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Nossa Senhora do Livramento: Excavation of the Holy Well at Jawatte Cemetery, Colombo (Sri Lanka)

Beiträge zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Archäologie Bd. 24 (2004):
31–37

<https://doi.org/10.34780/jsgga269>

Herausgebende Institution / Publisher:
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

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Kommission für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Archäologie
des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Bonn

AVA-Beiträge

Band 24

Beiträge zur
Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Archäologie

Band 24

KAVA

KOMMISSION FÜR ALLGEMEINE UND VERGLEICHENDE
ARCHÄOLOGIE

BEITRÄGE
ZUR ALLGEMEINEN
UND VERGLEICHENDEN
ARCHÄOLOGIE

BAND 24

2004



VERLAG PHILIPP VON ZABERN · MAINZ

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Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Beiträge zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Archäologie /

Komm. für Allg. u. Vergleichende Archäologie d. Dt. Archäolog. Inst., Bonn. –
Mainz am Rhein : v. Zabern.

Erscheint jährl. – Teilw. u. d. T.: Allgemeine und Vergleichende
Archäologie. – Früher im Verl. Beck, München. – Nebent.: AVA-Beiträge. –
Aufnahme nach Bd. 8. 1986 (1989)

ISSN 0170-9518

NE: Allgemeine und Vergleichende Archäologie; NT

Bd. 24. 2004.

Verl.-Wechsel

ISSN 0170-9518

ISBN 3-8053-3463-X

© Kommission für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Archäologie
des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Bonn, 2004
Satz und Herstellung: Linden Soft Verlag e.K., Köln
Druck und Vertrieb: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, Mainz
Printed in Germany

Printed on fade resistant and archival quality paper (PH 7 neutral) · tcf

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Nimal Perera/Rev. W. L. A. Don Peter

Nossa Senhora do Livramento:
Excavation of the Holy Well at Jawatte Cemetery, Colombo (Sri Lanka)

On a mound within the Roman Catholic sector of the Jawatte cemetery in Colombo lies a deep well (Figs. 1, 2). Two papers about the well by W. L. A. Don Peter (1963, 1977) aroused the interest of the Archaeological Department. In the days when the Kingdom of Kotte was under Portuguese rule, there was a Christian shrine very close to Colombo, which had a holy well. Nothing is now left of the shrine itself, but the well still remains. Excavations in and around the well were conducted by the Archaeological Department over two seasons in December 2001 and from January to February 2002¹.

Among the churches built in Sri Lanka by Christian missionaries during the Portuguese period, a few became popular shrines and centres of pilgrimage. One of these was the Church of Our Lady of Miracles in Jaffna. Another was the Shrine of Our Lady of Mondanale in the Kingdom of Kotte, the location of which has not been precisely identified. Closer to the city and fort of Colombo was the Shrine of Our Lady of Deliverance (Nossa Senhora do Livramento).

De Queyroz tells us that this last-mentioned shrine was “half a league to the South of Colombo . . . and within gun shot to the East of it was in former times the City of Cota” (1930, 715). Furthermore, he says that among the churches built in Sri Lanka by the Religious of St. Augustine (the Augustinians) was a “hermitage on the plain of Mapane” (1930, 720), which is also a reference to the same shrine.

The term “hermitage” is however misleading. S. G. Perera, in his translation of de Queyroz, has rendered the Portuguese word *ermida* as “hermitage”, but *ermida* is not exactly a hermitage. The Portuguese word for the latter is *eremiterio*. *Ermida* means a church or chapel in a secluded location, which more accurately describes the shrine of Livramento.

As noted by de Queyroz, the Augustinians were in charge of this shrine, and there is consequently more information about it in Augustinian records. They speak of an *ermida* that stood on farmland belonging to the order in a locality referred to as “Marapety”, but more often as “Narapeti”, which is evidently Narahenpita. The *ermida* had a “miraculous” image of the Virgin and a well of holy water, which was piously used by pilgrims and even taken back to their homes.

The Portuguese work *Santuário Marino* (compiled by the Augustinian Agostinho de Santa Maria and published in 1720), deals with Marian shrines in Asia and Africa, and says of the Narahenpita shrine: “Our Religious, the Hermits, had a monastery in Ceylon, and thirteen churches in which they administered the Sacraments like the parish clergy, and they had also under their charge an *ermida* in which was a miraculous image of the Mother of God which was much sought after and greatly venerated

¹ The excavation is designated J. C. G-2000.

