

# COLONIAL NARRATIVES AND THE RUINED CITIES OF CEYLON: EXPLORING THE EARLIEST ARCHITECTURAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL DOCUMENTATION DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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## ABSTRACT

The architectural and archaeological landscapes of Sri Lanka (referred to as Ceylon during the colonial period) is renowned for its historical and cultural richness, exemplified by ancient cities, such as Anurādhapura, Sigiriya, and Polonnaruwa, which date back to the second century BCE. These cities, long buried, were rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century through the interventions of colonial administrators and professionals employed by the British Ceylon Government (1806-1948). The uncovering of the ruins of these ancient cities, mainly Buddhist monastic complexes, significantly contributed to their eventual recognition as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Against this background, this essay narrates the inception and development of systematic architectural and archaeological documentation practices during Sri Lanka's colonial period, focusing on the pioneers who laid the foundation for this enduring legacy. The study draws from archival, cartographical, and iconographical research to critically examine the first instances of colonial architectural and archaeological documentation. The findings reveal that the early British efforts evolved into a comprehensive and systematic exploration of Sri Lanka's ancient heritage, culminating in the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon.

## KEYWORDS

Sri Lanka | Heritage preservation | British colonial heritage policy | Buddhist monuments

## ANCIENT CIVILISATION AND RUINED CITIES

Sri Lanka endured a series of Western invasions, beginning with the Portuguese in 1505, followed by the Dutch in 1658. These two powers initially held sway only over the Maritime Provinces of the island. However, British invasions into Dutch-controlled regions in 1796 ultimately culminated in the capture of the entire island in 1815, marking the end of indigenous sovereignty. Sri Lanka finally gained independence in 1948, concluding 450 years of colonial rule.

The early civilisation of Sri Lanka, dating back to at least the fourth century BCE, predominantly thrived within the expansive, undulating north-central plain known as the Dry Zone, spanning the northern half of the island and extending into the flatter terrain of the northern peninsula, as well as the narrower plains and valleys of the south and east. The agrarian framework of these early civilisations in the north-central plain was based upon a sophisticated network of village reservoirs alongside colossal human-made lakes and canals. Esteemed by historians of science as exemplary feats of hydraulic engineering in the premodern era, these infrastructural achievements emphasise the ingenuity of ancient Sri Lankan societies (Bandaranayake, 1990: 20). With the subsequent decline of the ancient civilisation of the north-central plain, the seat of royal authority gradually shifted towards the southwest and central regions of the island. The royal capital transitioned through approximately six locations over the four centuries preceding the arrival of the first European invader, the Portuguese. By the time of colonial intervention, the once flourishing and fertile north-central plain had reverted to jungle, effectively establishing a natural barrier between the peoples of the southern and northern parts of the island.

This north-central region's highly complex archaeological landscape, characterised by the skeletal remains of numerous ancient cities and an extensive network of Buddhist monastic complexes, has profound historical and cultural significance. Amongst the most prominent features are the renowned 'ruined cities' of Anurādhapura, Sigiriya, and Polonnaruwa, which have been the focus of scholarly investigation and conservation efforts for over a century. Originating in the fourth century BCE, Anurādhapura emerged as the capital of a unified island-wide kingdom by the second century BCE, maintaining its status as the principal political and religious hub for approximately 1,200 years until Polonnaruwa succeeded it in the late tenth century CE (Bandaranayake, 1990: 21-22). The ancient city of Anurādhapura still bears remarkable archaeological evidence of its past as the centre of a magnificent civilisation inspired by the ethos of Buddhism.

However, unlike the preceding Anurādhapura period, the Polonnaruwa period continued for just over two centuries, during which there were about sixteen rulers. That the munificence of these rulers towards Buddhism persisted is evident, but their reigns were primarily devoted to internecine warfare against the South Indian Cholas from roughly 993 BCE to 1070 CE (Premathilake, 1990: 38). The remains of several Hindu temples, built mainly in the Chōla architectural style, are also visible among the Buddhist archaeological remains in Polonnaruwa. Situated between Anurādhapura and Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya represents a distinct architectural and cultural epoch, primarily associated with the eighteen-year reign of King Kāshyapa during the late fifth century CE. Central to Sigiriya's significance is its focal point, the towering rock, a colossal inselberg soaring some 200 metres above the surrounding terrain, atop which the royal palace was situated (Bandaranayake, 1990: 25). These three sites have attained global recognition and been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, serving as a testament to their unparalleled architectural and archaeological importance at the global level.

