even of those who have read something of its ancient splendour, there are probably few who at all realize to what a height that splendour must have reached. When, one considers the small size of the island itself, and the fact that its kings (with the exception of temporary conquests of small districts in Southern India) never ruled over any country outside its borders, it is somewhat startling to hear of one chief city covering over seventy square miles of ground—of a defensive wall, erected round another chief city, which included an area of over three hundred and fifty square miles—and of a road. one hundred and sixty miles in length, along which a man could walk upon the roofs of the houses from end to end; and yet all this does not rest upon mere tradition—the ruins are there to this day to testify to these and many other evidences of the enormous wealth and the extraordinary command of labour possessed by the ancient Sinhalese kings. Much as the slight and partial excavations already made have revealed, there must still remain much more to reward a further and more systematic

search; for many miles of country, apparently as fertile as any in the world, and sheaving unequivocal signs of having once possessed a dense population, are now entirely overrun by jungle. Surely here is a good opening for the eager capitalist the land is to be purchased at a low rate, and when cleared would, undoubtedly, produce first rate crops, while in the process of clearing who knows what interesting and valuable relics of a bye-gone age might not be discovered? If these considerations, together with the fact that the climate is probably the pleasantest and most equable in the world (average mean temperature 80°, rainfall 51 inches) were made generally known, settlers would assuredly be forthcoming.

In view, then, of the fact that one hears so little of these ruined cities of Ceylon, I have thought that a short account of a flying visit recently paid to some of them might not be uninteresting to the readers of our Magazine. The earlier part of the journey from Colombo is performed by railway, and for the first fifty miles there is nothing specially worthy of note, except the marvellous luxuriance of the vegetation and the occasional lovely glimpses of flowery glades that relieve at intervals the monotony of the dense jungle growth. After passing Rambukkana Station, however, the scenery suddenly changes, becoming picturesque, varied, and even romantic. In the course of the next thirteen miles the line rises two thousand feet, and is consequently composed principally of sharp curves and steep gradients. Sometimes it is a mere groove cut out of the face of the cliff, and in one place it runs for some distance along a ledge only just wide enough for the rails, with a perpendicular wall of rock on one side, and on the other a sheer precipice of three or four hundred feet in depth, down which two little mountain streams fall in graceful cascades into the valley below. It is a sort of tropical complement to the railway up the Righi, and it is quite possible that some persons, when making the descent, might share Mark Twain's feeling of nervousness at finding himself "sliding down the banisters in a railway train," as he expresses it. At Kandy it is necessary to change trains, and take the branch line to Matale—the most northerly point to which the railway at present extends. Thus the first ninety miles of the journey are performed in comparative ease, though only at a very slow pace; but the remaining distance of seventy-two miles is far more formidable. If the enterprising traveller leaves Colombo, as our party did, by the 7.30 A.M. train, he will reach Matale at noon, and will have to leave again almost immediately by a sort of curtailed waggonette drawn by two skeleton horses, which is dignified with the title of a mail-coach. This will take him twenty-eight miles on his way, to the village of Dambulla, but there he will have to abandon it for a still more horrible contrivance called a "bullock-coach," which carries him over the remaining forty-four miles at a slow jog-trot of about four miles an hour, depositing him at Anuradhapura at about 6.30 on the following morning. It is possible, with some contrivance, for three persons to make some approximation to comfort in this vehicle; but when, as in our case, a cargo of eight unfortunates has to spend the whole night sitting bolt upright, with no room for the knees, and with iron supports bruising the back at every jolt of the crazy machine, this stage of the journey is simply unalloyed misery. I would also advise the traveller to possess himself quietly of the guard's bugle at the commencement of the evening, and keep it carefully hidden until morning, as otherwise his torture will be enhanced by a frequent and excruciating performance upon it. However, when the ancient capital is at last reached, all the fatigue and trouble of the journey will be speedily forgotten.