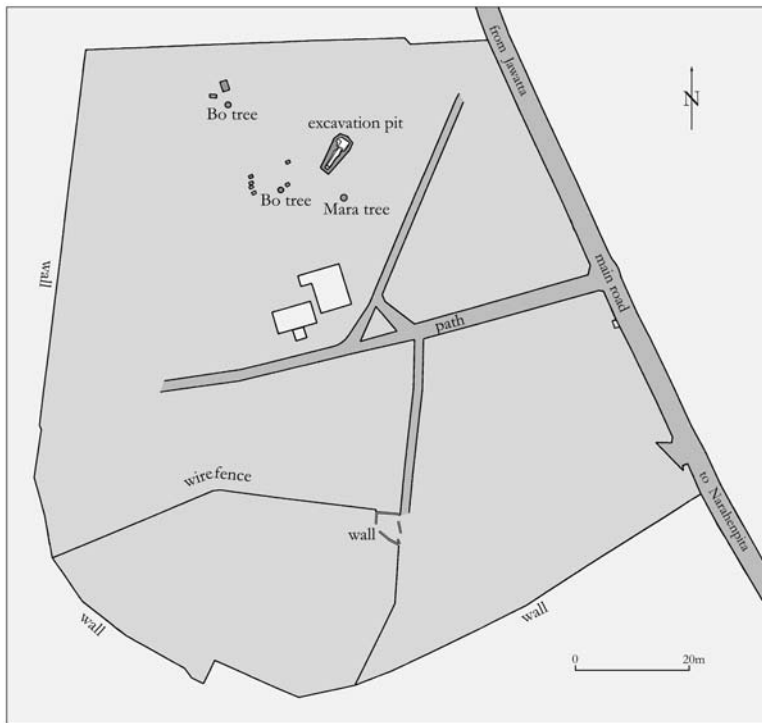


Fig. 1. The Jawatte cemetery area with the excavation around the Holy Well.

under the title of NOSSA SENHORA DO LIVER MENTO. The *ermida* stood on farmland belonging to the same order in a locality known as Marapety, about half a league from Colombo. This *ermida* and sanctuary of our Lady was a place of great devotion, and drew a large crowd of pilgrims; and never was that Residence without pilgrims. Many came there from distant places, as all in their affiliation with infirmities had recourse to its health-giving well, and all, Christians as well as non-Christians, went away healed and restored to health” (Santa Maria 1720, IV.I, 161f.).

When Colombo was surrendered to the Dutch in 1656, the terms of capitulation permitted the Catholic missionaries, who were banished from the country, to take with them sacred images and relics. The much-venerated image of the Narahenpita shrine was therefore taken to Goa by the Augustinians and placed in the Monastery of *Nossa Senhora de Graca*, which was the headquarters of the Augustinians in the East and the official residence of the Provincial.

The Santuario Mariano provides these details: “The Religious who had charge of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Deliverance brought its image with them and managed to save it from that grave peril, for it was for them a very great treasure, and they brought it secretly to Goa, where it is now much venerated. They placed it in a chapel in the cloister of the Monastery of Our Lady of Grace. This most holy image is carved to a little over three spans in height, and has the Divine Child in its arms” (Santa Maria 1720, IV.I, 163).

Manoel da Ave Maria says in his *Manual Eremítico*, a history of the Augustinians in the East up to 1817, that the image of the Narahenpita shrine was still venerated in Goa at the time he was writing (Silva Rego 1958, vol. XI, 4f.). What happened to it thereafter, however, we do not know.

In any case, the well is still identifiable, and marks the spot where the ancient shrine once stood. As we have seen, Augustinian records tell us that the shrine of *Nossa Senhora do Livramento* was at Narapeti, a Portuguese rendering

Fig. 2. The well of the Jawatte Cemetery as it is seen today, surrounded by an iron fence.



of Narahenpita. Even today there is at Narahenpita a locality known as Livreinento, although the name is quickly passing out of use. It is obviously from the shrine itself that the place-name is derived. The present Jawatte Cemetery lies in the locality known as Livramento, and in the catholic section of the cemetery is an ancient well now partly filled up. There can hardly be any doubt that this was the well of the shrine of Nossa Senhora do Livramento.