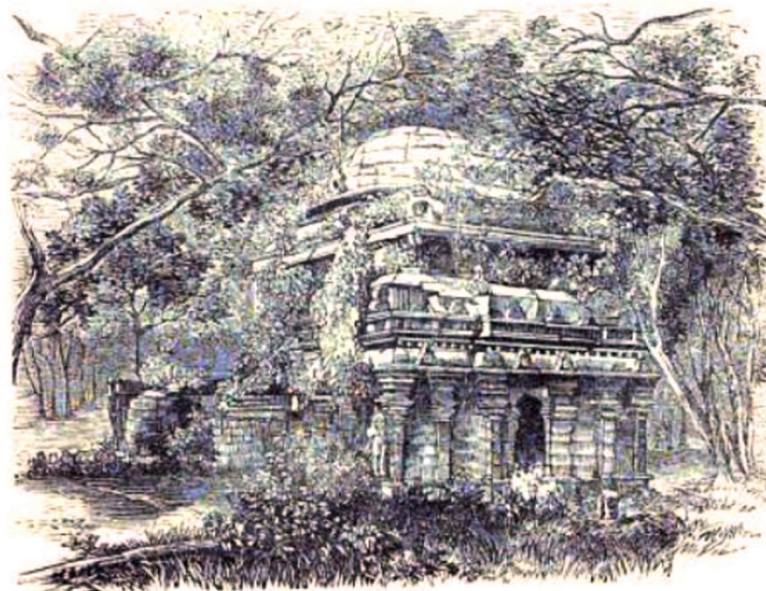
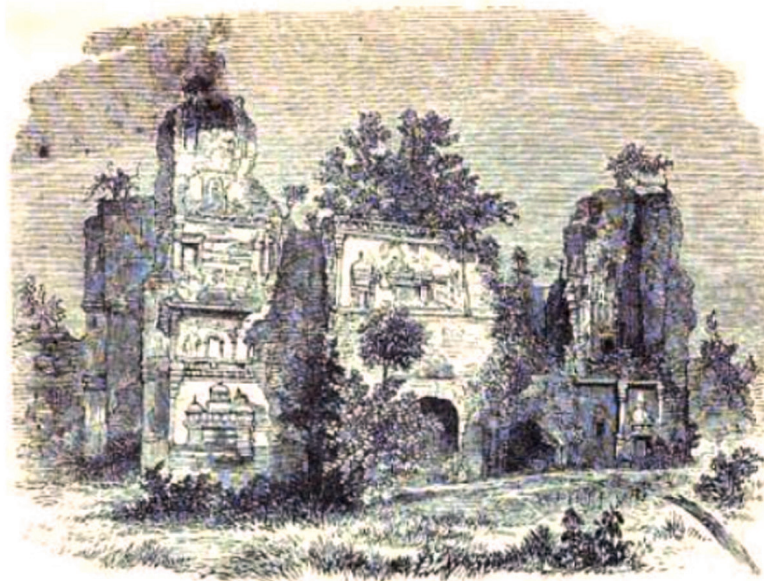
## REVEALING RUINS THROUGH THE COLONIAL LENS

Apart from a few brief references to the existence of monumental remains in modern antiquarians of the colonial period, the remains of these “ruined cities” endured, buried until the late nineteenth century CE, when colonial administrators and professionals employed by the British Ceylon Government took interest and, through their intervention, revealed vast monuments that had previously been obscured. With the extension of a stable British colonial administration, increased attention was directed at recording the ancient architecture of the island. In 1868, Governor Sir Hercules Robinson (1865-1872) established a state-sponsored Committee on Ancient Architecture in Ceylon, with Colonel Amelius Beauclerk Fyers, the Ceylon Survey-General, appointed as its chairman. The committee’s primary objectives were to obtain information about the different ancient architectural structures on the island, to report on them generally, and to recommend steps for preserving or photographing the most interesting ones (Administration Report Ceylon, 1868: II - 23).

In the narrative of Alastair Mackenzie Ferguson – the compiler of the monumental volume *Souvenirs of Ceylon*, featuring 120 engravings that capture various aspects of towns and buildings, ruined cities, and maritime and mountain capitals – the pioneering work of James Wheeler Woodford Birch of the Civil Service and Lieutenant Richard Warren Steward of the Royal Engineers is highlighted, particularly in the realm of the photography and documentation of antiquities of ancient architecture.

Wheeler Woodford Birch is credited as the first photographer to meticulously capture the antiquities of Sri Lanka’s “ruined cities”. His series of views of Polonnaruwa are remarkable for the manner in which they convey even the minutest details of oriental architecture and sculpture, surpassing the limitations of traditional engraving techniques. Alastair Mackenzie Ferguson emphasises Birch’s talent in bringing forth the intricacies of these ancient sites with a fidelity that engraving alone cannot achieve. Furthermore, Ferguson underscores Birch’s comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, noting that Birch supplemented his photographic documentation with several insightful records on the ruined city of Polonnaruwa. In these writings, Birch describes how the remnants of Polonnaruwa’s past grandeur now lay surrounded by vast forests and dense jungle. Granite pillars, hewn stones, piles of bricks, and other remnants of masonry serve as nostalgic reminders of the civilisation’s past triumphs, now obscured and sought after for shelter solely by the beasts of the forest (Ferguson, 1868: 110-112).

