Libraries of a Yester-Era*

Dr. Roland Silva^a

ARIBA, FIA (Sri Lanka), FSLCA, PhD (Lieden), Hon. DSc (Moratuwa)

Abstract

Seals found at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa civilizations and Clay Tablets of Mesopotamia prove that the concept of libraries originated in the prehistoric era and mostly centered on Asia. Dr. Siran Deraniyagala in his study through excavation of Anuradhapura found written materials akin to Brahmi writing assigned to the third century B.C. This indicates that Sri Lanka have had a deep rooted history of libraries. After Buddhist Texts were systematically documented at Aluvihara, in 89-77 B.C. it is clear that every Vihara had provisions for storage of books especially the doctrinal texts covering Thripitaka. This article investigates the architectural view of libraries in ancient Buddhist monasteries of Sri Lanka. Buddhist monasteries in ancient Sri Lanka find various types viz. Mahavihara Type, Panchavasa Type, and Vanavasa Type and every Vihara had a place for doctrinal studies where much use of books occurred. These places were attached to edifices such as Uposathaghara, Chapter house or Parivenas in monasteries.

Keywords: Sri Lanka Library History, Ceylon Architecture, Ancient libraries, Monastery libraries of Sri Lanka, Buddhist Monasteries

The earliest items of storage in a library covering its history would be the seals found at Mohengadaro and Harappa, datable to 3,000 to 5,000 BC¹ and the clay tablets of Mesopotamia, dateable to 1,500 to 1,236 BC.² While it is encouraging to note that the origins seem to centre on Asia, the south-eastern front relied mainly on the memory of *pandits* to retain the substance of these texts. The learned Apte underlines the phenomena thus: "...we have to presume that the vast Vedic literature was composed and preserved by oral transmission alone – a stupendous feat of memory which appears to be

^a **Chancellor of the University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka.**

E-mail: rsilva@silvermillgroup.com

***This article is based on the speech made by Dr. Roland Silva as the Chief Guest at the 2009 AGM of University Librarians Association of Sri Lanka held on June 2009 at Hotel Galadhari, Colombo. Dr. Roland Silva is a renowned scholar who has contributed to a variety of researches in various fields. He serves as the Chancellor of University of Moratuwa.**

almost miraculous. On the other hand, if we believe that these voluminous texts were committed in those old days to writing, we are faced with the problem of writing materials, of which we definitely know nothing.”³

With regard to Apte’s comment that we knew nothing about the writing material in terms of the Indian Subcontinent, the concept had reached a head when at the Centenary Seminar of the Sri Lankan, Department of Archaeology in 1990, when Dr. Siran Deraniyagala presented his findings of the stratified sixth century BC layers of the Anuradhapura excavation, wherein he found written material akin to Brahmi writing which had, for over 150 years, been assigned to the third century BC. As I was chairing this session, and as Dr.K.P Ramesh, the Chief Epigraphist of India, was in the front row of the assembly, we remarked that we were in for a battle royal.

Much to the surprise of all assembled, the humble comment of the learned scholar was, I totally agree. I was myself thinking so for a long time was his comment. Thus he took the wind off the sails of the Sri Lankan fleet. Subsequent excavations at the Citadel at Anuradhapura have confirmed substantially this major discovery. Hence, it is well to take the comments of Apte and other scholars into consideration that, “the Indus script formed the parent-source from which the oldest Brahmi alphabets have been derived.”⁵ Majumdar too, in turn conquers with this view when he says: “It (Brahmi) is the earliest form of Indian writing known to us, and from it have been derived,...all the Indian characters current today,...”⁶

At the same time, the massive compositions of the Vedas, the Buddhist and Jain texts were all saved up to the period of Brahmi writing through “human computer disks”, or by the transmission of such literature, from father to son or teacher to pupil, from around 1,500 BC to about 100 BC, when we have a definitive record that the Buddhist Texts were systematically documented at Aluvihara, on the initiative of king Vatagamini Abhaya (89-77 BC).⁷ The situation in Sri Lanka is thereafter, clear as every *vihara* whether it were a Mahavihara type, a Panchavasa type, a Vanavasa Type or even a standard

monastery of a peasant village, all had provisions for the storage of books, especially the vital doctrinal texts covering the Tripitaka.