During the Dutch period in Colombo, Catholicism was proscribed and Catholic churches and schools were confiscated by the government. The church of the Livramento shrine crumbled into ruins, but the well remained and continued to be visited by devotees.

Manoel de Miranda, writing half a century after the Portuguese had been overthrown, says that Livramento was “a place outside the city where there was formerly a church of our Lady of Release (Nossa Senhora do Livramento) but now only a ruined wall. However, many people, white and black and even non-Christian Singhalese, visit it with great devotion, and each one according to his own belief receives favours from God; and the sick drink of the water of the well, which is by the side of the church, and all the orders and penalties, which the Company had published against those who go thither, did not succeed in doing

away with the devotion of the people” (Perera 1936, 61).

This belief in the possibility of being cured by using water from the well of the old shrine persisted down to the British period. Cordiner, in his book on Ceylon published in 1807, says of the well and its water: “The water is of a superior quality, and is celebrated, together with the soil which surrounds it, for the possession of many virtues. Both are often carried to Colombo to gratify the wild fancies” – [as it seemed to him] – “of credulous superstition” (1807, vol. 1, 56).

Interest in the well and its water survived for another century or so. Charles Collin (who later became the first Rector of St. Joseph’s College, Colombo) writing in 1892, says of the former shrine and its well at Narahenita: “There, lost among infidels, is a group of Catholic families, the remains of a large Christian community of former days, which as a result of persecution by the Dutch and the absence of missionaries had been gradually absorbed by the Buddhist population. There still remains, very near to that place, some vestige of a church, and a well held in great veneration by the Catholics of Colombo. The place is called Livermante, a corruption of the Portuguese word “Liveramento”, which indicates that the ancient church was dedicated to Our Lady of Deliverance” (Collin 1892).

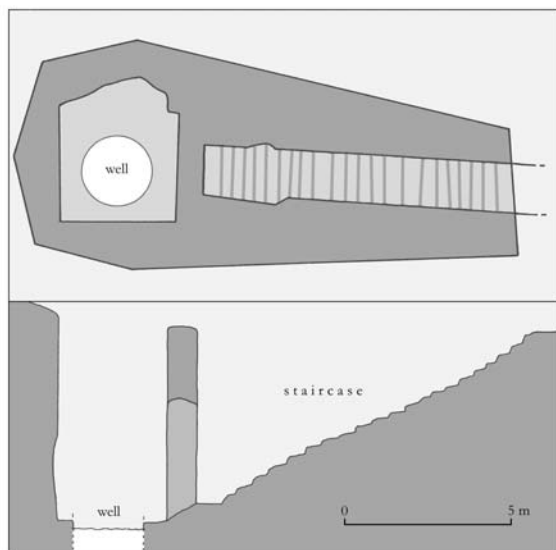


Fig. 3. Excavation area of the Holy Well and section.

Cordiner also gives a description of the well as he found it: “There is a very curious well said to have been dug whilst the Portuguese possessed the coasts of the island. The perpendicular descent into the well is of a square form, cut out of solid rock to the depth of thirty feet after which the well is contracted into a circular form, and is at the top of this water surrounded by sand. A subterraneous slanting passage, with steps hollowed out of the rock, leads down to this place, where a person can taste the water by taking it up with his hand. The top of the well is inaccessible, and not discoverable on account of thickets of shrubs which hang over it” (Cordiner 1807, vol. 1, 56).

Recently, the present curator of the Jawatte Cemetery cleared away the shrubs covering the well. Although now half filled with soil and without water, the well, as we saw it prior to the excavations, is exactly as Cordiner had described it. The terraced passage leading down to the water was also partly covered at both ends.

There is not the least doubt that this was the well of the Ermida of Nossa Senhora do Livramento. It is an historical, archaeological and religious relic of a bygone age and deserved to



Fig. 4. View down the stairway and the arched entrance to the lower part of the well.

be excavated and preserved by the Archaeological Department. The well moreover indicates the spot where the ancient shrine had been.

To fulfil the project objectives, the description of the well by Cordiner was used as a guideline for the subsequent excavation (Fig. 3).

Before excavation began, a contour survey at 1 m intervals was carried out. After clearing away vegetation, the whole area of the well was measured and divided into a 2.83×2.83 m grid. This grid covered the known extent of the monument and formed the basis for all subsequent survey and planning work. A permanent benchmark was erected at the cross-point of the coordinating lines of the excavated structure, and finds were documented according to this three-dimensional standard. It has



Fig. 5. The arched entrance and steps leading up.

