

Rest - Hall at Panavitiya*

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THE subject of this book is carvings on the wood work of the *ambalama* (rest-hall) at Panavitiya in Mayuravati Korale of the Dambadeni-hatpattuva of the District of Kurunegala (One inch per mile Map Reference I. 18/19).

Before we describe this particular building of very modest proportions, it is desirable that we form an idea as to the significance of the term *ambalama*, and consider the general pattern of buildings which go by that name.

The Tamil word *ambalam* means "an open space for use of the public", "abode", "dwelling - place", "village revenue office", etc. The Sinhalese word *ambalama* is used to mean a building of simple construction meant to provide a resting place for way-farers. These were indeed a great necessity when people had to cover long distances on foot. They were a great boon to people going on pilgrimages or visiting relative. The *ambalama* also served as a meeting place for the village-folk. It was the place where they exchanged gossip and talked politics, and an *ambalama* was built on a rocky site, so that the weary traveller who had not even a shade from sun or rain could find a place of refuge. Some *ambalama* halls were located at the edges of stretches of fields; others were located near rivers or streams in order that the fatigued way-farer could find an easy supply of water for bathing

and washing.

Sinhalese literature, particularly *Sandésa* poems, a literary form which contains descriptions of journeys, make mention of *ambalama* rests. The *Girasandesaya*, a poem of the mid-fifteenth century describes an *ambalama* which was situated at the village of Välitota, south of Bentota.

"People gather from various directions and rest here. Some of them relate the stories of Rama and Sita. Some recite poetry in contest with each other. Among them are those who commit to memory songs of praise produced in honour of the reigning king. The old people recite quatrains which were composed to praise the virtues of former sovereigns. Foreigners coming from countries such as Cola, Pandya, Gujarat, Tula country, Maharastra, Andhra and Vanga learn the teachings of the Buddha in Sinhalese and recite it. Some challenge each other in solving riddles. There are those who relate the manifold mighty deeds of the King Parakrama-*ḥ*bahu VI (A.D. 1410-1467)".

The above description clearly shows the purpose which an *ambalama* served.

The *Sälalihinisandésaya* written in A.D. 1437 has the following description of a resting hall called *Val-ambalama*, which was built close to a water pool on the road from Kotte to Kelaniya, not far off from Colombo:

“Joyously take thy flight, Wallam-
blam viewed

Close to the pool margent green with
shrubs of colon

With fresh springs where lave fair
maids

The heat to mitigate, whose locks are
wreathed.

With flowers, and sweet with aro-
matic fumes”.

Macready’s translation - verse 33
(1865).

The *Nilakobosandésaya* of the 18th century describes *ambalama* situated by a stretch of paddy-field in the village of Palonnaruva in the Southern Province. The building was under the shade of a tree, and on its walls were painted figures of lions and leopards. Mention of another *ambalama* at Uduvela in the same district is made in the *Diyasāvulasandésaya* (A.D. 1813). An *ambalama* built in the middle of a stretch of paddy fields by the Dāduru-oya in Kurunegala District is described in the *Astanarisandésaya* written in A.D. 1833.

We thus see that *ambalama* rest-halls were important landmarks on the routes taken by pilgrims and other travellers. With the introduction of modern methods of quick transport and travel, the usefulness of these buildings diminished, and they went into a state of neglect and disrepair.

The building of an *ambalama* was a co-operative effort by villagers. The Sinhalese Buddhist believe that it was a meritorious act to erect an edifice like a dagoba or an image-house. Similarly it was a pious deed to provide shelter for the weary traveller and the homeless. The size and grandeur of an *ambalama* depended on the ability of those who took part in its erection.

In the *ambalama* at Panavitiya, the

carvings from the wood-work of which is the subject of this booklet, is situated on a flat land at the border of a stretch of paddy fields. It may have been on an ancient foot-path leading from Dambadeniya to Kurunegala and Yapahuwa.

This *ambalama* is of the simplest type of such buildings. The principle of construction of such a structure is to raise a platform about a foot from the ground, then place four logs, transversely on blocks of stone, raise wooden pillars on top of the logs, and construct a simple roof. If the building is rectangular there will be a short ridge-plate on top. There will be two bosses and two pinnacles. The roof will be thatched, covered with straw or tiled, according to the ability of those who support its construction. The logs on which the pillars rest serve also as benches to sit on.

The *ambalama* at Panavitiya stands on a platform 12 feet 4 inches by 9 feet 6 inches raised about a foot from the ground with rubble. The marshy nature of the land has necessitated a foundation of rubble. Beams 9 inches to 1 foot square, 14 feet long, are placed on stone blocks. The floor consists of a grid of two parallel beams on each side. The outer set of nineteen posts are 5 feet 8 inches high. The nine inner posts are 6 feet 2 inches high. The building is 11 feet 5 inches high from the rubble foundation to the ridge of the roof. The roof is 18 feet 3 inches long on the longer sides and 16 feet 6 inches on the shorter, whilst the ridge plate is 3 feet 6 inches in length. The members of the wood work of the roof consist of beams, posts, rafters and reepers.

Though small in size, the value of this *ambalama* is in the ornately carved wood-work of beams and posts. Among

these carvings which may date to about the eighteenth century, are scenes of everyday life, wrestlers, musicians, dancers, acrobats, floral patterns, figures of animals, and birds (See Figures 1-20).

The fragments of tiles found at the site indicate that originally the roof was tiled. During an inspection in 1960 the top of the roof-frame was found to have been broken and the rafters dislodged by a coconut tree falling on it. (See *Report of the Archaeological Commissioner for 1960*, p. G. 90). In this very badly damaged and neglected state the Archaeological Department undertook its conservation and restoration with funds provided by the Department of Cultural Affairs. The work is now completed.

The accompanying plates illustrate a selection of some of the carved panels on the wooden members of the *ambalama*.