The Mahavihara type of plan was outlined at the very incept when king Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BC) handed over the Mahamegavana to elder Mahinda to build his monastery. Immediately he divided the ground into thirty two *malakas* and assigned a specific activity to each courtyard. The religious buildings occupied the more important *malakas* such as the *stupa*, Bo-tree shrine, the *uposathaghara* or chapter house and the subsequent image house. The next in priority were the communal buildings such as the refectory, the baths both hot and cold, and the *sanipathasala* or the administrative unit. The rest of the *malakas* retained the *parivanas* or teaching cum residential units.⁸ The buildings with special reference to libraries would, undoubtedly, be the chapter house where the doctrinal texts would be kept for the fortnightly gathering to recite the *Patimokha*.

Figure 1 – Jetavana Monastery, Mahavihara type

The Panchavasa type of *vihara* that came into being around the fifth century had a highly stylized layout with a distinct raised sacred platform in the middle of the monastery which accommodated the five sacred buildings of the establishment. These were the *stupa*, the Bo-tree shrine, the Chapter house, the Image house and the *Sabha*. The residences were at a lower level

surrounding the sacred platform in one, two or three concentric squares and facing the sacred edifices at the centre. This total layout was bound by a moat with some open ground beyond where at the Main Entrance were the hot water bath and the refectory. The total complex was finally surrounded by a high wall and a gatehouse as its point of entry.⁹ Here again the edifices with links to a library were, undoubtedly, the chapter house.

Fig. 4 – Puliyankulama

Figure 2 – Puliyankulama Monastery, Panchavasa type

The Vanavasa type also had a fresh flush of life after Buddhagosha awakened the *samgha* to the realities of the Master's teachings. Many of the monks that broke away from the chief *viharas* retreated to the forest way of life and strengthened the hand of these purists. The layout of a forest monastery is very different. All they had were the *padhanagharas*, the *chankamanagharas* where the extended meditations were carried out together with the cells of the monks also designed as double-platformed units.

The most prominent edifice was the all-purpose-hall where the monks of the *vihara* would all assemble after their morning ablutions to visit the village for their begging rounds. The chief monk would then lead the group out and return to the same hall where the head would address the gathered offering a *dharmadhana* as a response to the *dhana* that the monks had received. The monks would then return to their cells and consume the single meal of the day. On the days of the *uposatha*, the monks would assemble once more at

this all-purpose hall for the recitation of the Patimokha.¹⁰ Hence, if the fortnightly *Patimokha* was recited at the 'all-purpose-hall', then the books needed for this service automatically must have been kept here.

Figure 3 – Ritigala Monastery, Vanavasa type

Leave alone the regally patronized *viharas* as indicated previously, there were many others that were scattered in the countryside alongside reservoirs and agricultural settlements. These were the many monasteries that, king Vatagamini Abhaya was campaigning to set up and thereby, win over the people to the doctrine of the Buddha. Many of these are identified today as the drip-ledged caves of king Valagamba, with or without Brahmi inscriptions. Even these *viharas* had the obligation to congregate at an appointed time at a given place once every fortnight to recite the Partimokha.¹¹ Therefore, any books required for such ritual, these would necessarily have been housed in an edifice where this was held.

Thus we see a specific need of all monks, irrespective of their living outlook, to abide by a discipline of conformity whereby, they had to meet at a regular time at a fixed place for spiritual fulfillment. Thus, such a place of meeting in any monastery would, undoubtedly, be the right depository to place the codes of conduct and procedure meant for the spiritual leaders to follow. The heavy but

openable boxes in the chapter house at Malvatta could well be the remnant of a tradition of this nature. With time, it had become the practice to carry out any spiritual activity like the ordination ceremony also to be within such a building

Figure 4 – Thiriyaya, Countryside Monastery

It has also become custom to meet either religious or lay leaders also in the same premises. My own experience has been the conferring of the Order of Puravidya Vidvjjana Shiromani at the Pushparama Mahavihara, for the work carried out under my guidance at the Mavatta Monastery which convocation was also held at this *uposataghara*.¹² Thus the conclusion that we may draw is that the bulk of the doctrinal books of a monastery would rightly be, that these were generally placed in the *uposathghara*. Keleniya and Kotte Rajamahaviharas have such libraries in the upper floors of these edifices. This would not preclude a *vihara* having a separate library of its own as is the case of the Octagon at Malvatta.