The ruins stand in the midst of a vast plain; and except that the surrounding land is unusually fertile, it is difficult to imagine why the Sinhalese dynasty established its capital

here in those warlike days for the position has no strategic advantages of mountain, river, or forest, and all its riches must have lain very much at the mercy of the Malabar invaders when once they had obtained a footing on the island: indeed, history seems to show that more than once they found it a comparatively easy prey.

The first thing that attracted our attention on descending from the coach was a collection of sixteen hundred square granite pillars, arranged in rows of forty, and standing about six feet apart, so as to cover an area of about two hundred and forty feet each way. Though they stand some twelve feet out of the ground, each pillar is one solid block of stone, rough and undressed, apparently standing now just in the condition in which it was brought from the quarry two thousand years ago I am told that it is considered probable that these pillars were originally sheathed in copper, and there can be no doubt that they must have been covered in. some way; for a nation capable of executing the neat and refined working in stone which we .s all around us here, would certainly never have left a prominent part of one of its great edifices thus unfinished. These sixteen hundred pillars, it seems, originally supported the floor of an enormous monastery called "The Great Brazen Place," built by King Dutugemunu in the year 161 B.C. This building, we read, was nine stories in height, each story being less in size than the one below it; it contained a thousand priests, besides dormitories for apartments, various other hall supported including a great resting on on golden pillars centre of lions, in the magnificent which stood a as the whole ivory throne: and roofed with vast fabric was brass (whence tiles of burnished have presented its name), it must appearance in a truly imposing of old. those brave days

CARVED PILLARS AT ANURADHAPURA

Only a short distance from the Great Brazen Place is the celebrated Bo-tree – the oldest historical tree in the world. All students of Oriental history will remember how the Princess Sanghamitta, daughter of the great Asoka, king of Magadha, and sister to Prince Mahinda, the apostle of Ceylon, brought with her from India a branch of the sacred tree under which the Great Teacher sat when he attained the Buddhahood. It was planted here with much ceremony in the year 245 B.C.; and the story of its life has since been handed down in a continuous series of authentic records. It is now a wide spreading tree, and in spite of its 2131 years of life, it still looks hale and vigorous. It is surrounded by three tiers of terraces, which are raised in the centre of a small grove of palms and Bo-trees. At the foot of the steps leading up into the grove lies a curious and beautifully-carved semi-circular stone—a specimen of what students of Buddhist architecture have agreed to call the "moonstone," though beyond the resemblance in apparent outline it has no connection whatever with the moon. Several of these stones are to be found among the ruins, and all are alike in general. design, though it seems that no two resemble one another exactly in arrangement of details. So, at least, says Mr. S. M. Burrows, the Assistant Government Agent of the district, in his little book "The Buried Cities of Ceylon." No traveller visiting these places should be without, this work; we found it a most invaluable hand-book, telling us just what to look for and. where to find it, and giving us facts and figures for which we must otherwise have searched through many volumes. I quote his description of these moon stones: "As a general

rule, the outer border of the stone presents a procession of the elephant, the horse, the lion, and the Brahman bull; the next two or three circles skew designs taken from the stem and leaf of the lotus plant; then comes a procession of the hanza, or sacred goose; and the innermost circles represent the other stages of the lotus growth—the flower, and the round bud." Ascending the steps and entering the grove we find lying on the ground some fine granite pillars and several images, all more or less defaced by time. Passing up a flight of steep stone steps and under a heavy arched doorway, we at last attain the highest platform, and stand before the iron railing which guards the Sacred Tree from the touch of the profane. This is the spot where the enthusiasm of the devotees culminates; and I have seen few sights more striking than the enormous crowd of pilgrims which came steadily pouring along what is called "The Sacred Road" and up those steps to lay their flowers and perfumes and incense at the foot of that venerable tree. Through the whole night that crowd streamed steadily in, as it had done through the whole of the previous day, and as it did up to the moment of our departure on the following day; through the whole night the High Priest of Anuradhapura stood patiently at the head of those steps, answering questions, directing the surging mass, and averting by judicious exercise of authority what might otherwise have sometimes been a very ugly crush indeed. A suggestive scene, truly; suggestive to see the expression of rapt devotion on the faces of the pilgrims; suggestive to note how each band of weary and travel-stained men, when from a distance of half-a mile or more, they first caught sight of the sacred enclosure, raised a great shout of gladness and pressed on their way with renewed vigour, many even weeping with joy, like the Jews of old at the sight of Jerusalem: most suggestive of all to remember that just such a huge procession as this – nay, one which must often have been any times as large—has poured along that road and up those Steps on every greater festival for more than two thousand years.

