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B. Steinbring

Archaeological Investigations at Ambalantota 1997–1999
(Hambantota District, Southern Province, Sri Lanka)

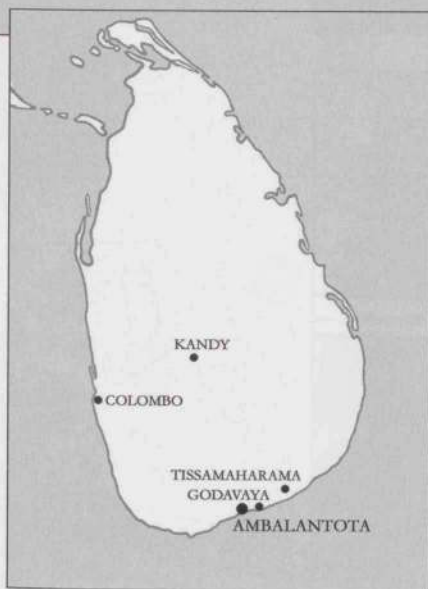
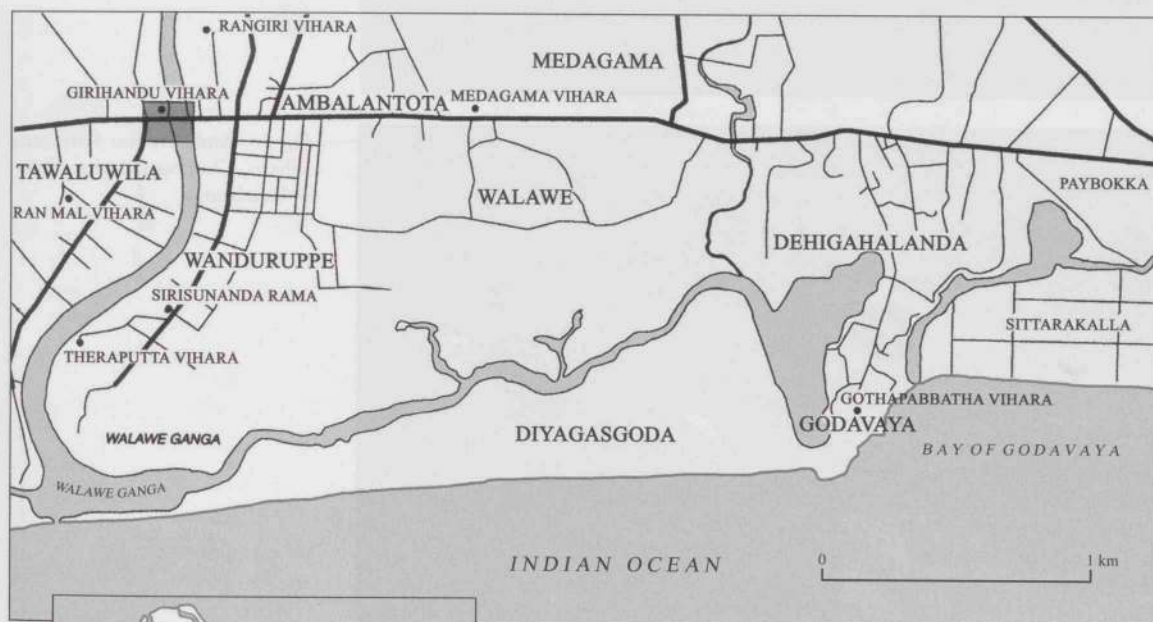


Fig. 1. The Walawe estuary on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, between Ambalantota and Godavaya.

This article gives a brief summary of a first excavation report (Roth/Steinbring/Wijeyapala 2001). Three campaigns of fieldwork were carried out in 1997–1999, at the Girihandu Rajamaha monastery at Ambalantota, as a joint project of the Institute for Pre- and Early Historical Archaeology (University of Bonn, Germany) and the Department of Archaeology (Colombo, Sri Lanka). The aim of this project was to re-examine the site of an excavation directed by the Department of Archaeology in the mid 1960s.