Following Birch’s pioneering efforts, Lieutenant Richard Warren Steward contributed to the photographic documentation of Polonnaruwa. Several of his views later appeared as engraved reproductions in Alastair Mackenzie Ferguson’s *Souvenirs of Ceylon*. According to Falconer and Raheem, these engraved reproductions emphatically reinforce photography’s importance as an archaeological tool. In these engraved reproductions, not only are many of the details lost but, for instance, in his view of Galvihara, the engraver clearly merged several photographs and entirely misrepresented their relationship. Such images might give the casual observer some indication of the scene, but they are valueless as archaeological records of these most beautiful rock-cut figures (Falconer and Raheem, 2000: 21) [fig.01,02,03].



**Fig. 01** · Engraved reproduction of the ruins of the Jétavanārāma Buddhist monastery in Polonnaruwa from a photograph by Richard Warren Steward (source: *Souvenirs of Ceylon*, 1868)

**Fig. 02** · Engraved reproduction of a Hindu temple in Polonnaruwa from a photograph by Richard Warren Steward (source: *Souvenirs of Ceylon*, 1868)

**Fig. 03** · Engraved reproduction of the Galvihara Buddhist temple in Polonnaruwa from a photograph by Richard Warren Steward (source: *Souvenirs of Ceylon*, 1868)

## VISUALISING RUINED CITIES

When establishing the Committee on Ancient Architecture in Ceylon, Sri Lanka's "ruined cities" began to capture the interest of commercial photographers from England. Among the most comprehensive series of early photographs of these archaeological sites is the collection by Joseph Lawton, a commercial photographer who had been operating a studio on Castlehill Street in Kandy since around 1866. Kandy's climate was favourable for photography due to its relatively cool and dry conditions, which had a minimal impact on the chemicals utilised in the wet collodion process prevalent in nineteenth-century photography (Raheem, 1996: 28). While Lawton also produced general topographical photographs of the central region around Kandy, his most significant contribution, according to many historians, was the extensive series of archaeological remains captured in 1870-71 for the Archaeological Committee. Lawton served as the appointed photographer of the Committee on Ancient Architecture in Ceylon and had already taken numerous photographs at sites such as Anurādhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Sigiriya, thus marking the inception of the history of Sri Lanka's architectural and archaeological documentation (Administration Report Ceylon, 1871: 253). To maximise the value of the two volumes comprising 227 photographs, additional descriptive notes were prepared by Louis Frederick Liesching, the Assistant Government Agent in Anurādhapura (Falconer and Raheem, 2000: 22) [fig.04,05].



**Fig. 04** Photograph of the ruins of the Galvihara Buddhist temple in Polonnaruwa by Joseph Lawton  
(source: *Regeneration: A Reappraisal of Photography in Ceylon*, 2000)

As John Falconer and Ismeth Raheem attest, Lawton's volumes of photographs provide extensive documentary records of ancient sites when their archaeological investigation was in its infancy and, as they had just been reclaimed from the jungle, no significant restoration work had yet been undertaken on them. Beyond their archaeological significance, Lawton's photographs possess a compelling power, showcasing his talent in balancing the requirements of archaeological documentation with the creation of images of significant aesthetic impact. This quality is especially evident in his views of some of the human-made lakes, which serve as striking landscape studies and hold considerable archaeological evidence (Falconer and Raheem, 2000: 22).

James Fergusson, in his seminal work *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, writes that Joseph Lawton photographed the principal remains of Anurādhapura and Polonnaruwa under the personal supervision and direction of James George Smither, Ceylon's first Government Architect in the Public Works Department, who later prepared the first set of architectural drawings of the more essential ruins of Anurādhapura (Fergusson, 1910: 225). Interestingly, Smither's work can be regarded as the earliest attempt by an Englishman to explore and document the monuments systematically with a series of general plans, sections, elevations, and intricate details, such as pillar capitals, carved urns, sculptured friezes, doorway lintels, and carved base mouldings. Notably, Smither's measured drawings were far more than mere depictions of physical remnants. Sometimes, he strived to reconstruct the original forms of ruined monuments by obtaining insights from ancient native literary sources, like *Mahāvamsa*, Sri Lanka's great chronicle of early history. His extensive descriptions, supported by many more historical sources, offer valuable comprehension of the architecture of each stupa and other ancient remains. These sources include the oldest native historical record of Sri Lanka, *Dīpavamsa*, and *The Pilgrimage of Fa Xian*, the accounts of the renowned Chinese monk Fa Xian, who travelled to Sri Lanka 410 CE.