Not far from the Bo-tree is a mound surrounded by a circle o fine pillars (monolithic as usual) with beautifully carved capital — all that now remains of the "Peacock Palace" described in the ancient chronicles, but time failed us to examine half the objects of interest that presented themselves even close to the high-road; every few yards we came across fallen columns or fragments of stone carving. All I can do, therefore, is to give any outline description of some of the more prominent buildings, referring those whose interest is excited, and who wish for fuller particulars, to Mr. Burrows' book above-mentioned.

The next place we visited was the Ruanweli or Gold-dust Dagoba, also built by King Dutugemunu, to commemorate his victory over the Tamil usurper Elala—for whom, by the way, (having killed him with his own hand) he built a magnificent tomb, the remains of which, I believe, are still to be seen, though we had not time to visit them. It is said that the precise spot where the dagoba is erected was selected, because a stone of early date was discovered there, bearing engraved upon it a prophecy that a great and victorious king should raise in this place a most sacred monument. The stone is still to be seen—a huge pillar of granite—but the inscription is now illegible. The present height of the Ruanweli dagoba must be rather less than two hundred feet, but no doubt it was originally much higher. The upper portion presents the appearance of a very steep mound, covered with grass and creepers, but the lower part has been restored to its original size by the exertions of the priest in charge, under whose directions the work is rapidly progressing. Strictly speaking, members of the Lord Buddha's order are forbidden to collect money for any purpose whatever; yet one can hardly help admiring a man who, in this half-hearted nineteenth century, has the courage to undertake single-handed so stupendous a task as the restoration of one of these royal dagobas. He told us that to build a course of only one foot in height required sixty four thousand bricks, and that a sum not far short of £20,000 had already been spent in the work. He has been severely censured by many

for attempting this restoration, and all kinds of insinuations have been levelled at him in consequence: I can only say that we found him straightforward, manly, and kind-hearted. He willingly showed us all that there was to see in the grounds under his jurisdiction, and even accompanied me in a break-neck scramble to the summit of the dagoba in order to point out the various objects of interest which so thickly stud the surrounding country. At parting he presented me with a relic of the Arahat Sivali in a beautiful golden case, and also a pretty little silver-gilt figure of the Lord Buddha.

Various objects of interest will be found upon the platform surrounding this dagoba—among others a small stone dagoba, which is said to have been the model on which the larger one was constructed. There is a circular bathing-pool, some sixty feet in diameter, and about twenty-five in depth, carefully lined with blocks of granite; also several statues and stone altars, more or less broken, and the remains of some very curious grotesque figures in alto-relievo. Outside the enclosure is a large hollowed stone, perhaps; seven feet by two and a half, which is called "King Dutugemunu's bath," but is more probably some sort of sarcophagus and also a raised slab of granite, surrounded by small pillars, upon which tradition says that the King had himself laid down when his death drew near, so that his last glance might fall upon the sacred shrine which he had reared. The present appearance of this and the other ruined dagobas gives but little idea of what they must have been in the time of their glory, for not only were they then considerably larger than they are now, but they were also coated with some sort of plaster which was susceptible of a very high polish, so that they seemed as though built of white marble.