Ambalantota is situated in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, on the western bank of the Walawe river (fig. 1). Numerous monasteries line the banks of the lower Walawe. The site itself is located to the south of the modern Girihandu monastery with its distinctive white dagoba (fig. 2). Ambalantota, mentioned in the Culavamsa chronicle for the 11th and 12th centuries AD, had been the main crossing of the lower Walawe in medieval times. Although there is no information from written sources on the Girihandu monastery, an Early Buddhist foundation can be assumed.

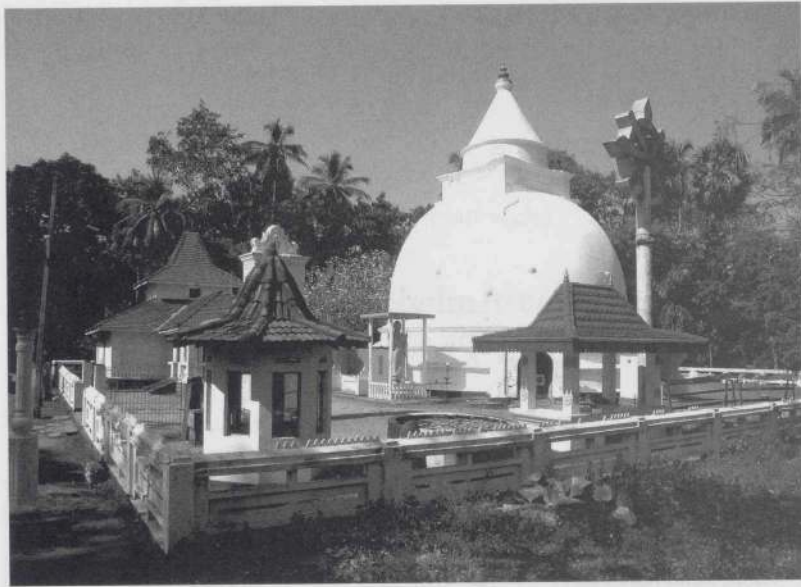


Fig. 2. Ambalantota, Girihandu Rajamaha Vihara. The monastery today. Photo H. Wittersheim.



Fig. 3. Ambalantota, Girihandu Vihara. Clearing the site. Photo B. Steinbring.

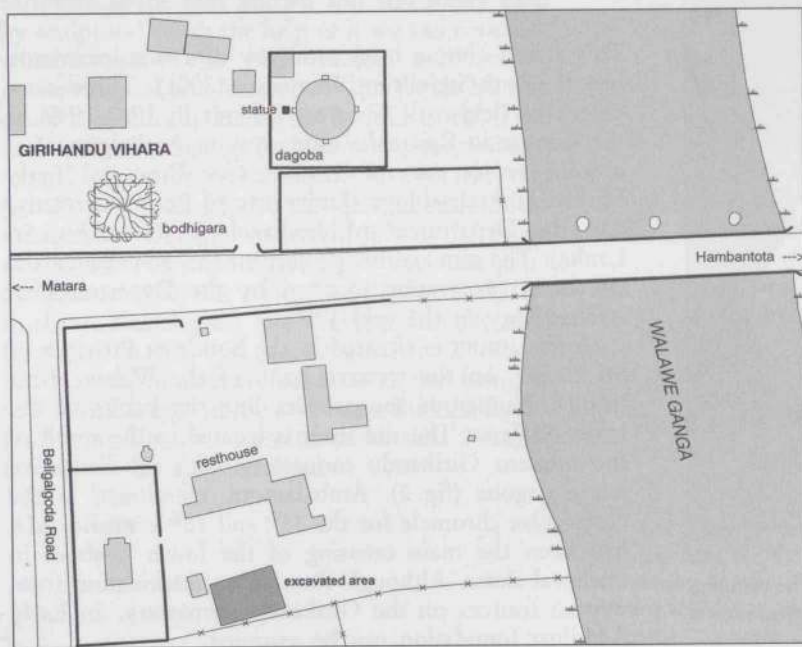


Fig. 5 a. Ambalantota, Girihandu Vihara. Site plan.