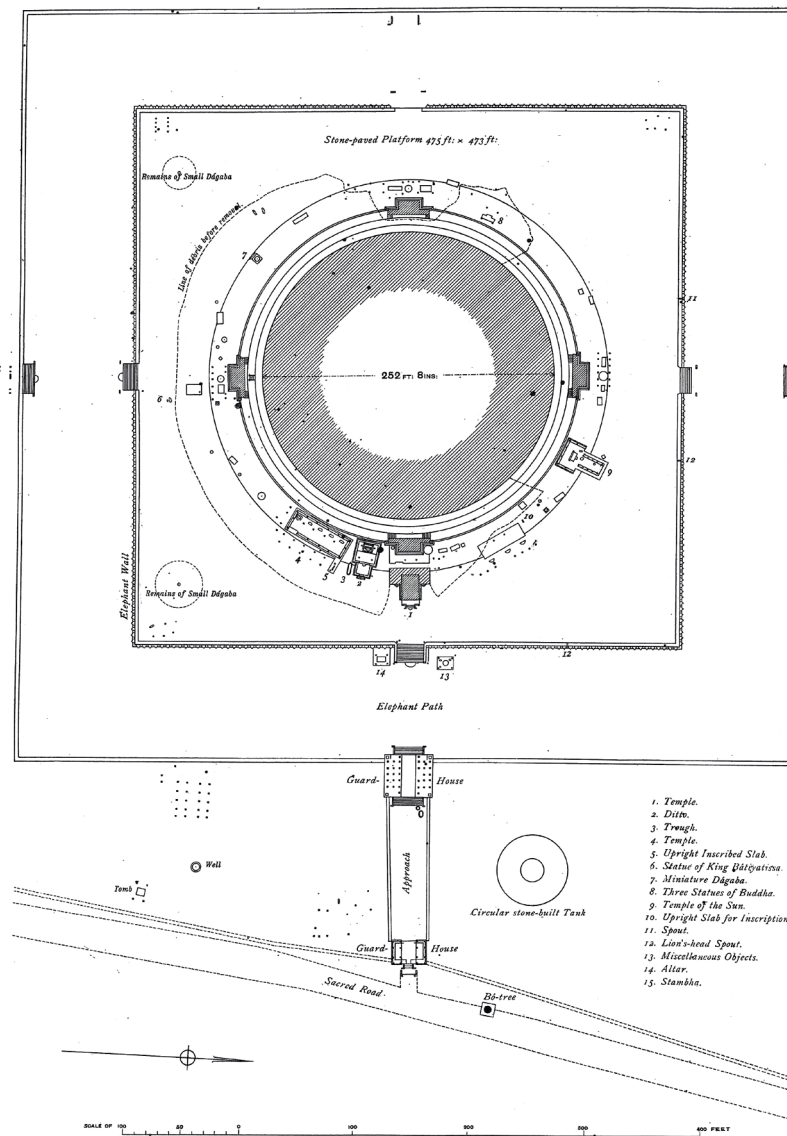
Fig. 05· Photograph of the ruins of the Watadageya Buddhist temple in Polonnaruwa by Joseph Lawton (source: *Regeneration: A Reappraisal of Photography in Ceylon*, 2000)

On his retirement in 1894, James Smither's valuable architectural documentation of the remains of Anurādhapura came to light as a letterpress printing with sixty-seven plates layering the measured drawings of massive domical structures of solid brickwork stupas or the dāgabas of Thupārāma, Lankārāma, Mirisavēti, Ruvanvēli, Abhayagiri, Jétavanārāma, and Khujjatissārāma, along with other ancient architectural remains, like the so-called Daladā Māligāwa, Mahasen's Pavilion, Queen's Pavilion, and Kuttam Pokuna. Additionally, collotype photographs, likely supplied by Joseph Lawton, amplify the volume's importance and value, offering a visually immersive and intricately detailed depiction of these monuments. The volume, titled *Architectural Remains Anurādhapura, Ceylon: the Dugabas and Certain Other Ancient Ruined Structures*, contains the results of rigorous surveys conducted from 1873 to 1877. This groundbreaking architectural documentation and presentation could have offered invaluable insights for the establishment of an institution akin to the Archaeological Survey of India, founded in 1861 by the British Indian government. By the end of the nineteenth century CE, the Archaeological Survey of India had significantly surpassed its founders' expectations, consistently yielding satisfactory results yearly. Nonetheless, the British Ceylon Government took almost three more decades to follow India's example (Karunaratne, 1990: 3) [fig.06,07,08,09].