A smaller dagoba erected by the same King bears the name Miriswetiya (curry and chillies)—the story told to account for the name being that this pious monarch always made it a practice to offer part of every dish he ate in charity, but having for some reason once forgotten to do so, he built this dagoba to atone for the omission and gave it its present title so that every one might ask for and hear the reason of its erection—this being apparently part of the expiation. It is as yet only very partially excavated, but on the wall of a sort of chapel or shrine on one side of it is quite the finest carving in high relief that I have seen in Ceylon. The visitor should particularly notice a most life-like row of elephants' heads, and a form of decoration which at a little distance, gives exactly the effect of the well-known, "dog-tooth ornament," and is quite probably its prototype. Not far off stand some sixty huge granite pillars, supposed to mark the site of a monastery.

One of the largest dagobas in Anuradhapura is the Abhayagiri – "The Mountain of Safety," or, as the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hian calls it, "The Mountain without Fear." He tells us that at the time of his visit (413 A.D.) there were five thousand priests attached to this establishment, and he describes a beautiful image of blue jasper, twenty feet in height, which stood in the principal hall of its monastery. Even now this huge mound – 325 feet in diameter and 230 in height—is completely encircled with ruins, which show how important a place it must once have been. There are still some fine specimens of stone carving visible, among which may be specially mentioned three huge cobras—one a seven-headed one of gigantic dimensions. This building was erected by King Walagambahu in the year 89 B.C. Tennant says of it that the materials used in its construction would build a town the size of Ipswich or Coventry, or would form a wall ten feet high and one foot thick reaching from London to Edinburgh.

The oldest and one of the most venerated of the dagobas is a comparatively small one—only sixty-three feet in height—called the Thuparama, which was built by the celebrated King Dewanampia Tissa in the year B.C. 307, for the purpose of enshrining the

collar-bone of the Lord Buddha. The Dalada, or "Sacred Tooth," was also kept here for some centuries before its removal, first to Pollanarua and afterwards to Kandy. This dagoba is surrounded by one hundred and thirty pillars, arranged in three rows. Close by is a huge block of granite hollowed out so as to form a kind of bath or cistern ten feet five feet broad, and two and a half feet deep. This is said to have been filled with food for the use of the pilgrims on the Wesak festival only a few years ago.

Other interesting shrines at Anuradhapura are the Jetawanarama (a companion in point of size to the Abhayagiri), the Lankarama, and the Isurumuniya, this last being carved out of the solid rock; but these we unfortunately were unable to visit. I cannot pretend in these few pages to give a thorough account even of the little that we could find time to examine in the intervals of business; the place must be seen to be appreciated, and to do it justice many days' study would be required. The same may be said of Mihintale, which we visited on the following day. This much venerated spot is about eight miles from Anuradhapura, but some distance from the coach-road, so that it has to be reached by the one conveyance of the country, the bullock-cart. Arriving at the foot of the hill the traveller has to follow a pretty jungle-path for some time, and then finds before him a gigantic staircase of 1,840 broad granite steps. The ascent, though of course fatiguing, is most interesting, as ruins of some sort mark every few steps. Everything, however, is now overgrown with a dense though beautiful jungle, in which troops of the grey Wanderoo monkey are frequently to be seen. Numerous sidepaths branch off from the main flight of steps, each leading to some spot worthy of careful study, but the only one we could spare time to follow was that which passes the Naga Pokuna, or snake-bathing-place. This is an irregular hollow in the rock, about one hundred and thirty feet in length and perhaps five and twenty in breadth, filled with clear, cold water, in which we found some priests bathing. On the wall of rock which rises behind the pool is sculptured a large five-headed cobra, the hood—some seven feet in diameter—and two or three feet of the body being all that is visible above the water, as the creature seems to rise out of it. The little path leading to this pool struck us as specially beautiful; indeed the most lovely bits of jungle scenery which I have yet observed in Ceylon are on that hill of Mihintale. There is said to be a well preserved portion of a fine stone aqueduct not far from the Naga Pokuna; but time compelled us to press on to the summit without staying to search for it. At the top of the last flight of steps is a small building said to be a guard-house, through which one passes on to the platform of the Ambustala dagoba—one of the holiest in Ceylon, since under it lie the ashes of the great apostle Prince Mahinilo and it also marks the spot on which he first met King Dewenampia Tissa as the latter was returning from a hunting expedition. It is built of stone, and is only of very moderate height; but it is surrounded by a circle of octagonal stone pillars with beautifully carved capitals. The pansala, or residence of the priests, is upon this platform; and surely a pleasanter situation it would be hard to find. Another flight of slippery rock-cut steps leads to the Mahaseya dagoba, which occupies the summit of this peak of the hill. The twin summit – the higher of the two – is also crowned by some ruins, but these we were unable to explore. This Mahaseya dagoba, like the great Shway Daigon at

