

The Cultural Triangle

Sri Lanka



Introduction

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Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food or wine.

Home to the world's premier Buddhist art and architecture, Sri Lanka's cultural triangle — Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa and Dambulla Caves — offers travelers an experience available nowhere else. On our tour itinerary, we explore the Sinhalese civilization's brilliant 2000-year legacy that features the world's largest brick-built structures, ancient bodhi tree shrines, painted cave temples and colossal standing Buddhas. Still infused with its historical magic, it is yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Art and architecture review.** We provide an overview of Sri Lanka's Buddhist art and architecture, isolating trademark features that you will see again and again while touring the island's cultural triangle. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **Tour of the highlights.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we offer a tour of Sri Lanka's greatest monuments (itinerary below). For each, we reveal its most important architectural and decorative features and provide a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

Tour itinerary

Our cultural triangle tour focuses on Sri Lanka's premier sites for art and architecture. It follows a chronological order so you can see how the Sri Lankan aesthetic evolved over time. Must-see sites are marked with asterisks (*).

- **Anuradhapura** (3rd century BCE - 10th century CE): Abhayagiri monastery (Abhayagiri stupa,* Mahasena's Palace & moonstone,* Ratna Prasada & guardstone,* Samadhi Buddha shrine*); Jetavana monastery (Buddhist railing shrine, image house, Jetavana stupa*); Mahavihara monastery (Ruwanwelisaya stupa,* Sri Maha Bodhi tree shrine,* Thuparama vatadage*); Mirisaveti monastery (Mirisaveti stupa).
- **Sigiriya** (5th century): apsara paintings,* lion platform, royal gardens* and rock summit.

- **Polonnaruwa** (11th-13th centuries): Alahana Parivena monastery (chapter house,* Kiri Vehera stupa,* Lankatilanka image house*); Citadel (council chamber, Kumara Pokuna, Parakramabahu I's palace); Gal Vihara monastery reliefs (samadhi Buddha,* cave samadhi Buddha,* standing Buddha* and reclining Buddha*); Hindu Shiva temple; Potgul Vihara monastery (statue,* shrine-library); Quadrangle (Atadage tooth shrine,* Hatadage tooth shrine,* Thuparama image house,* Vatadage tooth shrine*); Tivanka image house.*
- **Dambulla Caves** (18th century): Caves 1, 2,* 3,* 4 and 5.

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We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Sri Lanka's incredible Buddhist art and architecture and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Enjoy your trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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The Caves of India **Ajanta, Ellora & Elephanta**



Hindu Temples of **South India**



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Sri Lanka's Cultural Triangle: Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa and Dambulla

Version 1.0

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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—
Hail! I am vira-vidura bato [and] I wrote this.

The gentle breeze blew — the breeze which
is wet with cool dew drops — taking (with it)
fragrant perfume, in the spring sunshine, the
jasmine and the water-lily, being adorned with
flowers, shone all over. Leaving it (all aside),
my mind was agitated on seeing these golden
coloured ones and, being shot at, whilst going,
by their sidelong glances,
I became prostrate on the slope of this rock.
Having seen to my heart's content, the five
hundred damsels on the surface of the rock,
and having well remembered one (of them),
Heaven (itself) does not take my mind.

—
Poem left by a pilgrim
on the Mirror Wall at Sigiriya,
referring to the 5th century painted apsaras
(one of which is on this guidebook's cover).
Translated by Professor Senarath Paranavithana.

For the one whose hand I grasped under Lankatilanka's great Buddha

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Watch Before You Go

On Location Videos

Watch the Sri Lanka episodes of On Location, an online travel show from the creators of Approach Guides. To see all episodes in the series, visit approachguides.com/video or subscribe to our [YouTube channel](#).



Polonnaruwa's Vatadage. [Watch the video.](#)



Dambulla's Cave 2. [Watch the video.](#)

Packing List Suggestions

There are a few items we suggest bringing along.

- **A flashlight.** A [flashlight](#) will prove valuable in helping to see the frescoes in Dambulla and, even more so, in Polonnaruwa's Tivanka image house.
- **An extra pair of socks.** Not the typical recommendation, but we found [thick socks](#) very valuable in protecting our feet from the hot brick floors at many temples.

See our other [packing list recommendations](#) on our website.

Meet the Builders

The cultural triangle's art and architecture is the legacy of Sinhalese kingdoms that controlled the island nearly continuously for almost 2000 years. It is important to understand a bit of their backstory — who they were, what they believed and what was critical to their survival — since it necessarily had a profound impact on their aesthetic expression.



Fig. 1. The lion, symbol of the Sinhalese people [Mahasena's Palace, Abhayagiri monastery, Anuradhapura].

The Sinhalese People

- **Legendary founder Vijaya from east India.** As recorded in the Mahavamsa ([download a free copy](#)), the island's most important historical chronicle composed in the Pali language in the 5th-6th centuries, Prince Vijaya is the legendary founder of the Sinhalese civilization in

Sri Lanka. Likely from West Bengal or Odisha in east India, Vijaya landed at the coastal city of [Tambapanni](#) (present-day Mannar) in the early 6th century BCE.

- **Lion as symbol.** The lion (*simha*) was the symbol of the Sinhalese people; in fact, it gave them their name, as Sinhalese is derived from *simha*. This is likely due to Prince Vijaya's mythologized lineage: the Mahavamsa states that his father was half-lion, born of his own mother's romantic encounter with a lion king. The lion also took on religious associations with Buddhism's arrival on the island: the Buddha was metaphorically known as the "lion of the Sakya clan," so profound were his teachings that they had the resonance of a lion's roar. The ever-present artistic depictions of Sri Lankan lions are more symbolic than naturalistic, featuring bulging eyes and a vaguely human face ([Fig. 1](#)).
- **Island name.** Sri Lanka means sacred or resplendent island in Sanskrit.
- **Indo-European language.** Unlike the Dravidian languages of neighboring south India, the Sinhala language is Indo-European in origin, derived ultimately from Sanskrit spoken in north India.
- **Ancient capital cities.** Subsequent to the legendary Tambapanni, the Sinhalese had four major historical capitals: Anuradhapura (3rd century BCE - 993 CE), Sigiriya (477-495 CE), Polonnaruwa (1056-1236) and Kandy (1590-1815).
- **The Tamils.** While the Sinhalese (75% of Sri Lanka's current population) are responsible for the construction of the monuments profiled in this guidebook, it is important to understand their relationship to the second most populous ethnicity in Sri Lanka (11% of population), the Dravidian-speaking Tamils, particularly in light of the civil war that raged from 1983-2009. The Tamils' claims to the island range from being the original inhabitants (pre-Vijaya) to being holdouts from the Cholas from south India that ruled the country for 84 years from 993-1077.

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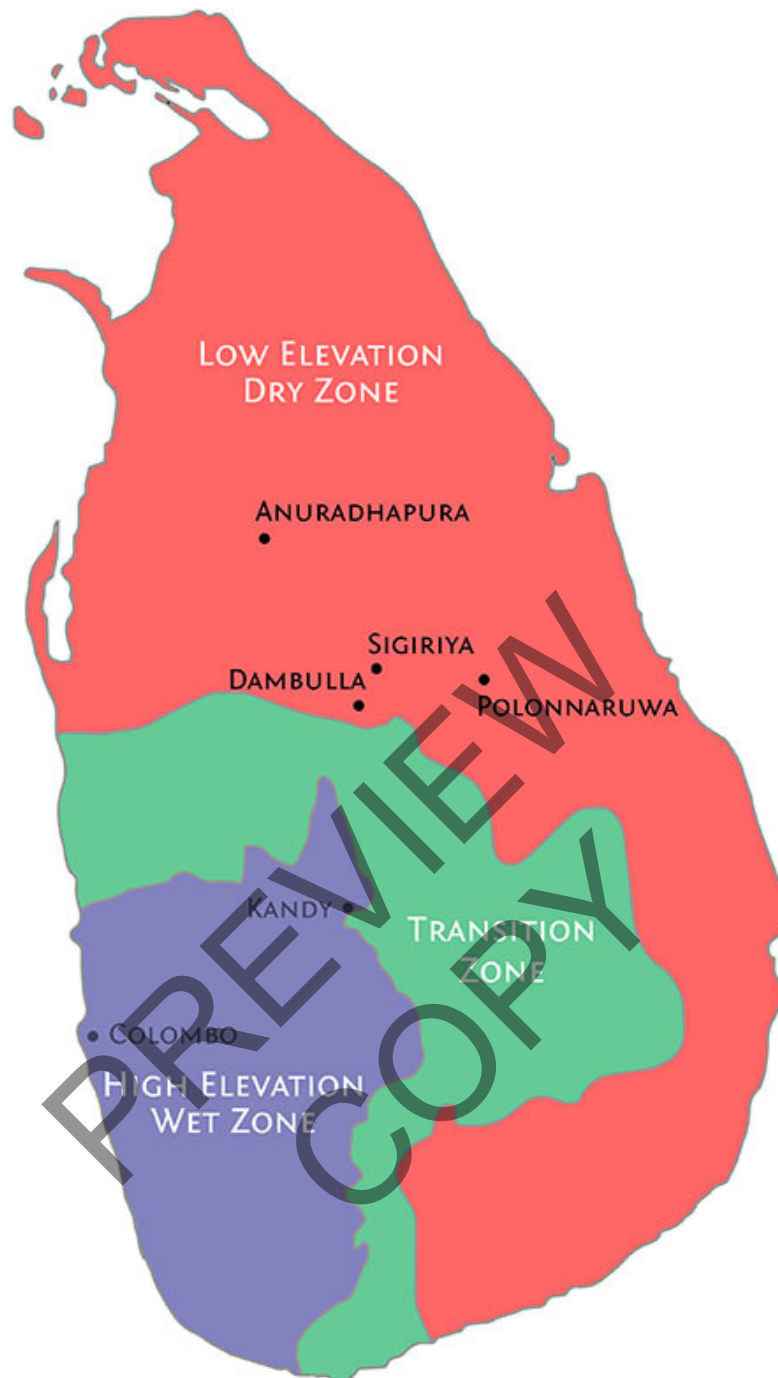


Fig. 3. Precipitation zones, Sri Lanka.