It would also be well to note that the monasteries of the Mahavihara type had *malakas* or courtyards wherein the chief monk was both head and the *guru* of about two dozen younger monks. If one were to study the layout of a residence cum teaching unit, it is the large central building of this quincunx plan that was occupied by the chief priest and also used as the teaching space to instruct the younger monks. The many archaeological remains at

Anuradhapura and elsewhere show clearly that this was storied. The immediate suggestion would be to propose that the chief monk lived there. But some of these central units retain the basal units of a Buddha statue.

Figure 6 - Keleniya Uposathaghara and Library

It would be unbecoming of a monk were to sleep in an upper floor when there was a Buddha image that was being worshiped in the lower level. Hence, our suggestion is that this floor above the teaching unit was used to store religious books and other items of ritual value required for the religious and teaching activities of the *vihara*. Within the Mahavihara format, there were yet other buildings especially set apart to handle those aspects of monastic administration. If one visualized the enormity of the task in feeding between 3,000 and 5,000 monks in the larger monasteries on a daily basis, one could grasp the many problems that one needed to encounter.

Further the monastic discipline of working on a set programme like the maintaining of daily accounts,¹³ monthly records, and the drawing up of an annual balance sheet,¹⁴ all these would have required shelves of documentation as would be in a spacious office or in a library for this specific purpose. Further, there were posts on the monastic cadre in positions such as Writer, Revenue Writer, which meant that record books had to be maintained.¹⁵

All this amounted to the retaining of books and records in a systematic way for reference and regular perusal. In a Panchavasa monastery, the library would have been in the upper floor of the *uposathaghara*. Similarly, the Vanavasa *viharas* that dispensed with all aids to spiritual upliftment would have reduced the number of books in this regard to a minimum. The few that were retained, would in all probability have been stored in the all-purpose-building, where the activities of the *Uposatha* were also conducted.

Let us for a moment reflect upon the books that were considered as the object of veneration. We were fortunate to discover the Pragnaparamitasutra that was enshrined in a relic house beside the royal palace at Anuradhapura. This is a book of about one hundred and ten leaves written on both sides on thick gold leaf. Only seven leaves were discovered and though the writing is in Sinhala of the ninth century, the language is Sanskrit. These were discovered in a broken pot buried very near the private circular relic house positioned near the residence of the high priest of Jetavanavihara.

Figure 7 - Teaching and Living Complex Mahavihara Type

These 'book-relics' of the Mahayana faith were meant for veneration. The permanent depository of the book beside the palace is called 'Building A' and the relic was taken to the Jetavana monastery every year and displayed to the public for veneration at the Relic House 9 positioned next to the *sanipathasala*

and in the green outside the outer *maluva* of the *stupa*. We also discovered the private circular relic house wherein the book was kept beside the residence of the high priest of Jetavana when it was not on display to the public. As this was a practice initiated by the palace for the Mahayana monks of Jetavana, a parallel exercise was set in place for the Hinayana monks at the Mirisavetiya when the Dharmasangani text was brought to the relic house from the permanent depository of the Gedige, which was also located beside the palace. These 'book-relics' that were venerated can be referred to as *Darmadhatu*, and are symbolic doctrinal texts meant purely for veneration.

Figure 8 - Book Relic Pragnaparamitas

If one moved away from monasteries to the Council Chambers of kings located next to the palaces, the royal records would have been overwhelming. The responsibilities of the king covered justice, grant of land, appointment of officials and many other functions about which records, whether archival or of the librarian type, had to be kept. This style of government continued until the twelfth century when the unitary control seized around the beginning of the thirteenth century and when the infrastructure elements of the nation collapsed including the Buddha *sasana* due to the monks being harassed and even persecuted, which compelled the *sangha* to leave the land to neighboring countries.

The divided kingdom that followed, with many rulers at Polonnaruwa, Dambadeniya, Tissamaharama, Jaffna, Minipe, Dedigama and Raigama, all contributed to a breakdown of national infrastructure, such as irrigation and other activities that were central to the supply of the staple food and other services to the people.

