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Excavations in the Citadel of Ancient Mahagama (Tissamaharama/Sri Lanka)

Archaeological fieldwork at ancient Mahagama, the Tissamaharama of today, looks back to a decade of research. In 1992 the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka and the Commission for General and Comparative Archaeology (KAVA), a branch of the German Institute of Archaeology commenced fieldwork in the ancient citadel, the capital of the kingdom of Ruhuna¹.

The first investigation took place at Tissa 1, a workmen's quarter in the southern part of the settlement. This Workmen's Quarter was of pre-Christian time, mainly the 3rd to the 1st centuries BC. The pottery in those layers largely consisted of Black-and-Red Ware (Weisshaar/Schenk/Wijeyapala 2001, 12ff.; Schenk 2001). Within the excavated area of 650 m² we found the traces of dwellings, a paved road or open courtyard with a square well and long battery furnaces for bronze production. Inhabitation at this part of the citadel goes back to the early 4th century BC.

In the west of the citadel, in Tissa 2 (the Court's Garden), we excavated a large house of a noble family on 150 m² dated to the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. The pottery had changed from Black-and-Red Ware to Coarse Red Ware (Weisshaar/Schenk/Wijeyapala 2001, 26ff.). When a new District Court had been built at this site we had to stop the fieldwork before we could reach the layers of Black-and-Red Ware.

Fortunately, we were able to resume the research in this part of the citadel about 50 m south in the Sarvodaya premises (Tissa 3). The excavation area is about 600 m² large. Thus around 1400 m² of the ancient citadel are under investigation.

Meanwhile we work at Tissa 3 in the same layers of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD as at Tissa 2, when the fieldwork had to stop (fig. 1). We uncovered a large building of wattle and daub. But unlike the house of the noble family at the nearby Tissa 2, this building turned out to be a hospital. The large house of Tissa 2 had thicker walls with a white wash and mouldings but in principal the two structures did not differ much. Both houses had large storage pots *in situ* and several fireplaces inside and outside the house.

The clay floor from the main building of the hospital was preserved at several places. It covered a shallow pit with a foundation deposit. Stone tables and pestles were arranged on top of a small vessel (fig. 2). The grinding tables and pestles were manufactured in pairs of different stone material. A second small pot, similar to the first one, was placed alongside in the pit. This type of vessel has been potted in all likelihood especially for the hospital. It does not have a place in the typology of the usual local pottery.

The small finds were very different to those in Tissa 2. We found many grinding stones and pestles (about 10 or 12) in the kitchen tract of the noble's house. But the fragments of stone tables, grinding stones, mortars and pestles of the hospital area go into the hundreds. Almost all of the tools were broken, wasted in the middle, thus giving proof of their long-time use. Beside the stone tools we retrieved a large number of iron finds.

This hospital is not to compare with those institutions we know from Anuradhapura, Mihintale and Polonnaruwa. These are much bigger, centuries later and they belong to the large monasteries. But at Tissamaharama the monasteries are situated outside the citadel, south of the Tissawewa.

Siriweera (2003) lists four categories of hospitals:

- A: Monastic hospitals where in-house treatment was provided for ailing monks for short or long period;
- B: Hospitals for laymen where in-house treatment was provided;
- C: Maternity homes;
- D: Hospitals where only outdoor treatment was provided.

The hospital on the citadel does not exactly fit into these categories. It is most probably a private hospital for laymen, founded by a rich private

¹ Weisshaar 1998; 2000; 2001; 2004; Weisshaar/Roth/Wijeyapala 2001; Weisshaar/Wijeyapala 1994; 2000.



Fig. 1. Tissamaharama. The site Tissa 3 (Sarvodaya Area) on the banks of the Tissawewa. Photo H. Wittersheim.

person or even by the king himself. It comes closest to the last type as the dispensing of herbal medicine to outdoor patients was by all means the main task.