The Importance of Water

The ancient Sri Lankan economy revolved around the cultivation of rice; the resulting need for water shaped the civilization's political and religious practices.

- **Minimal rainfall with low retention soils.** The cultural triangle occupies the country's low elevation dry zone, getting around 800-1200 mm (31-47 inches) of rainfall per year (red

highlights in [Fig. 3](#)), less than half that of the high elevation wet zone. Rainfall is concentrated in two monsoon periods, the latter being the more significant: the southwest monsoon (*yala*) from April-June and the northeast monsoon (*maha*) from October-December. To add to the challenge, the reddish-brown soils that characterize the area are hard when dry and have low water-holding capacity.

- **The role of the ruler.** The Sinhalese ruler's legitimacy sprung from his success in supplying the water that the people required to survive and prosper. Accordingly, to assure sufficient water for year-round agriculture (at least two rice harvests per year), rulers accumulated extensive hydrological expertise and sponsored the construction of massive reservoirs (*wewa*) and dam-channel networks that drew from monsoon-swollen rivers originating in the Central Highlands. The collection, storage and distribution of water in the dry season became the central preoccupation (and revenue source) of the Sri Lankan state. A quick look at any [map of Sri Lanka](#) reveals hundreds of reservoirs dotting the dry zone's landscape.
- **Objects of worship.** As you might expect, the principal objects of Buddhist worship — stupas, bodhi trees and Buddha images — were believed to possess the power to bring requisite rain, a gift from the Buddha. Likewise, animals that carried associations with water — nagas (serpents) and makaras (mythical water creatures with hybrid features) — became important symbols for the civilization, serving as guardians that were thought to protect the people and provide for them (as agents of the Buddha) in times of hydrological need.

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The Sinhalese Monastery

With the exception of Sigiriya and royal compounds, all of the structures profiled in this guidebook are religious in nature. Since the monastery — known as a *vihara* or *vehera* — was the center of Sinhalese spiritual life, and the site of the civilization's greatest works of art and architecture, it is where we will be spending most of our time.

Existing within clearly-defined geographic boundaries, the Sri Lankan monastery is comprised of a consistent set of buildings that support ecclesiastical, ritual and residential functions. While we will encounter many of them on tour through the cultural triangle, there are three that stand out in importance above all others, the centers of ritual activity.

- Stupa
- Bodhi tree shrine
- Image house

We offer a brief introduction to each before starting with our city-specific itineraries.

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Stupas

Overview

The first and most fundamental of Buddhist monuments, the stupa serves as a marker for a sacred space, a **symbolic representation of the Buddha's burial mound**.

This section outlines the defining features of Sri Lankan stupas, known locally as *dagobas*. In order to provide the proper context, however, we begin by considering the early stupas of India, which exerted great influence on those of Sri Lanka.

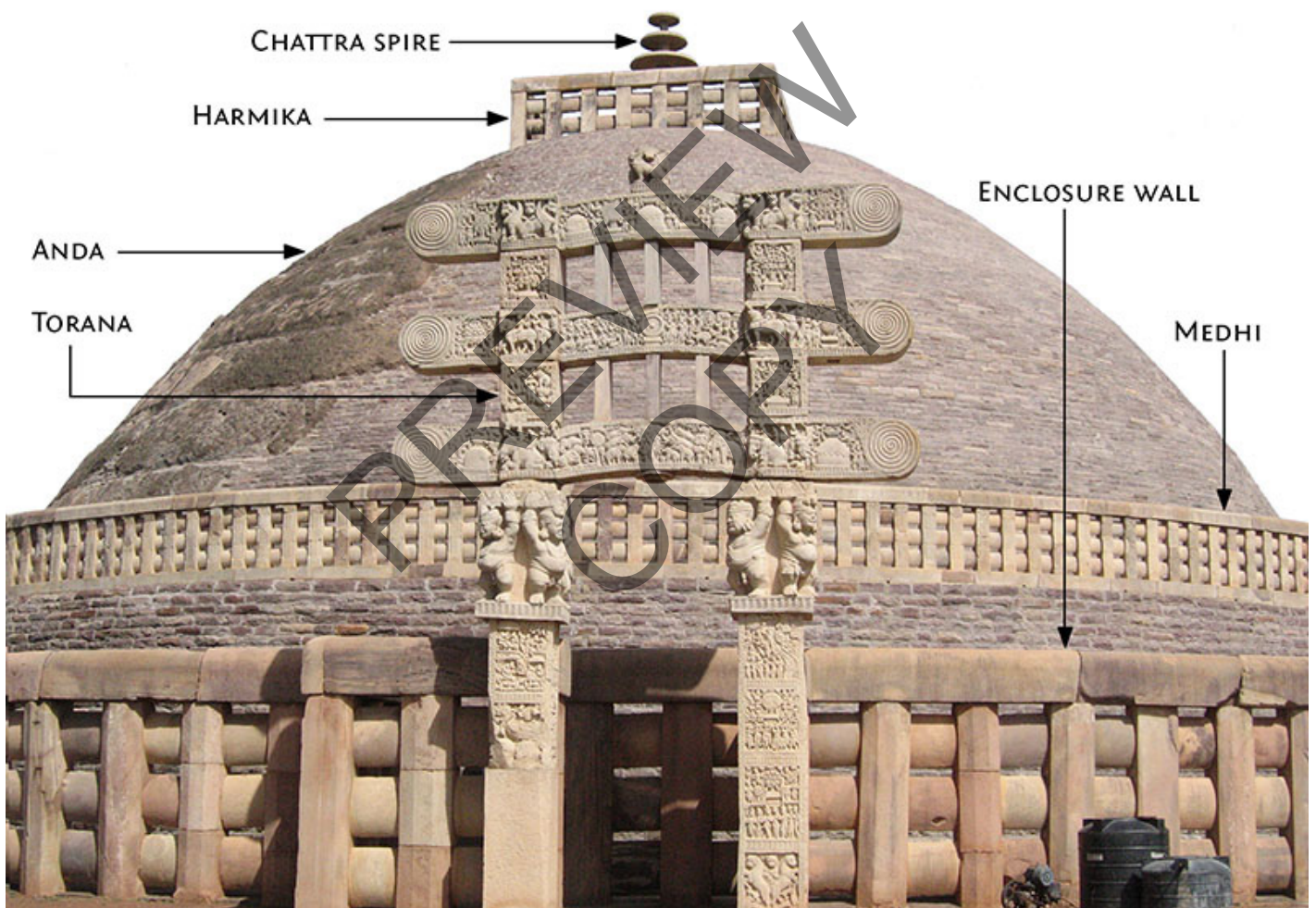


Fig. 4. Great Stupa, Sanchi, India.

The Indian Prototype: Sanchi Stupa

The Great Stupa at [Sanchi](#), in central India, is one of the earliest stupas; it served as a prototype for

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Fig. 7. Sri Lankan style stupa [Kiri Vehera, Alahana Parivena monastery, Polonnaruwa].

The Sri Lankan Stupa

The Sri Lankan stupa — which served as a direct or indirect model for those in Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Java, Laos and Thailand — deviates from the prototype at Sanchi in a few important ways.

- **The sides of the anda are steeper.** From a visual perspective, the anda's steeper sides are perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Sri Lankan stupa (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). To withstand the tremendous compressive pressures associated with its massive size (millions of bricks), the andas of Sri Lankan stupas employ large bricks made from a higher percentage of sand; they were fused together with a very thin layer of mortar.
- **No relics.** With the exception of Anuradhapura's Thuparama vatadage that holds the Buddha's right collar bone, the *tabenas* buried deep inside Sri Lanka's stupas hold other sacred objects.
- **The harmika is enlarged and emphasized.** Further, it is a solid block, rather than a fence-like hollow chamber, as was the case with the Sanchi prototype (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7).