**Fig. 06-** Photograph of the north-east view of Ruvanvēli Dāgāba in Anurādhapura by Joseph Lawton (source: *Architectural Remains Anuradhapura*, 1894)

THE RUWANWELI DĀGABA.  
Plan.



THE RUWANWELI DĀGABA.

West Elevation.

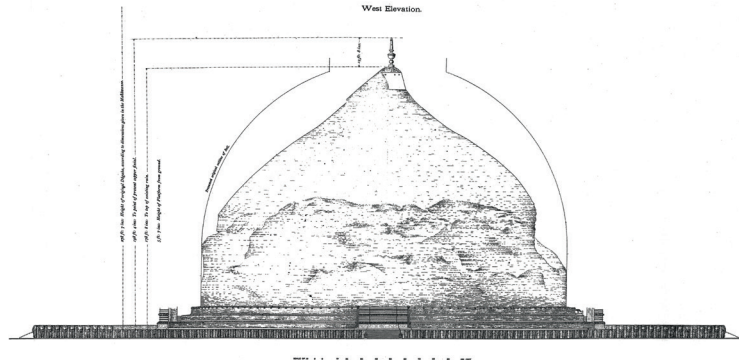


Fig. 07. Architectural drawing of the Plan of Ruvanvēli Dāgaba in Anurādhapura by James George Smither (source: *Architectural Remains Anuradhapura*, 1894)

Fig. 08. Architectural drawing of the West Elevation of Ruvanvēli Dāgaba in Anurādhapura by James George Smither (source: *Architectural Remains Anuradhapura*, 1894)

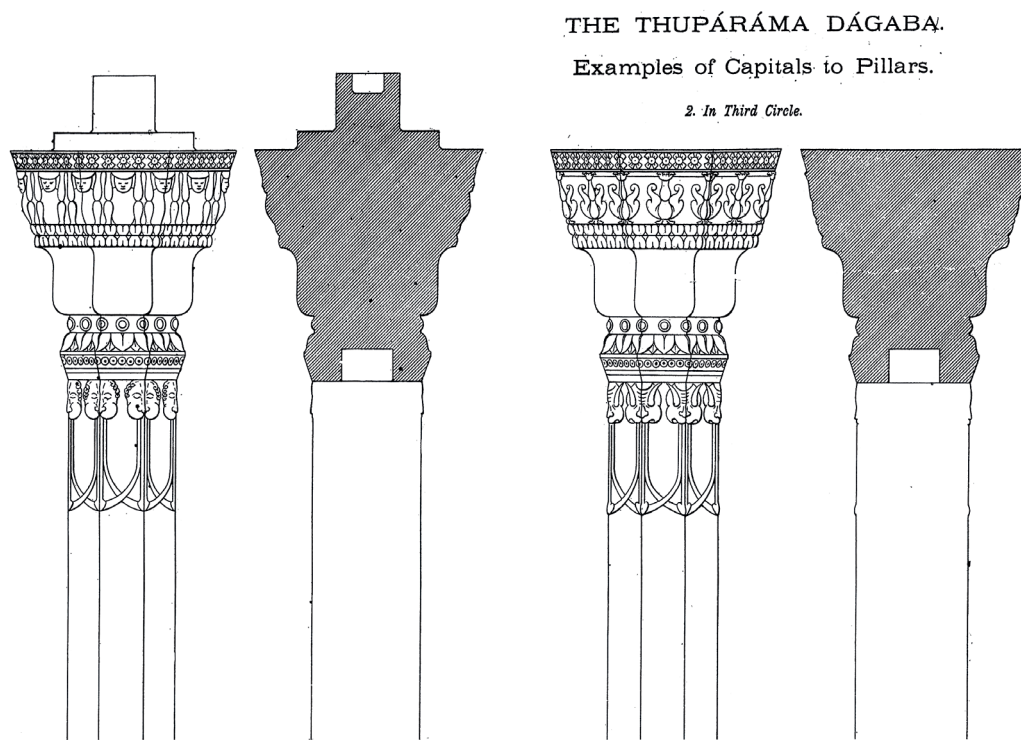


Fig. 09. Architectural drawing of the Pillar Capitals of Thupārāma Dāgaba in Anurādhapura by James George Smither (source: *Architectural Remains Anuradhapura*, 1894)

## PIONEERING HERITAGE DOCUMENTATION

Other noteworthy architectural and archaeological documentation during the British period are the conjectural restoration drawings produced for the Mirisavēti and Abhayagiri Dāgabas in Anurādhapura by Friedrich Oscar Oertel in the 1900s. Friedrich Oscar Oertel, an architect and archaeologist at the Indian Public Works Department, arrived on the island at the invitation of the British Ceylon Government. This invitation was prompted by the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland's determination to appoint an architect to assess potential restoration measures for the Mirisavēti and Abhayagiri Dāgabas. Oertel's comprehensive report, published in 1903 by the Government Printer, Ceylon, included nine plates of conjectural restoration drawings detailing plans, sections, elevations, and miniature buildings of the sites. This documentation can be viewed as a proactive step towards the scientific restoration and safeguarding of the antiquities of Sri Lanka's "ruined cities", preceding James Smither's contributions in this field [fig. 10, 11, 12].