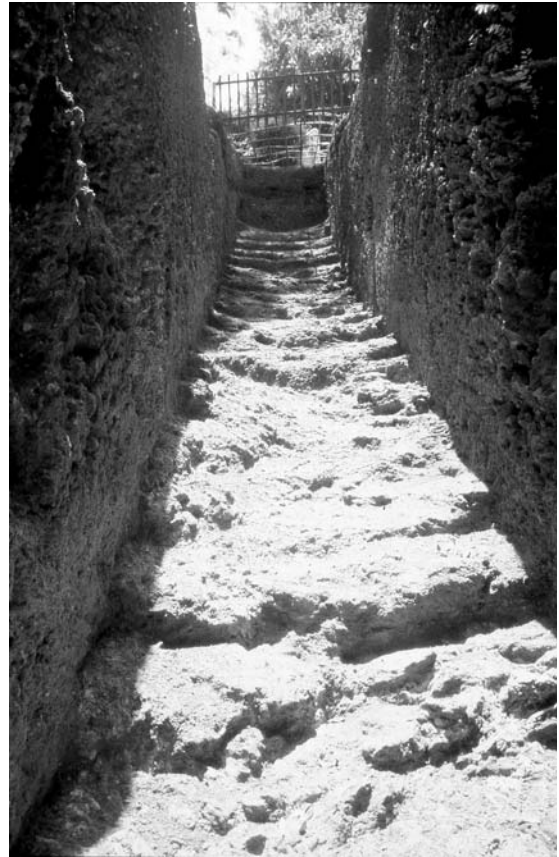


Fig. 6. Stairway leading up from the well.

to be borne in mind that the Jawatte Cemetery is still in use, with a daily inflow of visitors and bereaved. This partly inhibited the current excavations.

Stratigraphy of the site:

Context 5: Bedrock weathered deeply into a redish-yellow laterite.

Context 4: The laterite had been cut by the following features (Figs. 4–6):

- a. Circular, lower part of the well. Begins from 6.85 m below the surface; diameter at top, 210 cm; excavated only down to the water-table at 55 cm below the top edge.
- b. Square, upper part of the well. Extends from the ground surface

down to 6.85 m below it. The sides were originally perpendicular but had collapsed in places giving a width of 3.46 m (north), 3.40 m (east), 3.45 m (west) and 3.50 m (south).

- c. Arch between the well and the steps leading down to it. Width, 1.50 m, on the west side of the well. The top of the arch had collapsed.
- d. Flight of 23 steps, leading down to the west side of the circular well from above. Length 10.50 m; width 1.50 m; height of each step 20–25 cm; width of each step 40–45 cm. The top of the flight of

- steps has been built over with a recent monument, thus concealing an unknown number of steps.
- Context 3: Low (ca. 10 cm high) wall around the mouth of the circular well, constructed of four laterite blocks trimmed to shape.
- Context 2: Deposit of yellow, clayish sand over the steps and over the square platform at the top of the circular well: A natural, rain-wash deposit, thickness, ca. 6 cm. Inclusions comprise several coins ranging from the Portuguese to the British period (19th century)².
- Context 1: Recent fill. A grey-brown loam with ca. 40 % inclusions of cultural (grave) debris comprising human bones, clothing, coffin remains etc. The fill has been effected by gravediggers who used the well as a rubbish pit.

During the excavation it was not possible to empty and clean the well itself. It is very

probable that finds from the early history of the shrine and its well still lie below water level. The Archaeological Department will undertake the necessary steps to finish the investigation in the near future.

Conclusions

The presence of coins on the floor of the well-cutting confirms the hypothesis that the well was first excavated at least as early as the Portuguese period and was used down to the British period, thus corroborating Rev. Dr. Don Peter's conclusions about its identity. Apart from the coins, no other ancient artefacts were found. The remains of the Shrine to Our Lady of Livramento were not located in this excavation; but they probably lie buried in the near vicinity. Considering the rarity of Portuguese monuments in the Colombo District, it is proposed that the well should be declared a Protected Monument. St. Peter's College has volunteered to maintain the monument for public display³.

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² For the coins from Jawatte cemetery see the catalogue by R. Boekel in this volume.

³ A short newspaper report on the excavation: Forbes 2002.

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