Whatever the political motives may have been, the kings that followed sought spiritual refuge in carrying out various exercises of literary pursuits. As a result, later historians began to call Parakramabahu I as 'Great' and Parakramabahu II as 'Pandita'. The writings that followed covered religious, scientific and social subjects. It would be difficult to imagine a major attempt on writings that included commentaries on earlier texts and improvements on existing works, if the authors did not have substantial libraries. Every king, since the persecutor Magha (1215-1236), up to the moment when the island was overrun by foreign invaders in 1505, there have been either exceptional authors or at least great promoters of literary works

It was during Parakramabahu II (1236-1279) that the *Vinayartha-samuccya*, a *Sinhalese Sanne* of the *Vinaya-pitaka* was written. The king also got down many learned Bhikkhus from the Cola country who were versed in the *Tripitaka*.¹⁶ The *Dathavmsa* was also written during this period apart from the continuation of the *Mahavamsa*.¹⁷ The *Hatthavanagalla-viharavamsa*, strongly reminiscent of Sanskrit romances and the work of *Anomadassi-mahasami* titled *daivajna-kamadhenu*, along with a work on astronomy and astrology in Sanskrit were written.⁽¹⁷⁾ Other works compiled during this period consists of, the grammatical work, the *Padasadhhana* by Piyadassi and *Sambndhcinta-sanne* by Gotama and the Pali *Rasavahini* by Vedeha and *Samantakuta-vannana* by yet another.

The Sinhalese grammar written by Vedeha is considered to be identical to *Sidat-sangara*. The medical treatises in Pali the *Bhesajja-manjusa*, was also composed during this period. *Yogarnava*, another book on medicine, and a popular religious text, the *Pujavali*, the *Saddharma-ratnavali* a Sinhala version of the Pali *Dhammapadatthakatha* with lucid examples of the time and simple

language, were others written at the time.¹⁸ Beside Parakramabahu II being a patron of learning, he was himself an erudite scholar. He is reputed to have written explanatory works in Sinhalese on the Pali *Vinaya-vinicchaya* of Buddhadatta and on Buddhagosha's *Visudhimagga*. The well known work of the king is the *Kusadavata* or *Kavsilumina*.¹⁹

Figure 9 – Plan of Relic House

The king was succeeded by his brother Vijayabahu IV (1270-1272), who also encouraged learning. The king that followed was Bhuvanaikabahu I (1272-1284), during which period the Pali grammatical work called *Payoasiddhi* was written. The *Jinacarita*, a book on the life of the Buddha was also written at this time.²⁰ The final phase of high literary activity was with Parakramabahu IV (1302-1326) with whom the Sinhala *Panciya-panas jataka-pota* was written. It was also during this period that the *Dalada-sirita* was written and no doubt, its practice revived.²¹

The *Elu Bodhi-vamsa* and the *Anagata-vamsa* was also composed by Sri-Parakramabahu-mahimi and during this reign, a part of the *Mahavamsa* was also updated.²² In the reign of Bhuvanaikabahu IV (1341-1351), the *Paramimaha-sataka* and the *Jananuaga-carita* were also written. In the reign of Vikramabahu III (1357-1375) the *Vimukti-sangraha* was composed. It was also during this period that the messenger poems or the *sandesa kavi* were attempted and it spread from the Gampola era to the Kotte period.²³ Not long after, in the reign of king Bhuvanaikabahu V (1372-1408), that the controversial *Nikaya-samgrha*, a large work called the *Saddharmalankara*, the *Balavatara* and the *Saddharma-ratnakara*, were written.²⁴

The long and glorious rule of Parkramabahu VI (1412-1467) records the end of the royal patronage to Sri Lankan Literature prior to a four hundred and fifty year slot of occupation in the independence of the nation. Parakramabahu VI extended patronage to many of the *parivanas* and encouraged scholarship. Some of the institutes of learning that he either established or promoted include the Padmavati-parivena at Karagala and that at Sangharaja. The others were the Vijayabahu-parivena at Totagamuva, Sunethradevi-parivena at Papiliyana, the Irugalkula-parivena at Mulgirigala and the Sri- Ghanananda-parivena at Raigama.

As for scholarship the two *sandesa* poems, the *Paravi* and the *Salalihini*, *Kavyasekhera* and the two grammatical works in Sinhala and Pali have been attributed to Sri Rahula who even referred to the old Tamil Glossary as well. Such classical works as *Saddharma-ratnakara*, *Guttala-kavya* and *Parakumba-sirita* were books of this period. The Rayigama masterpieces of this period include the *Lovada-sangara*, *Kavlakunu-minimal* and *Budugunalankara*. The king himself wrote *Ruvanmala* and he invited learned men from South India who wrote some medical texts in Sinhalese.