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TOURING ITINERARY

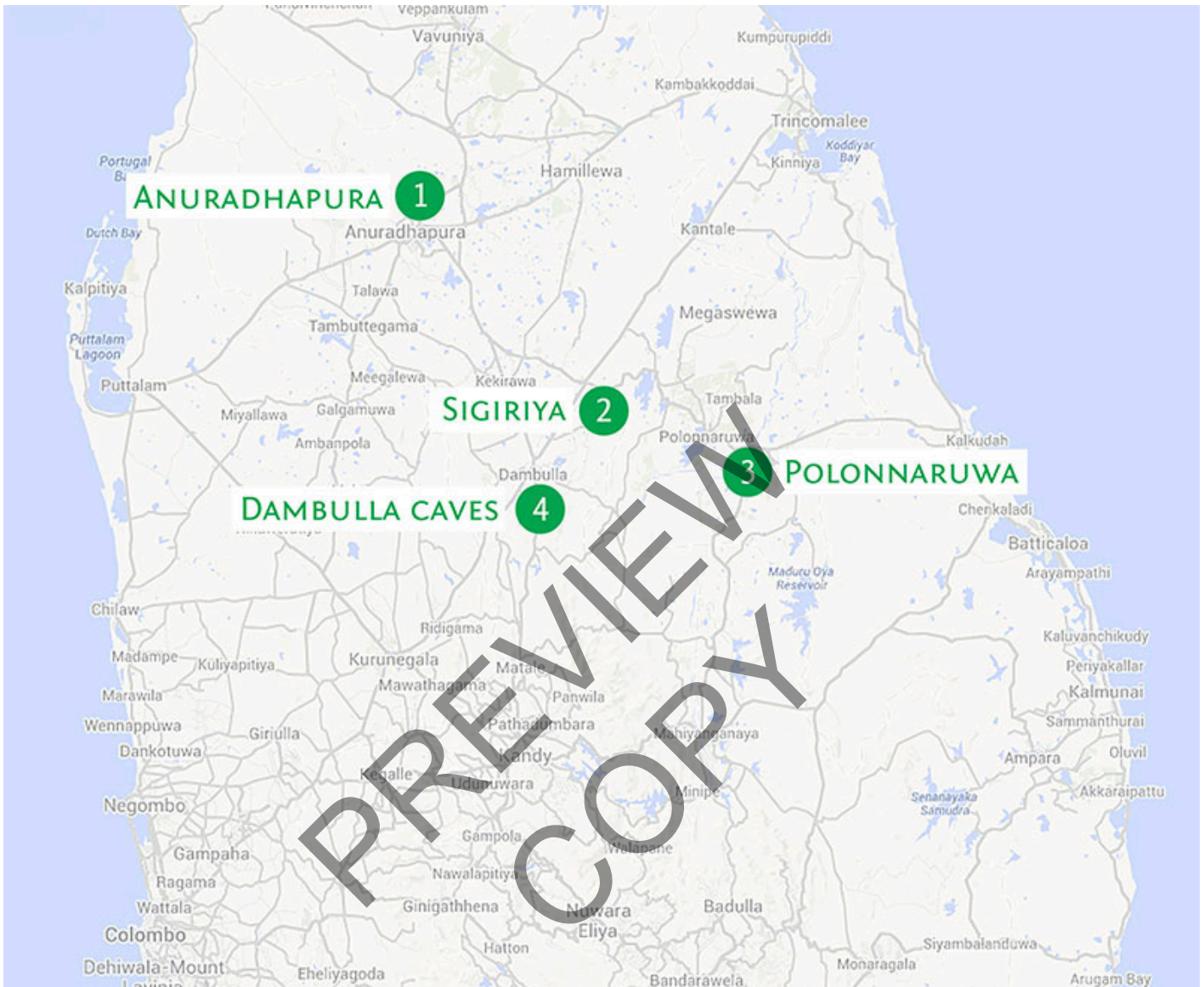


Fig. 14. Touring itinerary. See in [Google Maps](#).

Our cultural triangle tour focuses on Sri Lanka's premier sites for art and architecture (Fig. 14). It follows a chronological order so you can see how the Sri Lankan aesthetic evolved over time.

1. Anuradhapura (3rd century BCE - 10th century CE)
2. Sigiriya (5th century)
3. Polonnaruwa (11th-13th centuries)
4. Dambulla Caves (18th century primarily, with some 9th century features)

Author tip: Remember to use the table of contents. We have designed this guidebook for quick navigation. Since each site has its own dedicated chapter, even if you don't strictly follow our touring itinerary, you can always get the information you are looking for when you need it.

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ANURADHAPURA

Background

The Sinhalese civilization's most ancient and important capital city, Anuradhapura holds many of its premier architectural ruins.

- **Origins and linkage with Buddhism.** Technically the third Sinhalese capital after Prince Vijaya's Tambapanni and its successor, Upatissa Nuwara, Anuradhapura was likely founded in the 4th century BCE. However, the historical record gains momentum with the reign of Devanampiya Tissa (likely 250-210 BCE). From the moment of his conversion, the city and the Sinhalese people were intimately linked to Buddhism and the monastic orders.
- **The monasteries.** The city's layout was determined by its principal monasteries: Mahavihara, Abhayagiri, Jetavana and Mirisaveti. We visit each as part of our touring itinerary.
- **A history spanning 1200 years.** Aside from a brief period in the late 5th century when the capital was temporarily moved to Sigiriya, the city was the political-religious center of Sinhalese civilization for over 1200 years.
- **The fall.** The powerful south Indian Hindu Chola dynasty sacked the city in 993. When the Cholas were eventually vanquished in 1056, Anuradhapura lay in ruins and the decision was made to relocate permanently to Polonnaruwa, a former garrison town and the Cholas' administrative center. Nevertheless, the ancient city continued to hold tremendous religious and political significance.
- **The architectural ruins.** Stupas represent the oldest surviving architectural remains, dating back to the city's earliest days. However, aside from these massive brick structures, most of what is now visible dates from the Late Anuradhapura period (7th-10th centuries), when the decorative arts were at their apex.

Map

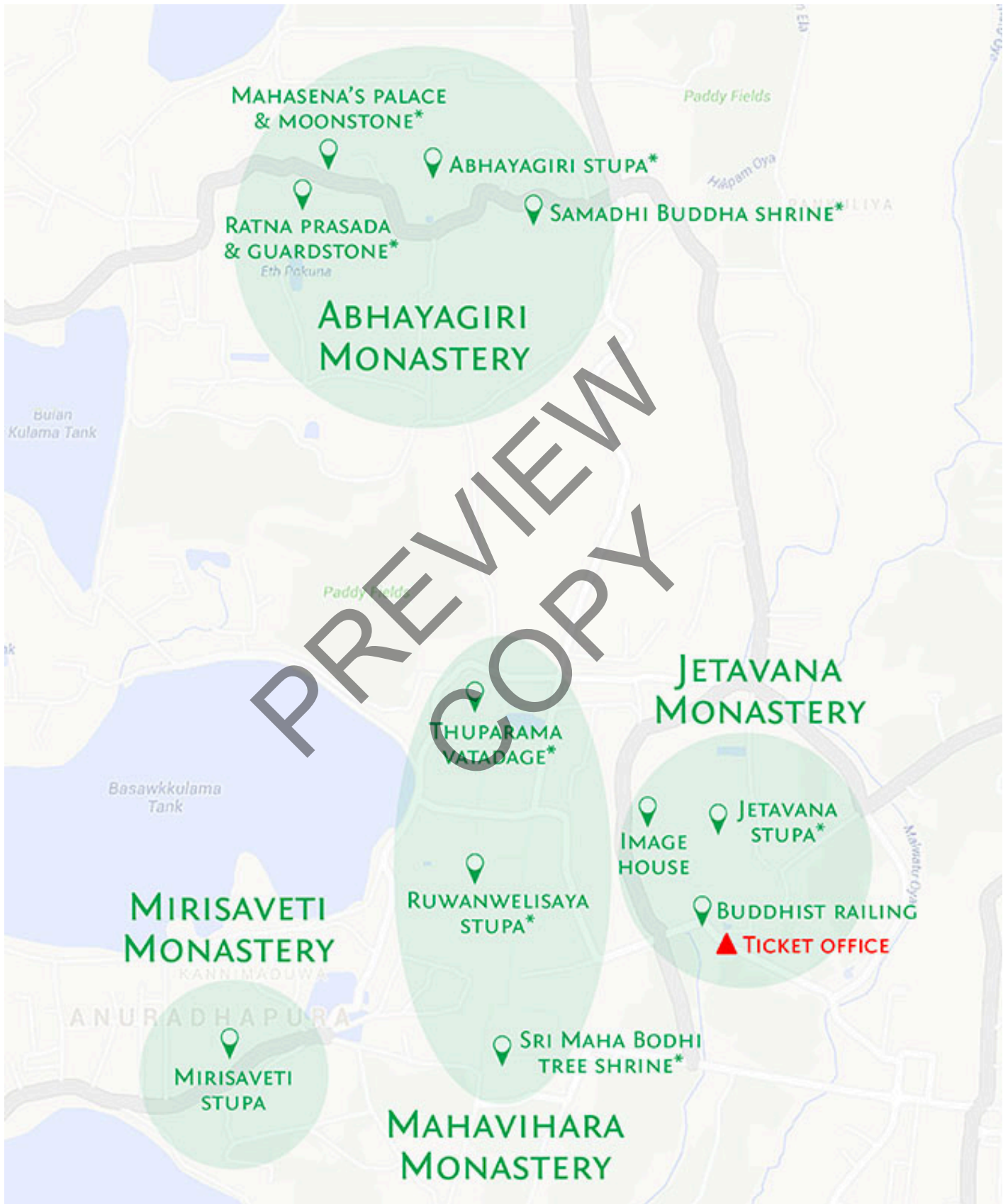


Fig. 16. Top sites, Anuradhapura. See satellite view in [Google Maps](#).

