

The Archaeological Department in its register of ancient monuments has listed the site of the ancient viharaya at Padeniya No. 34/3 in the Kurunegala district.

“There is an ancient vihara and a library building at Padeniya Raja Maha Vihara on the Kurunegala, Nikaweratiya road. The carvings on the wooden pillars of the vihara are comparable with the carvings at Embekke Devale. The paintings on the Walls of the vihara belong to the Kandy period. The library building has the architectural features of the Kandy period.”

THE ANCIENT LIBRARY BUILDING AT PADENIYA

BY L. K. KARUNARATNE

The Situation

The Padeniya junction is on the Wariyapola, Kurunegala road where the road deviates to Anuradhapura via Ridi Bendi Ela. The site located in the midst of several large irrigation schemes served by ancient tanks, anicuts, and canals has been a center of learning as the presence of the imposing library building indicates. The Dambadeni period of Sri Lankan history centered in this area was a period of major irrigation systems and culture destroyed after several Chola invasions resulting in the fall of the Polonnaruwa kingdom. This Period is of particular interest for the profusion of literary activity leaving a record of several literary works of considerable importance. The books labouriously written on ola leaf with their limited editions had to be made available in well built library buildings for reference and study. The library building at Padeniya is perhaps the earliest existing example of a library of the early period.

Whether there were buildings of a similar nature in ancient Anuradhapura or Polonnaruwa is yet to be explored and identified. One could conjecture the central building in a panchayatana group of five residential units having a mini library in the custody of a teacher monk. The Potgul Vihara was a library of the Polonnaruwa Period.

Among the extant buildings housing libraries of ola books are those at Aluvihare, the octagon of the Dalada Maligawa, Malwatte and Asgiriya temples and the cave temple at Nagolla, in Kurunegala. At Aluvihare and at Asgiriya vihare in Kandy the tradition of writing on ola leaf continues even today. At Nagolla vihare a painted wooden box contains several old ola volumes of the dhamma. A similar painted box at Lankatilake vihare at Kandy contains old ola books and tapestry.

Ola books

The recent discovery at the Jetavana monastery site of a book written on gold plate is dated to about the 9th century. This is indicative of a tradition of writing on ola leaf. The format of the ola leaf has been imitated in gold plate with even the two perforations for threading the leaves together. Ola books generally consist of several well cut leaves provided with two perforations on the two ends for keeping them together. The writing is done with a steel pointed stylus, the letters being brought out by blackening. The style of writing is itself very decorative rounded forms of letters. Two heavy flat covers of wood complete the book. These covers made by traditional lac workers and carvers are exquisite works of art, lacquered, inlaid in

silver or ivory and very delicately finished with traditional motifs. Old books were on various subjects ranging from religion literature to medicine and even the recordings of village and district boundaries in the Kada-im-pot.

Village libraries

The center of learning in the village was in the temple. Every temple had its collection of ola books. The library in a central location was perhaps a special place for a large collection of books. There may have been many other library building similar to the one seen at Padeniya. The design of this building has features for not only storage of books but also for the study of letters.

Building tradition

In the study of Sri Lankan building forms we have a long history of building traditions extending from the earliest Anuradhapura period to almost today. This cultural tradition is visible in the ruins of many stone and brick buildings as well as in the village house of mud thatch and timber. The

Padeniya library building and other buildings associated with it in the temple complex are in a simple tradition of vihara architecture which has been developed to serve a community of several villages. These buildings are simple and functional. Materials available at site, the site itself and an indigenous tradition provided the solutions to everyday needs in building. The village temple, ambalama rest hall and the temple building all had scale and formed an integral part of the landscape. This is what strikes one looking at the Padeniya library building sited on a rocky site with a sloping roof almost hugging the slope of the rock. A bo-tree sited behind the building makes beautiful backdrop to the buildings.