Fig. 4. Ambalantota, Girihandu Vihara. Work in progress in the old excavation area. Photo B. Steinbring.

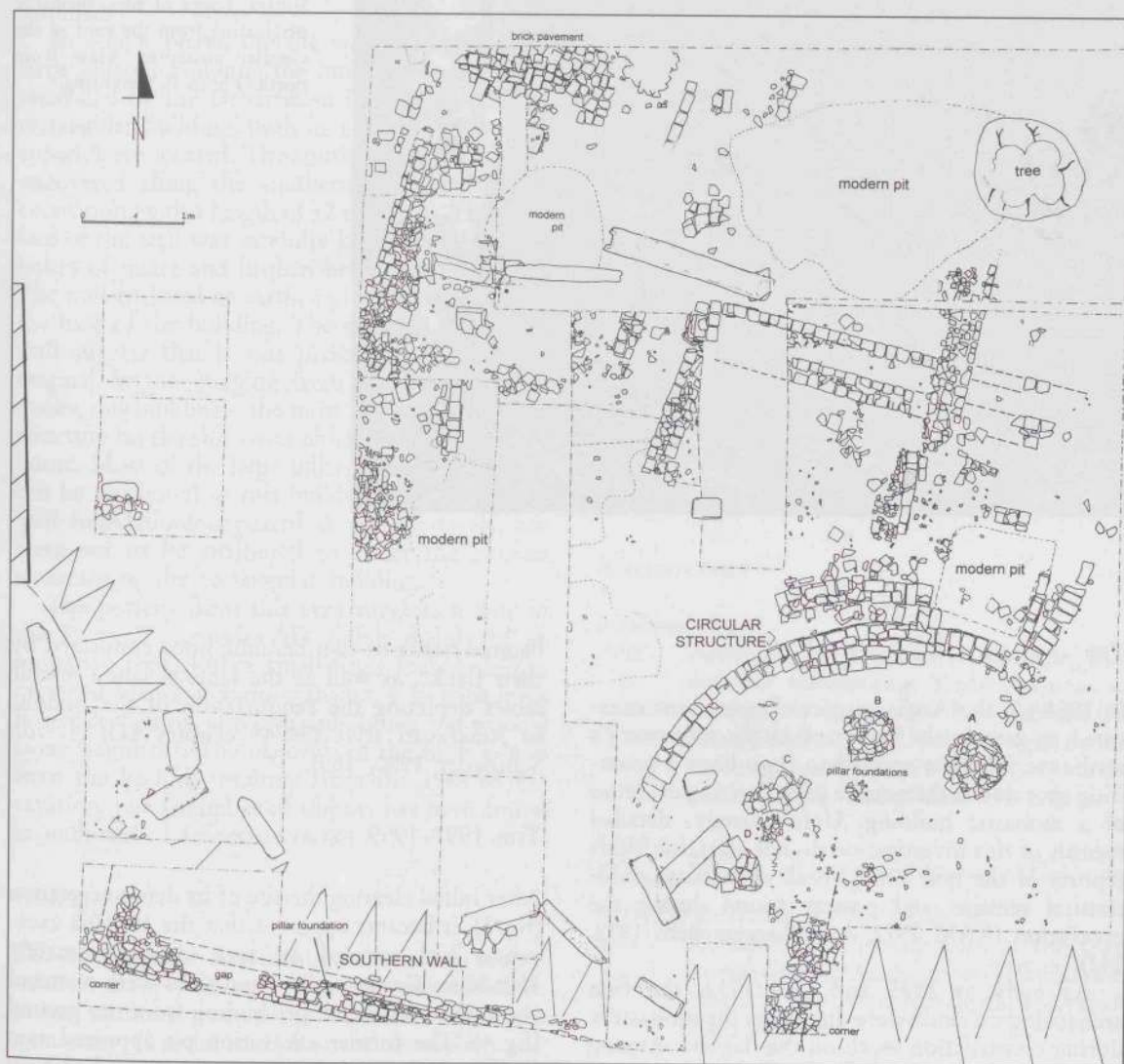


Fig. 5 b. Ambalantota, Girihandu Vihara. General plan of excavation.