Itinerary

Author tip: Look for the asterisks. To make things easier and allow you to focus on the real highlights, particularly if you only have limited time in this ancient city, we have marked those sites that we believe are must-sees with asterisks (*). We do this for Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa and Dambulla also.

The Hit List

Our tour of Anuradhapura follows the typical progression, starting in the southeast corner at the ticket office and following a counter-clockwise course around the ancient city (green highlights in [Fig. 16](#)). Our picks for Anuradhapura's best sites are marked with asterisks (*).

- **Jetavana monastery:** Jetavana stupa,* image house, Buddhist railing shrine
- **Abhayagiri monastery:** Samadhi Buddha bodhi tree shrine,* Abhayagiri stupa,* Ratna Prasada guardstone,* Mahasena's Palace moonstone*
- **Mahavihara monastery:** Thuparama vatadage,* Ruwanwelisaya stupa,* Sri Maha Bodhi tree shrine*
- **Mirisaveti monastery:** Mirisaveti stupa

Visiting

- **Visiting hours.** The ticket office is open daily from 7am - 6pm. The monuments stay open until sunset.
- **Tickets.** The primary ticket office is located on the southern end of the city, nearby Jetavana stupa, inside the Archaeological Museum. We have marked its precise location on our map (red highlights in [Fig. 16](#)) and on [Google Maps](#).
- **Getting around.** The sites profiled in this guidebook, representing the core of the old city, range over an area approximately 4-5 kilometers north-south and 1-2 kilometers east-west. Accordingly, while certainly walkable, it helps to have transportation (bike, tuk-tuk or ideally a car) if you plan on seeing them all in a single day.
- **The museums.** Anuradhapura has several museums. We rate the Abhayagiri Museum and the Archaeological Museum as the best of the lot. We have marked their locations on our monastery maps and on [Google Maps](#).

Author tip: Bring socks! You will have to remove your shoes in order to enter most religious structures. Since the brick floors can heat up to blistering temperatures by the middle of the day, we recommend bringing socks to protect your feet. If you reading this on location, it's not too late: there are many shops in town where you can find a pair.

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Abhayagiri Monastery *

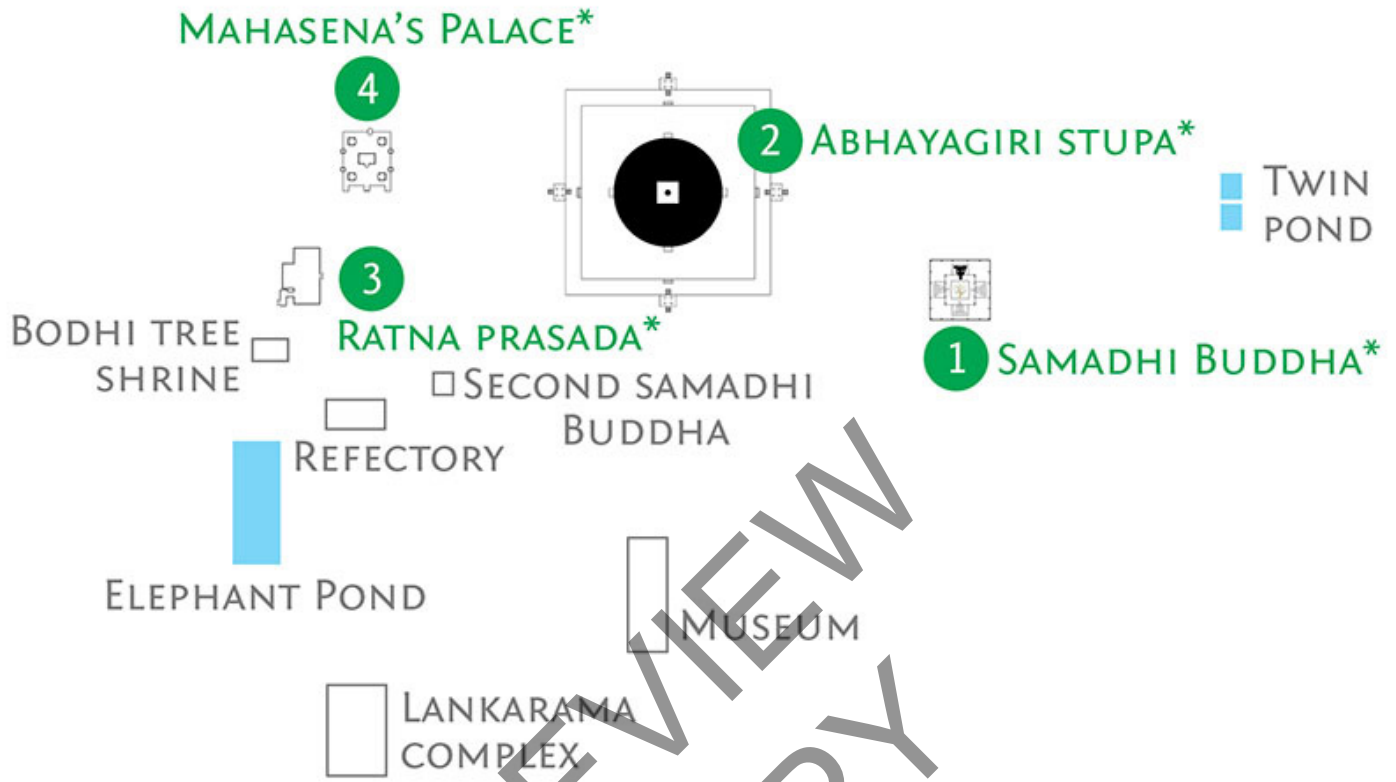


Fig. 28. Layout, Abhayagiri monastery.

Itinerary

Profiled sites on the tour are marked with green highlights in Fig. 28. All are must-sees (*).

1. Samadhi Buddha bodhi tree shrine *
2. Abhayagiri stupa *
3. Ratna Prasada and guardstone *
4. Mahasena's Palace and moonstone *

Background

Abhayagiri monastery — founded in the 1st century BCE by ruler Vattagamani Abhaya as one of his first actions after expelling south Indian Tamil invaders who had controlled Anuradhapura for fourteen years — is the second oldest monastery in Sri Lanka. The name is a combination of the victorious ruler's last name, *abhaya* (fearless), and its slightly elevated position, *giri* (mountain).

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2. Abhayagiri Stupa *

Background

- **Built.** Under ruler Vattagamani Abhaya, in the second part of his reign (ruled 104-103 and 89-76 BCE). It was famously restored in the 12th century under the Polonnaruwa-based ruler Parakramabahu I.
- **Location.** Center of Abhayagiri monastery, on the northern edge of the ancient city. See in [Google Maps](#).