SEVEN-HEADED COBRA

Rangoon, is said to enshrine a hair of the Lord Buddha. It is built of brick in perpendicular stages, and its summit would be quite inaccessible were it not that a breach made by the Malabars in search of treasure has transformed one side of it into a very steep inclined plane up which it is possible, though certainly dangerous, to climb. The view from the top, however, is so fine as to render it well worth while to make the effort.

Another path from the Ambustala platform leads through a rocky ravine in which grow the most lovely ferns to what is perhaps the most interesting spot of all—Mahinda's cave. Certainly the great Missionary Prince chose his locality well, for it would probably hard to find anywhere in the world a scene of more romantic beauty than this. To give any real idea of it would require a painting by one of our great landscape artists; mere words can never do it justice. As I have said, the traveller follows a steep path through a ravine apparently in the heart of the group of hills and, towards the end of it at least, progress becomes so difficult over the sharp-pointed rocks and the huge slippery boulders that he is too fully occupied to get any hint of the surprise in store for him. Finally be scrambles into the cave itself, and with a suddenness that takes his breath away, finds a prospect of fifty miles of country stretched very literally at his feet, for he stands less than three yards from the edge of a precipice, and at an elevation of some eight or nine hundred feet from the jungle-covered plain below. The cave is formed at the extreme point of a spur of the hill; its floor is a smooth slab of rock, perhaps nine feet in length and about six in breadth, and its roof is an enormously strong natural arch of granite, rather over six feet from the floor at the higher end, and about two at the lower. Thus both sides of the cave are open, and as the Royal Priest lay there to take his noonday rest, he had on his left the beautiful rocky glen before referred to, in which huge grey boulders peep out at frequent intervals through an indescribable luxuriance of vegetation, and on his right, far, far below, an unbroken sea of verdure extending to the horizon, dotted at intervals by a few smaller hills. But no; that statement is incorrect; that is what the enraptured visitor sees *now*, but in Mahinda's time that desolate plain was no doubt covered with populous villages and highly cultivated gardens, and that lonely glen-filled with the residences of his priestly pupils. Then or now, no situation could be more striking; and no one who has had the good fortune to see it will ever forget Prince Mahinda's cave.

On the journey back to Kandy we found ourselves with an hour to spare at Dambulla, and so hurried off to visit the famous rock-temples there. We saw only enough to make us wish for time to see more, but even that little is well worth describing. The ascent to the temples from the road is a steep one, partly up slippery rocks and partly up a very picturesque old staircase. The view from the gate-house of the temple platform is said to be one of the finest in Ceylon, but on that point I am unable to speak from personal experience, as when we were there everything was hidden by torrents of rain. The five temples are simply caverns in the side of a huge mass of gneiss rock, and it is said that King Wala-gambahu (B.C. 104) had frequently used them as a refuge during the unsuccessful years of his long war with the Malabars, and so, when he was finally victorious, he celebrated his triumph by turning his asylum into a magnificent shrine. A narrow outer gallery has been built under the overhanging rock in front of the entrances: thereby much spoiling the external effect. In the first temple is a gigantic recumbent figure of the Lord Buddha, cut out of the solid rock, and about fifty feet in length; around it are several smaller figures, one being a wooden statue of Vishnu, from which this cave is called the Mahadeva Dewale. The next temple is called the Maha Vihare, and is about one hundred and seventy feet long by fifty or sixty broad, the roof being twenty feet high in front, but sloping down gradually to the floor. In this