Fig. 6. Ambalantota, Girihandu Vihara. Pillar foundations of the oldest phase within the circular brick structure. Photo B. Steinbring.



Fig. 7. Ambalantota, Girihandu Vihara. Layer of tiles, probably originating from the roof of the circular structure. View from north. Photo B. Steinbring.

THE SITE

In 1964/65, the Archaeological Department excavated an area in the backyard of the monastery's resthouse. The site seemed to have been a promising spot due to the granite pillars, giving evidence of a monastic building. Unfortunately, detailed records of this investigation do not exist, but short reports of the mid 1960s speak of statues, architectural remains and pottery found during the excavation (RAM 1972, 662; Bopearachchi 1998, 142).

As early as 1875 and 1936/1938, the first archaeological finds were dug up in the monastery during construction work on the dagoba. Among them are a number of fragments of 7th century statues (cf. von Schroeder 1990, 248), and various other small finds. Noteworthy finds are a small

bronze statue of two heraldic lions connected by their flanks, as well as the famous white marble tablet depicting the renunciation of the Buddha in Amaravati style (3rd/4th century AD; cf. von Schroeder 1990, 105).

THE 1997–1999 EXCAVATIONS

After initial clearing the site of its dense vegetation (fig. 3), it became apparent that the 1964/65 excavation had covered an area of approximately 15 × 30 m. Granite pillars and slabs were scattered about the surface, or protruding from the ground (fig. 4). The former excavation pit appeared as a shallow depression; since the mid 60s, it had been constantly backfilled, especially during the monsoon seasons.

SETTLEMENT STRUCTURES (fig. 5)

The oldest phase is marked by a circular building, one quarter of which was uncovered at c. 3 m below the modern surface. Its foundation consisted of a double wall of bricks. An extension on the northern outer wall might indicate an entrance area. Within the walls, four pillar foundations, each made of a large granite slab and bricks, were discovered (fig. 6).

Since this area was excavated already in 1964, datable finds were unfortunately missing, except for a single late Roman coin of Delmatius Caesar struck in AD 335 (Walburg 2001, 268, no. 50). The circular structure seems to represent a platform featuring a tiled roof supported by pillars. Undisturbed layers close to the building contained numerous broken tiles (fig. 7). The distinct shape suggests a relic house, a circular shrine as found at the Jetavana monastery at Anuradhapura, although a non-religious function may also be assumed.

In a later phase, the site was dominated by a large pillared building, the interior of which was excavated by the Department in 1964/65. Of this rectangular building, both its eastern and western corner were located. The southern outer wall was uncovered along the southern boundary of the excavation, with a length of 12 m (fig. 8). The outer face of the wall was carefully laid with alternating layers of intact and broken bricks and roof tiles. The wall enclosed an earthen platform that formed the base of the building. The steps on top of the wall suggest that it was preserved almost at its original height. Judging from the structural remains, this building – the most recent architectural structure on the site – was either a chapter or relic house. Most of the large pillars found on the site can be attributed to this building. Several further wall foundations appeared at various levels, but were not to be attributed to either the circular structure or the rectangular building.

The pottery from this area suggests a date in the 5th to 7th centuries AD and is mainly of an utilitarian type. Other small finds include beads, moulded bricks in various shapes, e. g. with lotus flower decoration, also iron nails, bones and worked stone fragments. The majority of the finds comes from the backfill resulting from the 1964/65 excavation, but a number of objects has been found in undisturbed features.

CONCLUSION

The excavation at Ambalantota allowed to reconstruct and approximately date the main buildings in the southern part of the Girihandu Rajamaha monastery. In order to explore the chronology and architectural development of the site, further excavation preferably in an area formerly untouched by archaeological work would be desirable. Un-



Fig. 8. Ambalantota, Girihandu Vihara. Later phase. The southern wall of the circular building. View from east. Photo B. Steinbring.

disturbed features were especially met along the northern boundary of the excavation. Further archaeological work at Ambalantota, therefore, should target this area.

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