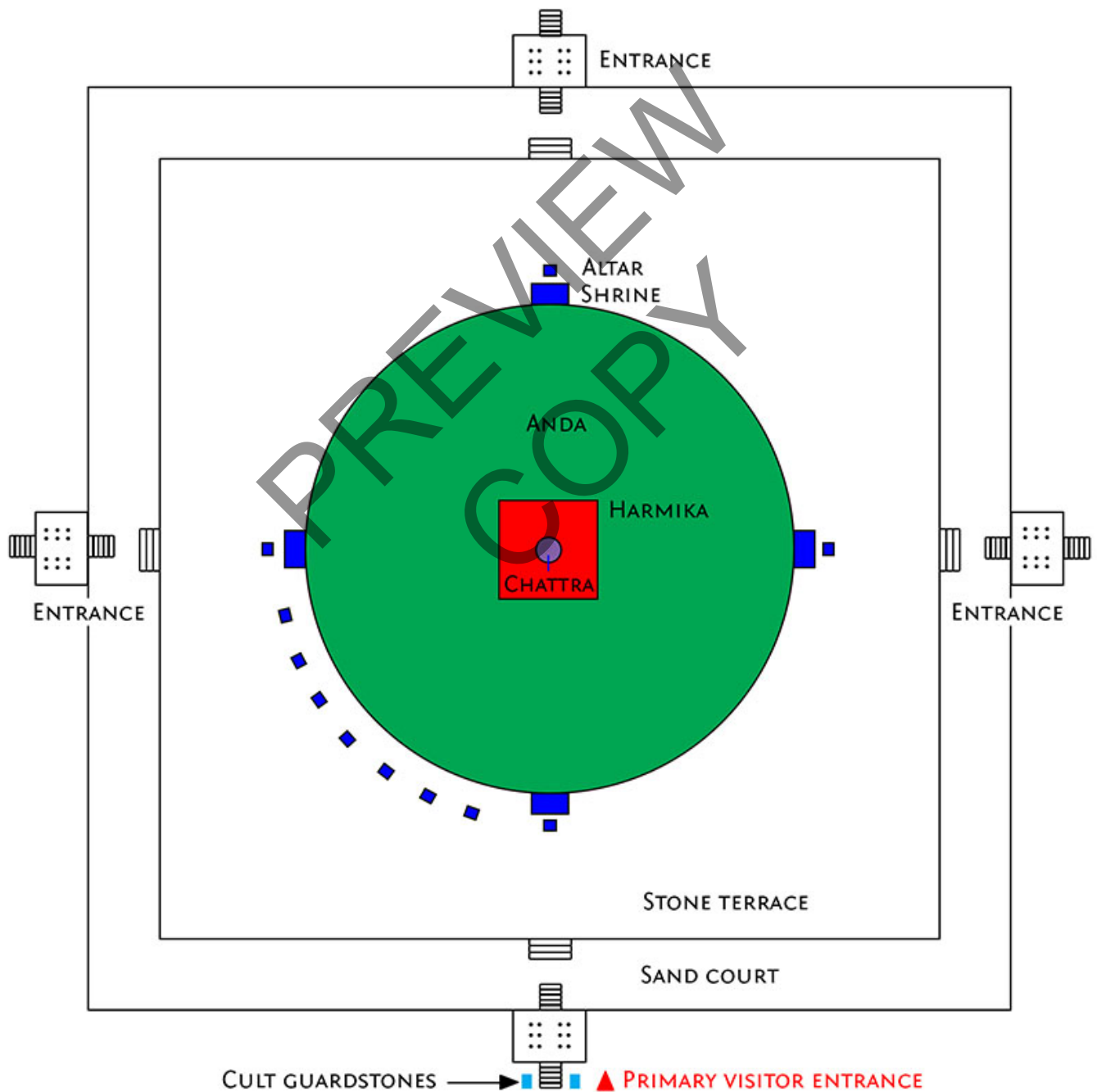


Fig. 33. Layout, Abhayagiri stupa, Abhayagiri monastery.

Layout

- **Massive scale.** Abhayagiri is yet another of Anuradhapura's massive stupas. Its current dimensions — 73 meters/240 feet in height (from the platform) and 99 meters/325 feet in diameter — rival those of Jetavana and Ruwanwelisaya. It is popularly believed to have been built over a footprint of the Buddha.
- **Entrances.** The general arrangement is very similar to that of Jetavana stupa: visitors enter through one of four elevated entrance pavilions located on the cardinal points; they then cross through a sand court on route to a set of stairs that brings them to the square stone terrace on which the stupa sits (Fig. 33). The primary entrance today is from the south side.
- **Cult guardstones.** Enclosed in makeshift shrines at the primary entrance are two guardstones, likely from the Late Anuradhapura period (light blue highlights in Fig. 33). They feature dwarfs, two of the eight treasures of Kuvera, the god of wealth: Padma (lotus treasure, on the right side) and Sankha (conch shell treasure, on the left side). Padma wears an inverted lotus flower on his head, while Sankha wears a conch shell (Fig. 34). They have taken on popular cult status at Abhayagiri, receiving offerings and accepting prayers. We will get a closer look at this type of guardian at “4. Mahasena's Palace and Moonstone.”
- **Shrines and altars on the cardinal points.** Buddha shrines (*vahalkadas*) project from the stupa's anda on the cardinal points (dark blue highlights in Fig. 33), symbolizing the ubiquity of the Buddha throughout the world. Altars designed for ritual donations sit directly before them. Further, unique among Anuradhapura's stupas, a series of altars runs along the base of the anda between the south and west shrines.

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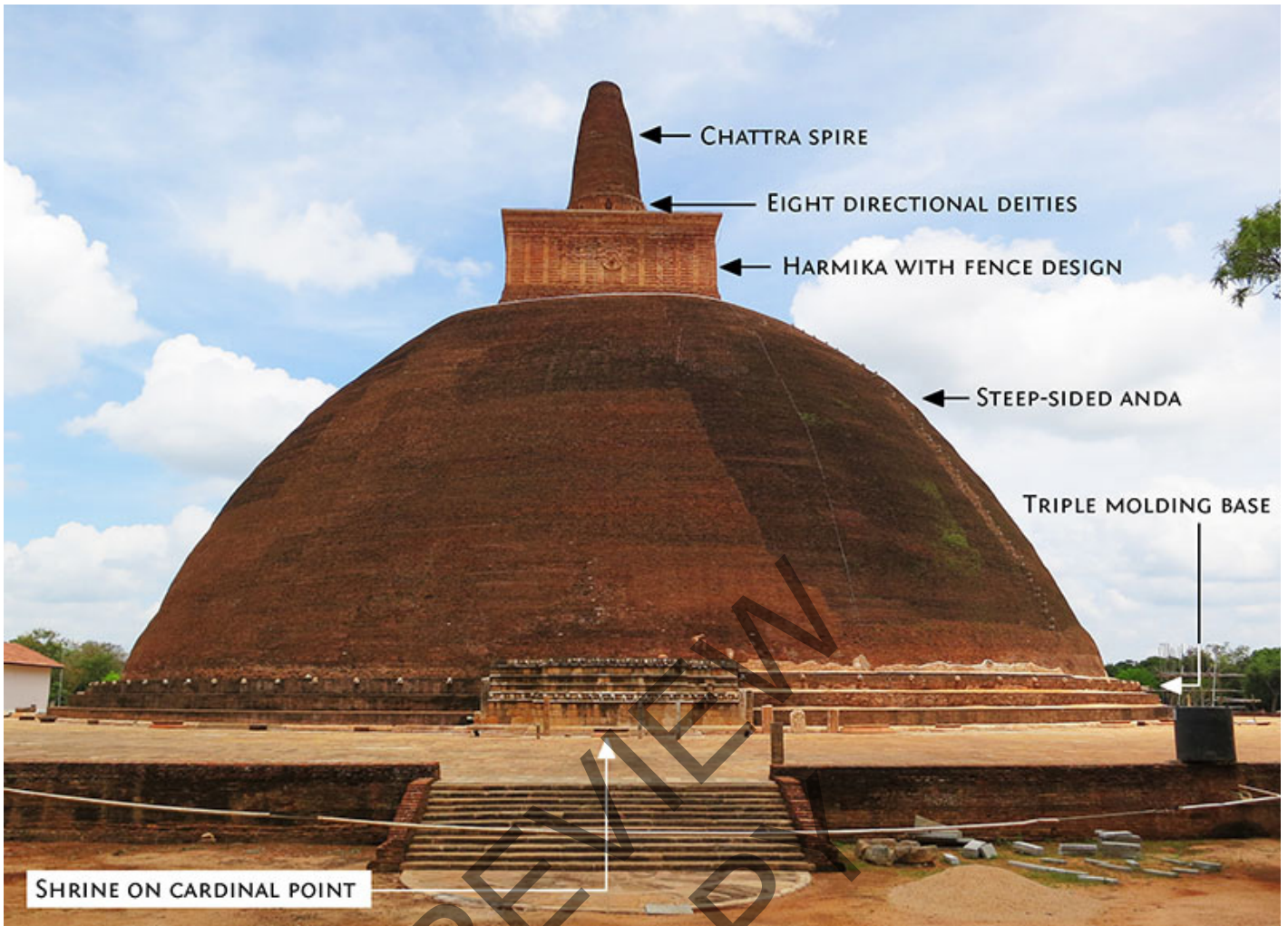


Fig. 35. Abhayagiri stupa, Abhayagiri monastery.

Appearance

- **Standard Sri Lankan profile.** The stupa has all of the standard features: steep-sided anda, solid harmika, thick inverted conical chattra spire and triple molding base (Fig. 35).
- **Eight directional deities.** Although they are tough to spot given their relatively small size and high elevation, there are eight directional deities wedged between the top of the harmika and the bottom of the chattra spire (Fig. 35). For a close-up image of these deities, see the section entitled “Mirisaveti Monastery - 1. Mirisaveti Stupa.”