One of the striking features of the later hospitals is a big trough, where patients took a medical bath of herbal oils. They were of solid stone and the inner tube sometimes in the shape of a human body. The hospital is too early for these solid basins. But we uncovered an oval structure, built of stones with an inner pavement of stones, sealed with clay (fig. 3). At some parts the outer surface was concealed with vertical tiles. The basin or foundation of a (wooden?) trough is about 1 m wide and 2.30 m long. The structure could very well be one of the forerunners of the medical bathtubs we find in later hospitals. The tube stood inside a hut of wooden posts. The tiles of the collapsed roof covered the entire structure.

Toilets are a common feature within later hospitals. At Tissa 3, we also uncovered a large toilet area directly at the lake at a distance of 10 m from the hospital. Strong walls with a recession in the last line of bricks probably served as a hold for wooden beams of a floor. Underneath the floor were filter pots of urinals surrounding a central shaft.

This is the actual situation and the structure is still under investigation. The filters consist of at least two vessels, one pot riding on top of the other. As it seems, the bottoms are purposely broken-off and some vessels are turned upside down (fig. 4). One filter is filled with sand; the other is filled with lime, taken from corals (fig. 5). The whole feature, the central shaft and the filters are greenish discoloured by the wastewater.

The northern part of the structure is well preserved (fig. 6). Walls and filters have been rebuilt several times. The youngest building of the 2nd century AD had a small covered water channel made of bricks. An open platform for washing was probably integrated into the structure. A shallow ditch with light grey soil stretches alongside in the west of the toilet area. It is almost entirely filled with flat dishes and water pots.

The hospital of Tissamaharama is an early archaeological proof to the long medical tradition on the island.

In the 3rd century AD (phase e) the successive building was of wattle and daub. Only parts of the floor and an elevated fireplace survived. In front of it were several vessels *in situ*, a number of plates on top of each other. They were of Coarse



Fig. 2. Tissamaharama. Hospital of the 1st century AD. Shallow pit with foundation deposit. Photo H. Wittersheim.



Fig. 3. Tissamaharama. Ancient hospital. Oval stone structure of a basin. Photo H.-J. Weisshaar.

Red Ware. Here, also a lot of iron finds and stone tools came to light, but they are not to compare in numbers with those of the earlier hospital. A hoard of 26 punch-marked coins was retrieved from this layer. They obviously have been in a small bag. The textile structure was preserved on two of the corroded coins. Several fragments of green-glazed Parthian or Sasanian containers came up in the layers of the 3rd century AD (fig. 7).

Numerous beads were uncovered. Some of them belonged to a string of green glass beads. Many types in the upper layers of this site did not turn up in the workmen's quarter of Tissa 1 (Hannibal-Deraniyagala 2001). They give new information on the typology and the history of bead making in Sri Lanka. And several of them demonstrate long distance connections².

In phase f (4th century AD – 450 AD) we found the brick foundations of two successive buildings. For a later repair of the structure, postholes were set into the line of bricks (fig. 8). Both buildings were covered with tiles. Many of them lay within the building together with some pinnacles. We gave a report of these buildings at the conference in Leiden (Weisshaar/Wijeyapala, in press).

After 450 AD the latest house had been destroyed. Many pits showed that the bricks were reused shortly after. In the last layer of the building and especially in these pits were a lot of Roman coins from the end of the 4th to the end

of the 5th century AD. The latest being two coins of Leo I (457–474).

The importance of this house is underlined by several sealings in- and outside the building. Two of the motifs are an elephant in front view and a wild boar. Together with the coins they also give proof of the trade in the Early Historical Period. The sealings do not only derive from trade goods (like parcels or boxes), or stoppers for the sealing of jars but also from written documents (like letters or palm leaf books).

We do not have later settlement structures on the site. The youngest feature was a small monastic building of poor quality. Stone pillars were erected on brick foundations (fig. 9). The bricks had been taken from the debris of the older buildings. Within the line of pillars lay a group of vessels, probably a foundation deposit. Beside one contemporary vessel (that is phase g, beginning in the late 5th century AD) two vessels belonged to the preceding phase f (4th century AD). In the layers connected to the monastic building a rare red painted pottery occurred³.