In 1884, before the official establishment of an archaeological department, S. M. Burrows, a member of the Ceylon Civil Service, was authoritatively tasked with overseeing archaeological matters concerning monuments and antiquities in Anurādhapura, including the partial conservation of the crumbling remains and clearing them of vegetation (Fergusson, 1910: 225). Recognising the significance of sites like Sigiriya led the British Ceylon Government to initiate the formation of an Archaeological Survey of Ceylon. In 1890, a regular allocation of funds for archaeological purposes was introduced in the Supply Bill, proposed to the Council by then Governor Sir Arthur Hamilton-Gordon (1883-1890). In his message to the Council on 20 November 1889, the Governor advocated for a systematic examination of remarkable sites, such as Sigiriya, resembling the approach taken in India to avert the disappearance of historical monuments. Subsequently, under the directive of the Governor,

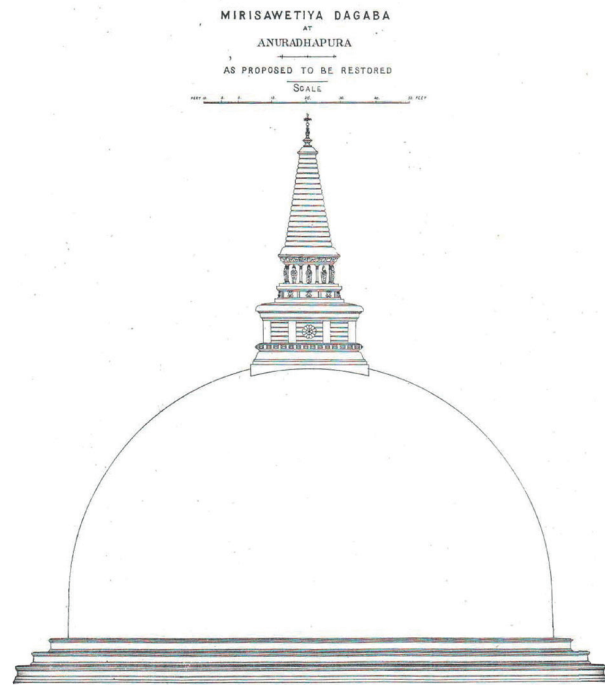
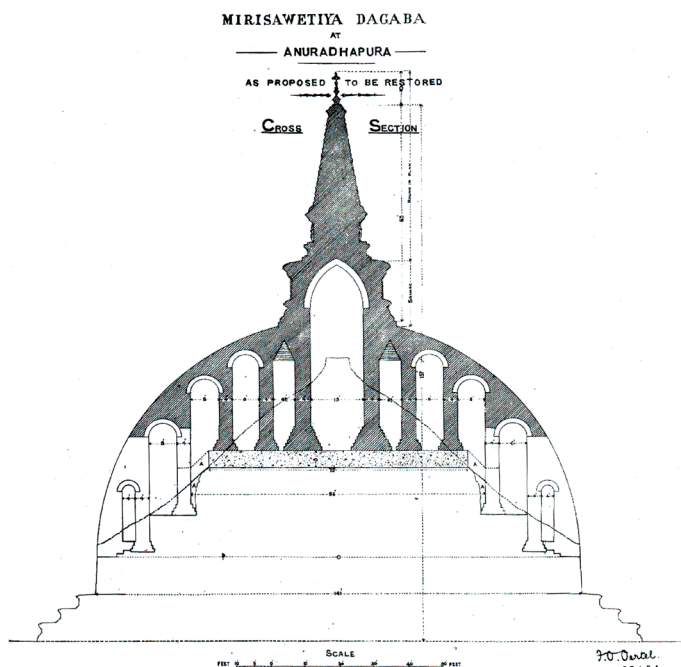
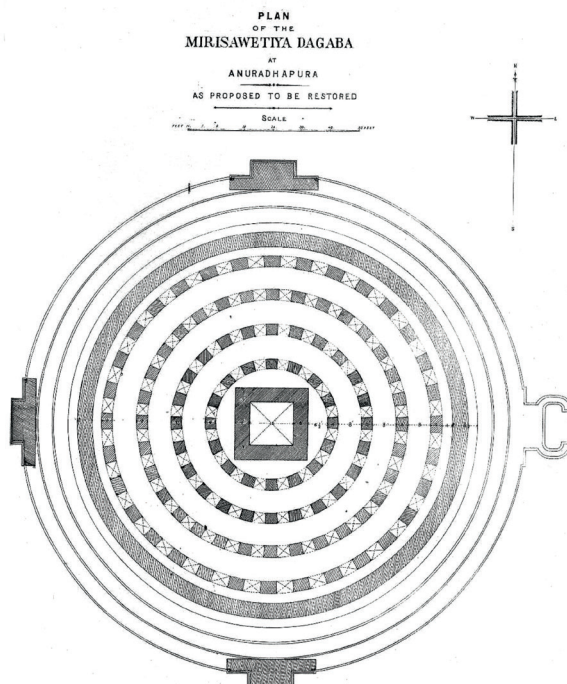