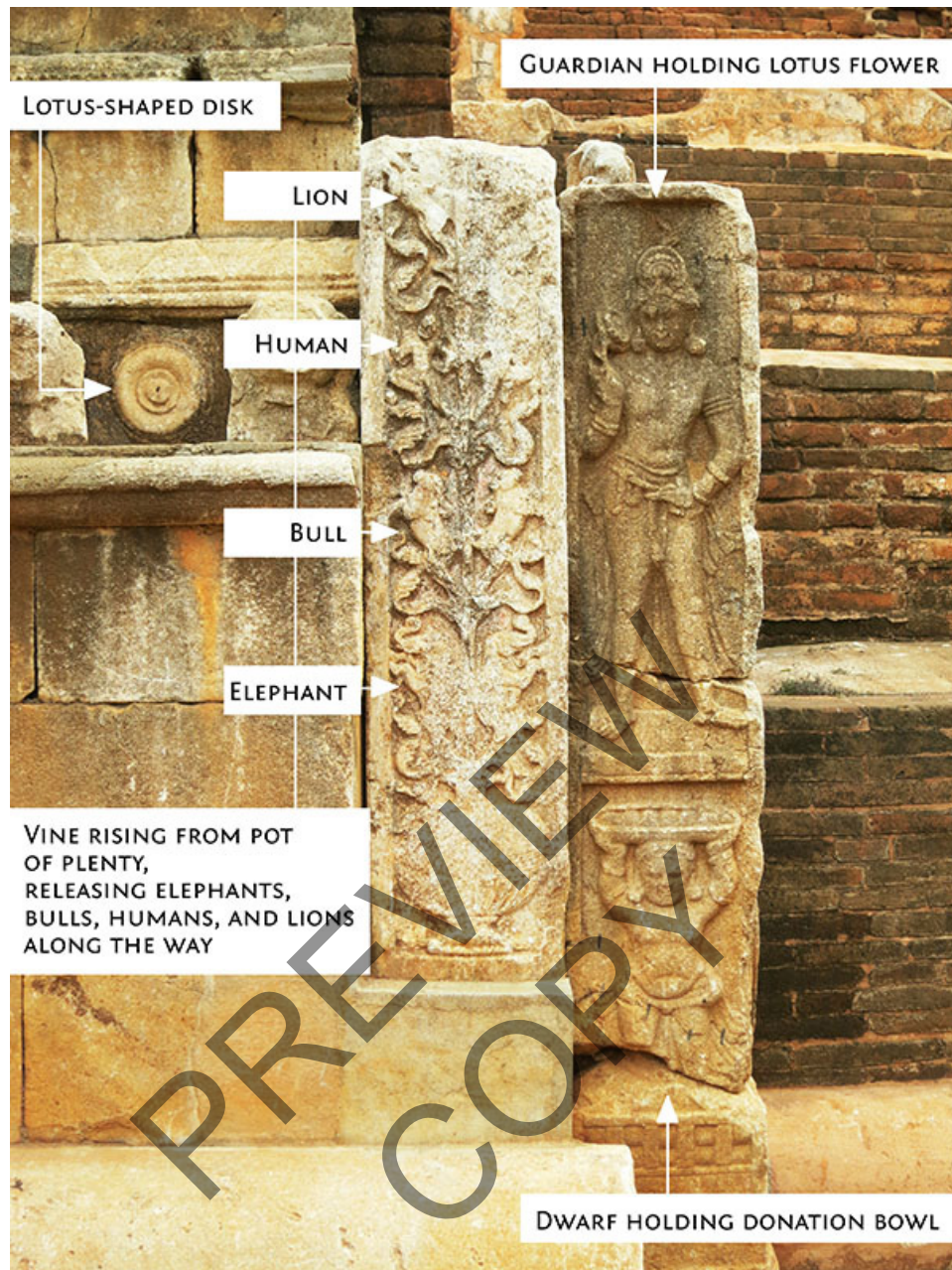


Fig. 36. Shrine decoration, Abhayagiri stupa, Abhayagiri monastery.

Decoration

As is typical, the limestone bases of the shrines on the cardinal points hold the stupa's only carved decoration. Along with Jetavana stupa, Abhayagiri stupa has the best surviving reliefs.

- **Elephants and makaras.** As at Jetavana, rows of elephants and makaras line the string-courses. Elephants also make an appearance on the triple molding base that encircles the stupa.
- **Figures.** Figurative depictions flank the shrine's edges: dwarfs holding donation bowls and guardians holding lotus flowers (Fig. 36).
- **Pots of abundance symbolize a thriving Sinhalese civilization.** Vines rise from water

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SIGIRIYA

Background

- **A fortified city for a patricidal ruler.** Sigiriya replaced Anuradhapura as capital for a brief period under Kashyapa, who ruled from 477-495 CE. Kashyapa's decision to abandon Anuradhapura and build the fortified mountaintop city was grounded in practical necessity: he had acquired the throne by murdering his father, the ruler Dhatuseana; his brother Moggallana, the rightful heir, had fled to south India for safety; suspecting that his brother would return to forcibly reclaim the throne, he required a city that provided him with superior protection. In the end, even Kashyapa's precautions proved insufficient: Moggallana returned in 495 and defeated the army of his patricidal brother, who committed suicide before being captured. With Moggallana's victory, the capital returned to Anuradhapura, where it would remain until Polonnaruwa assumed the reigns in the 11th century.
- **A perfect secular specimen.** Well preserved and virtually unaltered since its construction in the 5th century, Sigiriya offers unrivaled insight into early Sinhalese garden design, painted decoration and urban planning. Further, the site is different from all others profiled in this guidebook due to its purely secular character: it is a royal city with none of the familiar monastic structures — stupas, bodhi tree shrines and image houses — that dominate other sites.
- **Geology.** Sigiriya rock is the magma plug of an extinct volcano. The plug formed after volcanic activity ceased two billion years ago and the lava core cooled and hardened. The slopes of the volcano have since eroded, leaving only the granite plug we see today.
- **Elevation.** The summit is nearly 200 meters/656 feet above the surrounding plain and 370 meters/1214 feet above sea level.
- **Development prior to and after Kashyapa.** Prior to Kashyapa's conversion of Sigiriya into his royal capital, the site had hosted a monastery with cave dwellings carved into the lower slopes. And with the return of the capital to Anuradhapura, monks reclaimed the space; the presence of a bodhi tree shrine and a stupa in the citadel area attest to their presence.

Map

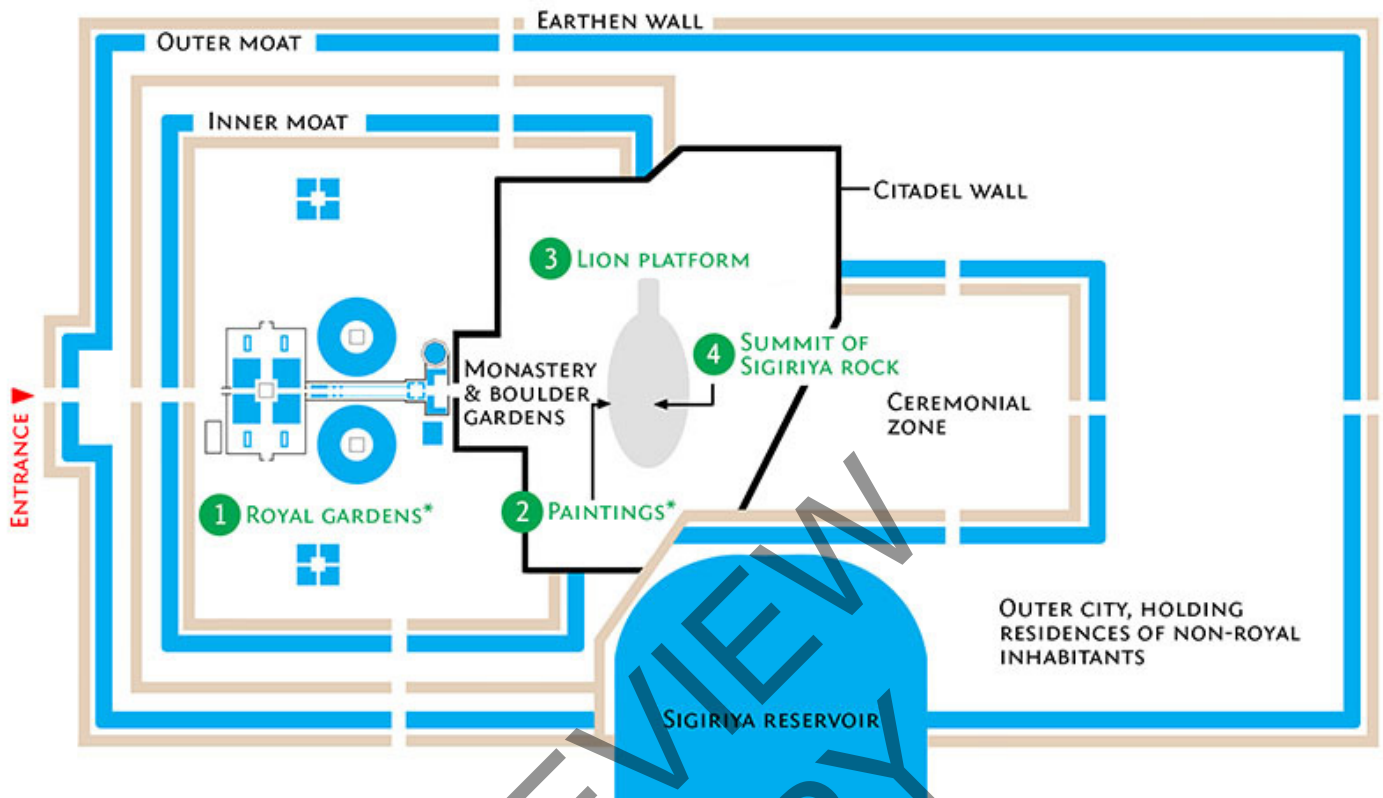


Fig. 57. Layout, Sigiriya. See satellite view in [Google Maps](#).