gloomy cavern is a semicircle of huge sitting figures of the Lord Buddha which presents a very striking effect as one enters from the glare of daylight outside. There are some smaller statues also, but I should say that fifty at least are above life-size. A small dagoba stands at one side, and parts of the roof and walls are covered with very curious paintings—utterly innocent, most of them, of any idea of perspective—representing historical events, such as the landing of Wijeya, the preaching of Mahinda, and the planting of the Bo-tree. In one place water drops from a fissure in the roof, and is caught in a stone vessel and reserved for sacred purposes.

The third temple is about eighty feet in length, and varies breadth from some sixty feet to perhaps about twenty-five. In its centre sits under a stone canopy a large image of the Lord Buddha, and at one end is a recumbent brick figure of him thirty feet in length. There are at least fifty statues in this chamber. The fourth and fifth temples we had not time to visit, but we were told that they were both smaller than those we saw; one is said to contain some fine specimens of wood carving, and another, gigantic reclining statue of our Lord[1].

This account of the little that we ourselves were enabled to see cannot, of course, be considered as giving more than a mere hint of what would reward the researches of a traveller with more time at his disposal. Surely therefore when our Indian neighbours require rest and relaxation, they might do worse than pay a visit to what Mr. Burrows describes as "an artistic and archaeological treat, which is perhaps unique in the East." They will at the same time be enabled to form something like a just estimate of the past history of a very interesting nation—a nation which, as the same author remarks, "could build a city of gigantic monoliths, carve a mountain into a graceful shrine, and decorate its pious monuments with delicate pillars that would have done credit to a Grecian artist."

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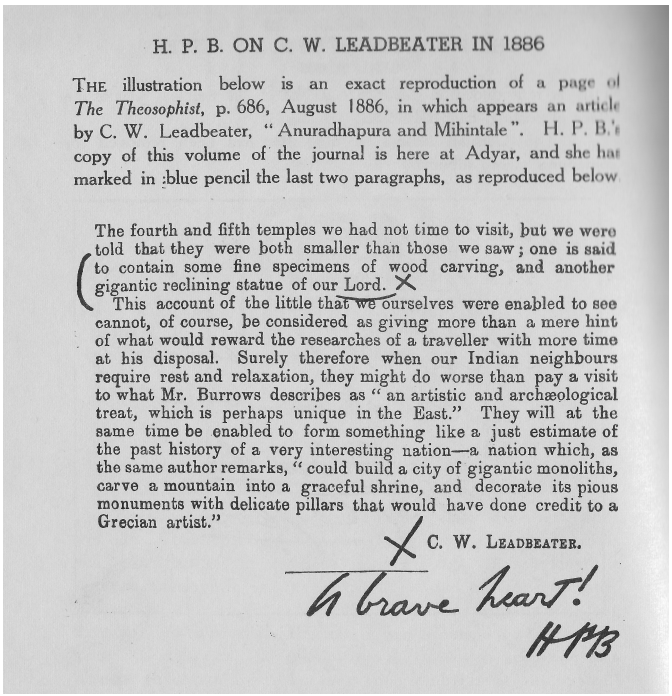
[1] When Madame Blavatsky read this article, and particularly this passage in which CWL refers to Lord Buddha as 'our Lord', she wrote in her copy of the magazine (*The Theosophist*): 'A brave heart!' We reproduce here page 100 of C. Jinarajadasa's book *The "K.H." Letters to C. W. Leadbeater* (1980 edition).



H. P. B. ON C. W. LEADBEATER IN 1886

THE illustration below is an exact reproduction of a page of *The Theosophist*, p. 686, August 1886, in which appears an article by C. W. Leadbeater, "Anuradhapura and Mihintale". H. P. B.'s copy of this volume of the journal is here at Adyar, and she has marked in blue pencil the last two paragraphs, as reproduced below.

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HPB