Fig. 10. Conjectural restoration drawing of the Plan of Mirisavēti Dāgaba in Anurādhapura by Friedrich Oscar Oertel (source: Report of the Restoration of Ancient Monuments at Anurādhapura Ceylon, 1903)  
 Fig. 11. Conjectural restoration drawing of the Cross Section of Mirisavēti Dāgaba in Anurādhapura by Friedrich Oscar Oertel (source: Report of the Restoration of Ancient Monuments at Anurādhapura Ceylon, 1903)  
 Fig. 12. Conjectural restoration drawing of the Elevation of Mirisavēti Dāgaba in Anurādhapura by Friedrich Oscar Oertel (source: Report of the Restoration of Ancient Monuments at Anurādhapura Ceylon, 1903)

in February 1890, H. C. P. Bell, who was based in the Central Province as the District Judge of Kegalle, was tasked with launching archaeological endeavours in the North Central Province, marking the official inauguration of scientific archaeological exploration in Sri Lanka (Karunaratne, 1990: 3-4).

From 1890 to 1912, H. C. P. Bell's tenure as the inaugural Commissioner of the newly established Archaeological Department marked a pivotal period in the systematic exploration, documentation, and preservation of Sri Lanka's architectural and archaeological treasures. Among his early significant contributions was the initiation of the periodical series, the "Archaeological Survey of Ceylon" Sessional Papers, which commenced on 15 July 1890. These Sessional Papers served as comprehensive records detailing various aspects of architectural and archaeological endeavours, including the allocation of annual funds, meticulous exploration and excavation methodologies, discoveries, and detailed descriptions of monuments and epigraphical findings. Bell's initial publications primarily focused on the North-Central Province, the heartland of Sri Lanka's "ruined cities". These initial reports were accurately compiled and presented, often featuring detailed "as restored drawings" as two-tone images, providing precise visual representations of the archaeological interventions and restoration efforts. From 1893 onwards, Bell extended the coverage of these Sessional Papers to other provinces, notably Sabaragamuwa, Central, North-Western, and Eastern Provinces. Printed by the Government Printer in Colombo, these reports were supplemented by separate annexures containing plans and plates rendered through rough lithographs in pen and ink. This thorough documentation laid the groundwork for subsequent scientific archaeological work, shaping the trajectory of investigation and exploration in the field [fig.13].