The Royal City, from Entrance to Summit

Before kicking off our tour, we walk through the layout of Kashyapa's royal city as a 5th century visitor would have experienced it, touching on the most salient features.

- **Entry.** The city has a rectangular plan (length roughly twice width) with Sigiriya rock at the center. Starting at the primary entrance on the west side (red highlights in Fig. 57), visitors would have passed through heavy fortifications — three earthen walls and two moats — as they made their way inside.
- **Royal gardens (itinerary stop 1).** The royal gardens occupy the entire zone west of the rock (Fig. 57). Water for the gardens was drawn from Sigiriya reservoir, which abuts the city's south wall.
- **The citadel.** Having passed through the gardens, visitors would have entered yet another fortified area — called the citadel, its boundaries marked by a brick and rubble wall — that surrounds the base of Sigiriya rock (Fig. 57).
- **Apsara paintings (itinerary stop 2).** Midway up the face of the rock was a massive “picture gallery,” featuring paintings of apsaras that could be viewed from the gardens below (Fig. 57).
- **Lion platform (itinerary stop 3).** Moving progressively higher, visitors would have fol-

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lowed a set route to the rock's northern face, which had been crafted into a wonder of the ages: a massive lion. Behind the lion facade were stairs that led to the summit (Fig. 57).

- **Summit (itinerary stop 4).** Having finally reached the summit, visitors would have been welcomed to Kashyapa's palace and personal gardens (Fig. 57).

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Itinerary

The Hit List

The tour follows the natural progression through Sigiriya, from western entrance to rock summit (green highlights in [Fig. 57](#)). Our picks for Sigiriya's best sites are marked with asterisks (*).

1. Royal gardens *
2. Apsara paintings *
3. Lion platform
4. Summit

Visiting

- **Visiting hours.** Daily from 7am - 5:30pm.
- **Tickets.** The ticket office is located just outside the western entrance, west of the inner moat. We have marked the precise location on [Google Maps](#).
- **Getting around.** The site is visited entirely on foot. Also, aside from the gardens, keep in mind that our itinerary requires climbing steep (but well-maintained) steps. Budget 10-15 minutes to the paintings; another 5-10 minutes to the lion platform; and a final 10 minutes to the summit. Wear appropriate shoes.

Author tip: Avoiding the crowds. Sigiriya is the busiest tourist destination in the cultural triangle. Further, the nature of the site necessarily concentrates visitors along select paths up and down the mountain. For this reason, we suggest avoiding weekends and arriving early (7-8am); the morning's cooler temperatures also make the climb a little easier. If you are interested in getting an uninterrupted view of the paintings, we further recommend getting ahead of the crowds by proceeding directly to the paintings and then circling back to see the gardens at the end of your visit.

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2. Apsara Paintings *

Author tip: 5th century artistic wonders. These paintings will remain etched in your memory long after you have left Sri Lanka. They remain just as vibrant as when they were painted over 1500 years ago.



Fig. 62. Location of paintings, view from west, Sigiriya.

Background

- **History.** Also dating from the reign of Kashyapa (477-495), the paintings represent some of the earliest, and certainly the best preserved, paintings in Sri Lanka.
- **Location.** They sit in an overhang approximately 100 meters/328 feet above the gardens below (Fig. 62). The spot is accessed by a modern spiral staircase that rises from the level of the Mirror Wall.
- **Small portion of the original paintings.** The surviving paintings — 18 in total, 12 of

which are 100% intact — represent only a small portion of what existed in Kashyapa's time: a strip of stucco, 140 meters/460 feet long and 40 meters/131 feet high, originally ran along the western face of Sigiriya rock, perhaps holding as many as 500 figurative paintings.



Fig. 63. Floating apsara, Sigiriya.

Technique and Style

- **Fresco lustrato.** The nature of the painting technique has been a matter of longstanding debate in academic circles, with opinions favoring either *fresco secco* (painting on dry plaster with gum-bound tempera paints) or *buon fresco* (painting on wet plaster with pure unbound paints). However, consensus appears to have recently settled on the *fresco lustrato* technique, implying that both camps were partly right. Also employed in Rajasthani paintings, *fresco lustrato* is a blend: tempera paints are applied to a base of wet lime-based plaster; to aid the incorporation of the paint into the plaster, the surface is polished, which affords the painting a smooth, shiny appearance. The absorption of the paint into the wet plaster has allowed Sigiriya's paintings to survive over 1500 years in near-perfect condition.
- **Minimal narrative agenda.** Unlike the paintings that would follow in subsequent centu-

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POLONNARUWA

Background

- **Chola occupation.** The transfer of the capital from Anuradhapura occurred due to an invasion: the powerful armies of the south Indian Hindu Chola dynasty — under its esteemed ruler Raja Raja the Great — sacked Anuradhapura in 993 and developed Polonnaruwa as their administrative center.
- **A new Sinhalese capital.** Vijayabahu I vanquished the Cholas and established an independent Sinhalese kingdom with Polonnaruwa as its new capital, a status it held from 1056-1236. Situated on the west bank of the Mahaweli (the island's greatest river), it had earlier been a garrison town that defended Anuradhapura against attacks from the south.
- **The fall.** The city fell to another wave of Hindu invaders, this time from Kalinga (Odisha) in east India, who subsequently passed it on to south India's Pandyan dynasty at the end of the 13th century.
- **The architectural ruins.** The city's ruins are significantly better preserved than those of Anuradhapura. But more than that, they reveal a new aesthetic: although rulers looked to Anuradhapura for inspiration, they designed a city better suited to the contemporary political and religious landscape. Monastery layouts reflected a slightly greater bias toward Mahayana beliefs, allocating much greater resources to the cult of the image; this explains the city's massive image houses that, for the first time, rivalled stupas and bodhi tree shrines in importance. Further, decoration incorporated Hindu features, the result, no doubt, of the prolonged Chola occupation.

Key Rulers

Although twenty rulers reigned during the Polonnaruwa period, only three are of consequence from the perspective of extant art and architecture.

- **Vijayabahu I (1056-1111).** Vijayabahu defeated the Cholas, restoring Sinhalese sovereignty. He rejuvenated Buddhist art and architecture, which had atrophied under the Chola overlords, going as far as bringing in monks and artists from Burma's Buddhist Bagan civilization, which was at the height of its powers.
- **Parakramabahu I (1153-1186).** The primary builder in the Polonnaruwa period, he is responsible for the most impressive structures in the ancient city.
- **Nissanka Malla (1186-1196).** A fervent Buddhist, he continued the building boom, yet focused a bit more on restoration of existing structures. He was also responsible for major restoration work at the cave temples of Dambulla, which we will explore next on our touring itinerary.

Map



Fig. 69. Top sites, Polonnaruwa. See satellite view in [Google Maps](#).

Itinerary

The Hit List

The tour of Polonnaruwa follows the typical progression, starting on the southern end and moving northward along the primary axis of the ancient city. Profiled sites on the tour are marked with green highlights in [Fig. 69](#). Our picks for Polonnaruwa's best sites are marked with asterisks (*).

- **Potgul Vehera monastery:** statue,* shrine-library
- **Citadel:** Parakramabahu I's palace, council chamber, Kumara Pokuna bathing pool
- **Hindu Shiva temple**
- **Quadrangle:** Vatadage,* Hatadage tooth relic shrine,* Atadage tooth relic shrine,* Thuparama image house*
- **Rankot Vihara stupa**
- **Alahana Parivena monastery:** Kiri Vehera stupa,* Lankatilanka image house,* chapter house*
- **Gal Vihara monastery** *
- **Tivanka image house** *

Visiting

- **Visiting hours.** The ticket office is open daily from 7:30am - 6pm. The monuments stay open until sunset.
- **Tickets.** The ticket office is located on the southern end of the city, just inside the citadel's walls. We have marked its precise location on our map (red highlights in [Fig. 69](#)) and on [Google Maps](#).
- **Getting around.** As at Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa's ruins are spread out: the sites profiled in this guidebook range over an area approximately 7 kilometers north-south and 1 kilometer east-west. Again, while certainly walkable, it helps to have transportation (bike, tuk-tuk or ideally a car) if you plan on seeing them all in a single day.
- **The museum.** Polonnaruwa's museum, located adjacent to the ticket booth, offers an excellent review of the city's history and sites and is definitely worth a quick stop. If you are pressed for time, we suggest leaving it for the end of your visit.