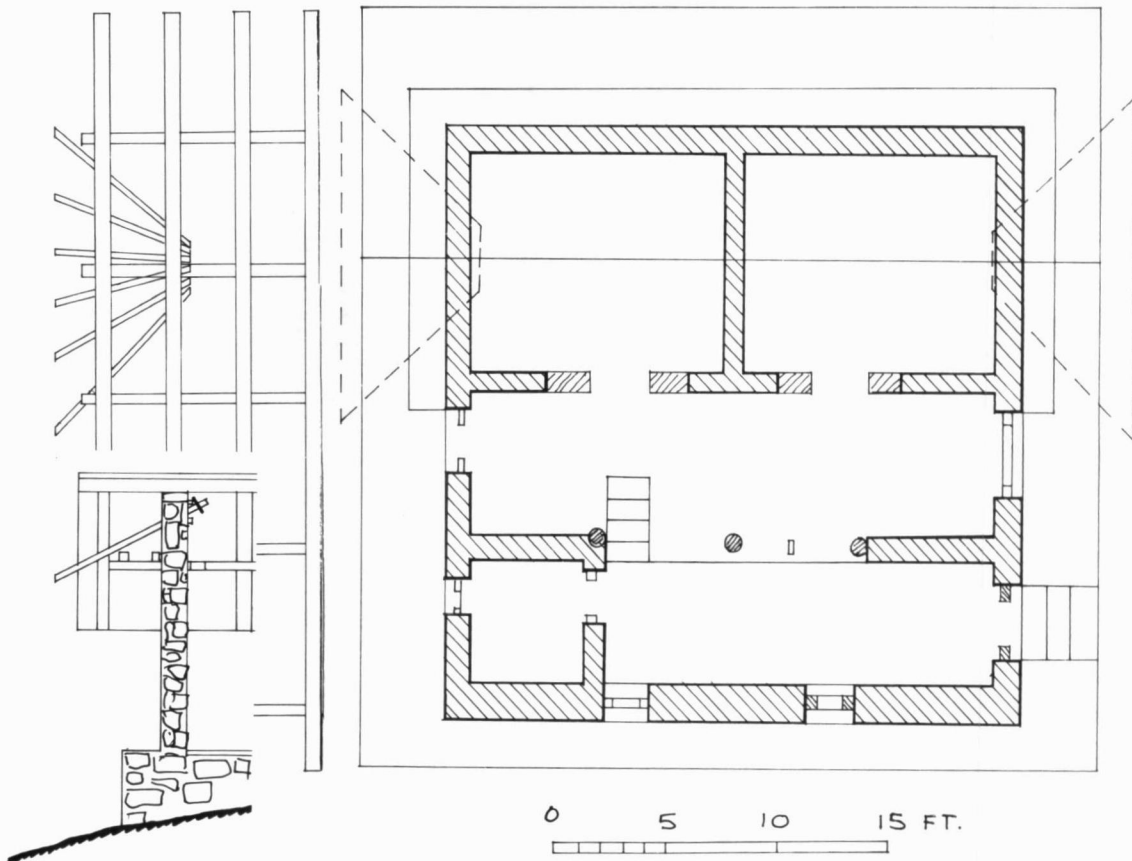
As recently as a century ago the average village had its own craftsmen, the carpenter, the potter and the smithy. They combined to build structures of lasting beauty in the temple complex and the village rest

hall. The master carpenter was perhaps the architect and directed the design and construction whilst the smithy made the tools locks and hinges and the potter did the tiles and pinnacles. The masonry work was confined to a rubble wall built in mud mortar plastered in mud and white washed.

The carpentry work was elaborate. There were the heavy doors and small windows, floor beams, brackets, and a decorative roof. The work was carried out to a developed pattern of joinery, and detailing of pillars, beams and brackets.

The library building at Padeniya basically comprises of a long verandah, a hall running parallel to its, a rear verandah and a wideplinth all round. The building is built on two levels to suit the levels of the site and has an interesting roof sloping with the gradient of the rock. The roof is in two parts. There is the roof of the main building and two lean-to roofs on two sides sheltering a wide plinth.





The cantilevered roof on the two ends shelters a plinth with a sandtray on which one learned to write letters with the finger. In early days before slates were used children learned to form letters on a sand tray or sand spread on the floor. Once you have learned the basics you begin to use a stylus and form your letters on ola leaf strips prepared for the purpose. This led to

very decorative letter forms on sees in the old ola books. In writing the descriptions of paintings on temple walls the letters became more decorative and finally led to the development of the printed letter.

The preservation of the library building at Padeniya is indeed the preservation of an important link in the study of

writing and learning in the temple school. The building is a legacy in carpentry and building, a valuable record of the dedicated team of craftsmen designers bequeathed to us and generations to follow.