The question that one needs to raise is how all these books were written without libraries and the various texts being readily available? Although the major constructional phases of Sri Lanka's history was to some extent lost in the latter phases after the Dambadeniya period, the literary skills of monks

and laity sustained this sensitive traits of writing and reading for which the palace had given true leadership.

These thoughts on a 'Yester Era' on Libraries and Librarianship, is to jog an element of enthusiasm into the minds of this profession of not mealy to record the ins and outs of books and records, but also to look a little beyond. We think of people like E. B. Cowell, the Librarian of Cambridge University, who organized the translation of the five hundred and forty seven Jatakas (not five hundred and fifty). One other who helped in this translation was the Under-Librarian, H. T. Francis, It was the latter that completed the Fifth Volume of this Translation and the series. Think of our own H.A.I. Goonetilleke, who prepared a standard index to all Sri Lankan Publications up to a given date of 1978. Then there is W. B. Dorakumbura, the Librarian of Sri Jayawardenapura who later became the Vice Chancellor. These thoughts, I trust, would suffice to indicate my line of thought and hope for the young librarians of your splendid island.

Notes:

1. Pusalker, A.D. , The Indus Valley Civilization, *History and Culture of the Indian People*, London, 1957, pp. 190-191.
2. M.O.P. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1954, Vol. 14, p2.
3. Apte, V.M, Social and Economic Conditions, *History and Culture of the Indian People*, London, 1957, pp.392.
4. M.O.P. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1954, Vol. 14, p2.
5. Apte, V.M, Social and Economic Conditions, *History and Culture of the Indian People*, London, 1957, pp.392.
6. Majumdar, R. C, Sources of Indian History, p.53. and Pusalker, A.D, The Indus Valley Civilization, *History and Culture of the Indian People*, London, 1957, p. 190.
7. Mahavamsa, etc. tr. W. Geiger, ch. XXXIII, vv. 100 – 101.
8. *Ibid*, XV, vv. 202 – 214.
9. Silva, R, The Monastery of Mahinda Thera, Son of King Asoka, Established at Anuradhapura in the Third Century BC, and its Influence on the Viharas of Sri Lanka up to the Sixth Century AD, *Ancient Ceylon*, no. 22, pp. 266 ff.
10. *Ibid*, pp.267 ff.
11. Silva, R, Environment, Town, Village and Monastic Planning, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, vol. X – pt. I, pp.163 ff. Non-Formal Vihara Types (Awaiting Publication),

12. Silva, R, The Monastery of Mahinda Thera, Son of King Asoka, Established at Anuradhapura in the Third Century BC, and....its Influence on the Viharas of Sri Lanka up to the Sixth Century AD, *Ancient Ceylon*, no. 22, pp. 260-261.
13. *Ibid*, p. 262.
14. Silva, R, Environment, Town, Village and Monastic Planning, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, vol. X – pt. I,....p.121 (Awaiting Puplication).
15. *Ibid*, pp.119 ff.
16. Culavamsa, pt. II, tr. W. Geiger, ch. LXXXIV, vv. 9-10, and vv. 11ff.
17. Hettiarachi, D. E, Civilisation of the Period (*Continued*): Literature and Art, *History of Ceylon*, vol. I, pt. .II, p. 771.
18. *Idem*, p.772.
19. *Idem*, pp.771-772.
20. *Idem*, p. 773.
21. *Idem*, pp. 773-774.
22. *Idem*, p. 774.
23. *Idem*, pp. 774-775.
24. *Idem*, pp. 774-776.

References

- Apte, V.M, (1957). Social and Economic Conditions. *History and Culture of the Indian People* London, pp.392.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1954). Vol. 14, p2.
- Hettiarachi, D. E,. Civilisation of the Period (*Continued*): Literature and Art, *History of Ceylon*, vol. I, pt. .II, p. 771.
- Mahavamsa . tr. W. Geiger, ch. XXXIII, vv. 100 – 101.
- Majumdar, R. C, (1957). Sources of Indian History, p.53
- Pusalker, A.D. (1957). The Indus Valley Civilization. *History and Culture of the Indian People*. London, pp. 190-191.
- Silva, R,. Environment, Town, Village and Monastic Planning, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, vol. X – pt. I, p.121 (In print).
- Silva, R. The Monastery of Mahinda Thera: Son of King Asoka, Established at Anuradhapura in the Third Century BC, and its Influence on the Viharas of Sri Lanka up to the Sixth Century AD, *Ancient Ceylon*, no. 22, pp. 266