² See the paper by A. Hannibal-Deraniyagala in this volume.

³ For the red painted pottery see the paper by H. Schenk in this volume.



Fig. 4. Tissamaharama. Large toilette of the hospital area. Filter pots, 1st century BC – 1st century AD. Photo H. Wittersheim.

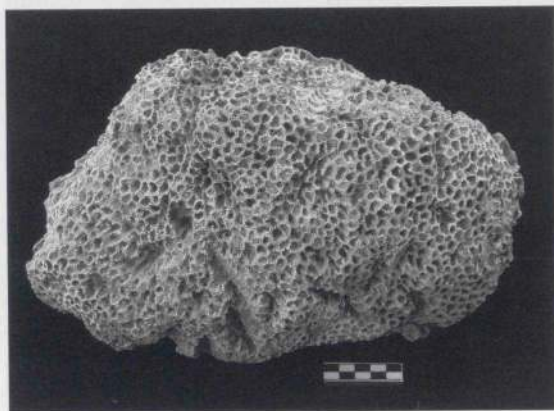


Fig. 5. Tissamaharama. Lime taken from corals inside one of the filter pots. Photo H. Wittersheim.

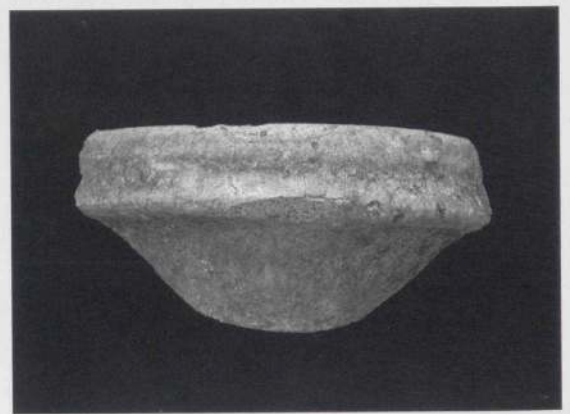


Fig. 7. Tissamaharama. Green-glazed Persian rim fragment, 3rd century AD (phase e). Photo H. Schenk.

The building did not last long. The monasteries probably gave up to set foot within the citadel area. Most pillars collapsed. One of them fell into a pit that contained part of a human skeleton. The bones, however, were in disorder. The place was no longer used as a monastery.

The evidence from all excavation sites of Tissamaharama suggests a decline of the settlement after 500 AD. Royal power collapsed. The citadel however was never abandoned totally. We do have finds up to the 9th and 10th centuries AD, and the monasteries south of the Tissawewa still flour-



Fig. 6. Tissamaharama. Hospital area. Walls of the toilette structure, 1st century BC – 2nd century AD. Photo H. Wittersheim.



Fig. 8. Tissamaharama. Brick walls of foundation. Noble house of phase f (4th century AD – 450 AD). During a repair postholes were set into the walls. Photo H.-J. Weisshaar.



Fig. 9. Tissamaharama. Small monastic building, late 5th/early 6th century AD (early phase g). One of the stone pillars is still standing. Photo H.-J. Weisshaar.

ished. Many of the well-carved stone sculptures of the Tissamaharama monasteries are younger than the decline of the citadel⁴. But it seems that many people left the area.

It has been argued elsewhere by Siriweera (1986) that droughts and famines led to a shift of population to the west of Ruhuna in that time. The wet zone of the island is only some 50 km away. The archaeological data from Tissamaharama fit into this picture. Being witness to the drought the area around Tissamaharama and Hambantota faced during the 2001 season one can very well follow these arguments.

The trenches at ancient Mahagama are like windows into the past of the kingdom of Ruhuna and into the daily life on the citadel. The "Ancient Ruhuna Project" tries to shed some light on early urban development and on the early history of the island.

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⁴ The stone sculptures are kept in a small museum next to the Yatala Dagoba. See the paper by F. Reitz in this volume.