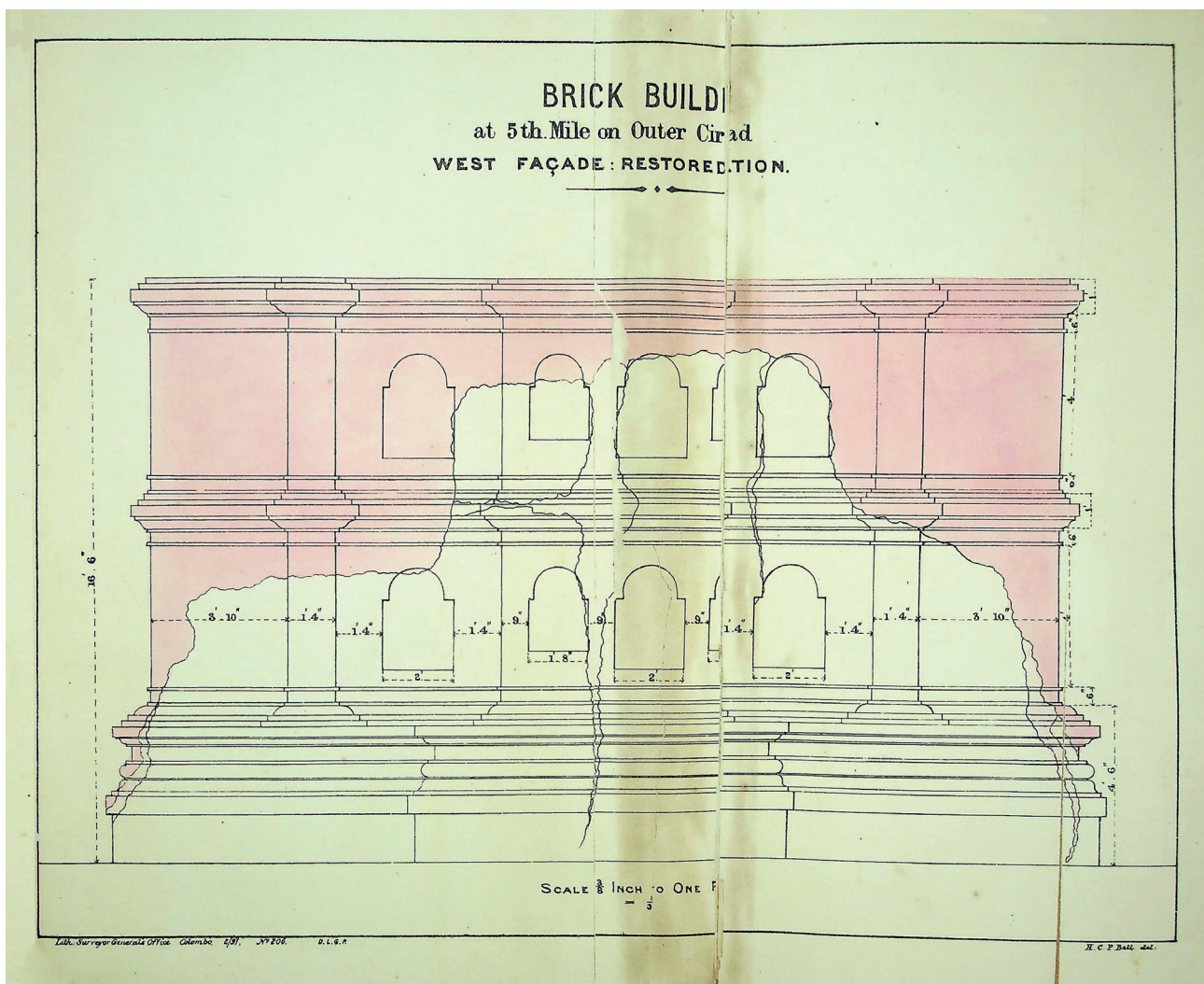


Fig. 13. Elevation drawing of the West Façade of the newly discovered brick building Thupārāma in Anurādhapura by H. C. P. Bell (source: First Report on the Archaeological Survey of Anurādhapura, 1890)

What is intriguing about the archaeological documentation from the late colonial period is that the works of Bell and his successors, notably R. Ayrton (1912-1913), A. M. Hocart (1922-1924), and Senarath Paranavitana, the first Sri Lankan Commissioner under the British Ceylon Government from 1940, were frequently disseminated through journal articles. The findings of this documentation appeared in popular journals, such as the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, the *Ceylon Journal of Science*, and the *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon*, ensuring that the findings reached a wide audience of scholars, enthusiasts, and the interested public of colonial Ceylon and overseas as well. This dissemination through established academic channels contributed to the safeguarding of heritage, the advancement of architectural and archaeological knowledge, and the international recognition of Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, the colonial narration of the safeguarding of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage, particularly during the late colonial era, reveals a significant initial effort driven by administrators and professionals affiliated with the British Ceylon Government. The establishment of the Committee on Ancient Architecture in Ceylon marked a crucial turning point in the preservation of the island's historic sites. The pioneering work of figures such as English commercial photographer Joseph Lawton, the first British-Ceylon Government architect James George Smither, and architect and archaeologist Friedrich Oscar Oertel from the Public Works Department in India, whose photographic documentation, architectural records, and conjectural restoration drawings laid the foundation, inspired subsequent generations within the Sri Lankan Archaeological Department to continue and refine these efforts. The enduring contributions of other individuals, like H. C. P. Bell and his successors as State Archaeological Commissioners, drove the restoration endeavours to unprecedented heights, leaving a legacy that endured into the era of Sri Lanka's independence in the mid-twentieth century.

However, the initial colonial involvement in preserving Sri Lanka's "ruined cities" was not without its downsides. Historians have documented the extensive removal of artefacts during British rule, including numerous Buddha statues, religious texts, Ola leaf manuscripts, and temple decorations. Despite this significant issue, the focus of this paper has been on the conservation efforts rather than the negative colonial impacts.

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