Author tip: Bring socks. *If you found socks valuable at Anuradhapura in providing protection for your feet from the hot brick floors, you'll want to bring them to Polonnaruwa also.*

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Quadrangle *

Background

- **Built.** Under rulers Vijayabahu I (1056-1111), Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) and Nissanka Malla (1187-1196).
- **Location.** The center of the old city of Polonnaruwa. See in [Google Maps](#).

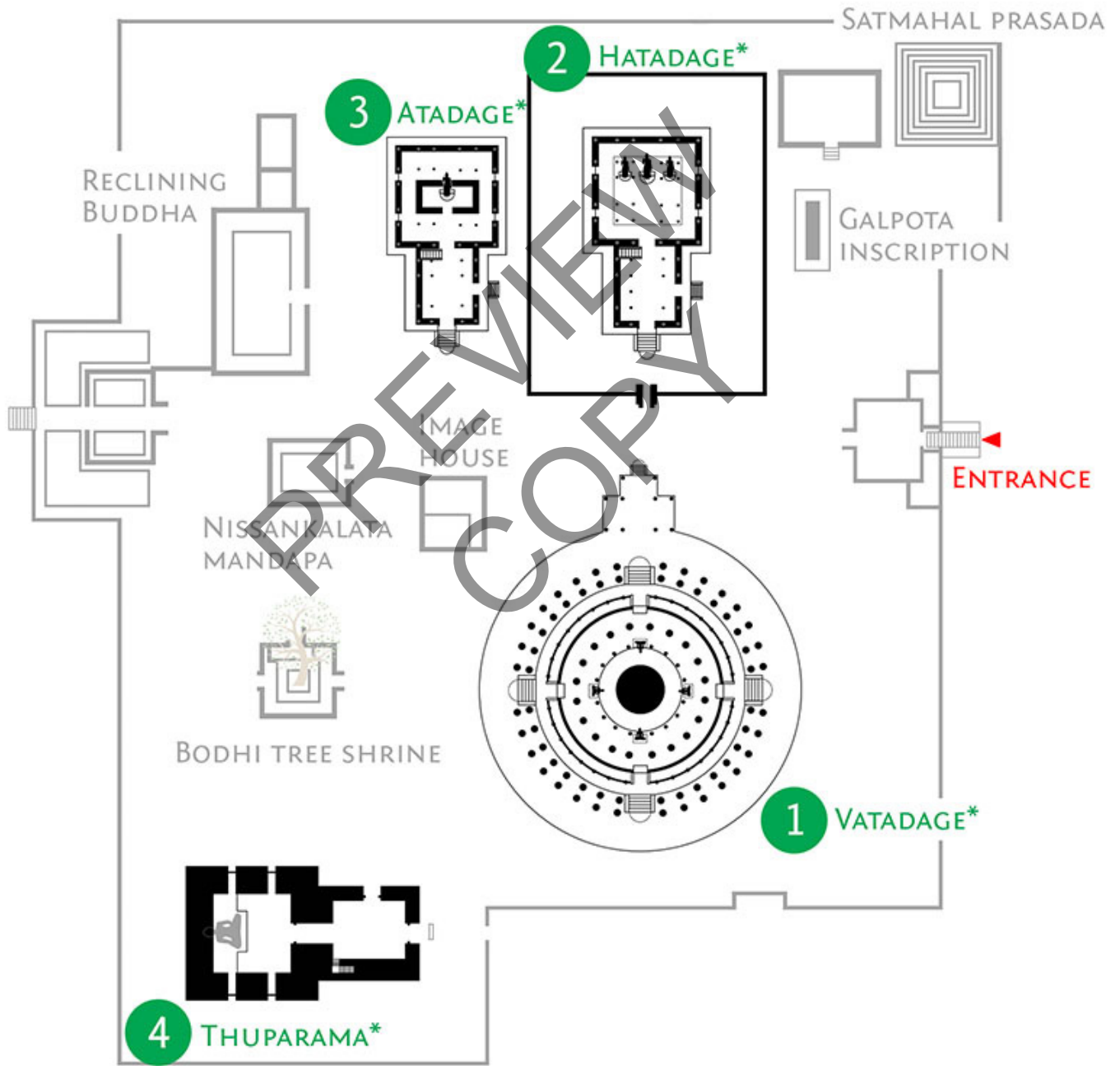


Fig. 85. Layout, Quadrangle.

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1. Vatadage *

Background

- **Built.** Built originally under Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) and restored under Nissanka Malla (1187-1196). Vatadage likely served as a tooth relic shrine, the second of three built in the Quadrangle. If so, from a design perspective, it marks a bold departure from the more conventional structures used by Parakramabahu's predecessor (Vijayabahu I's Atadage) and successor (Nissanka Malla's Hatadage).
- **Location.** Southeast quadrant of the Quadrangle, near the entrance. See in [Google Maps](#).

Author tip: Quintessential Sri Lanka! Polonnaruwa's Vatadage — a covered stupa temple — is the premier example of this unique Sri Lankan architectural form.

Take a Virtual Walk through Vatadage



Fig. 86. Watch the video.

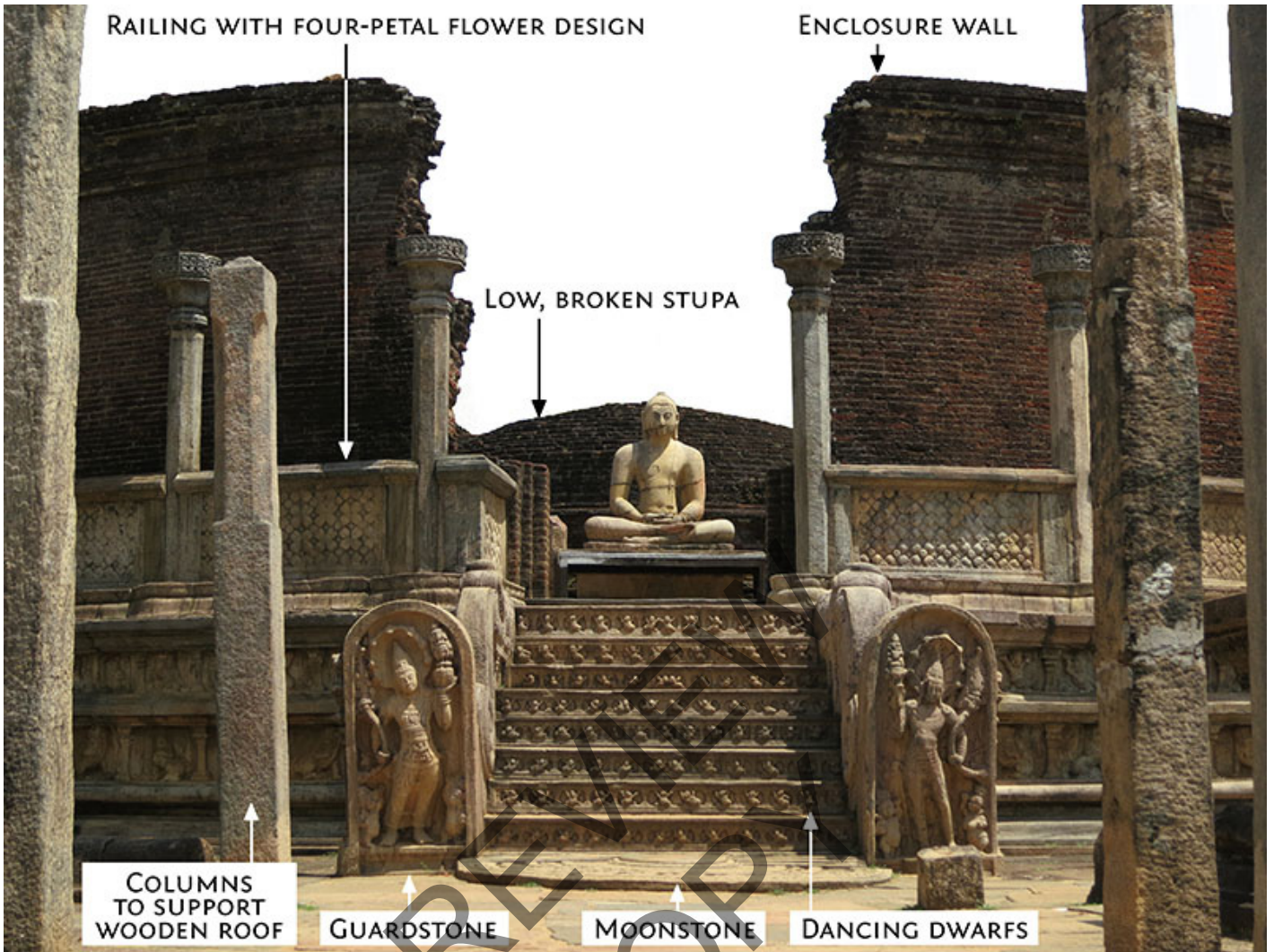


Fig. 87. View from north entrance, Vatadage.

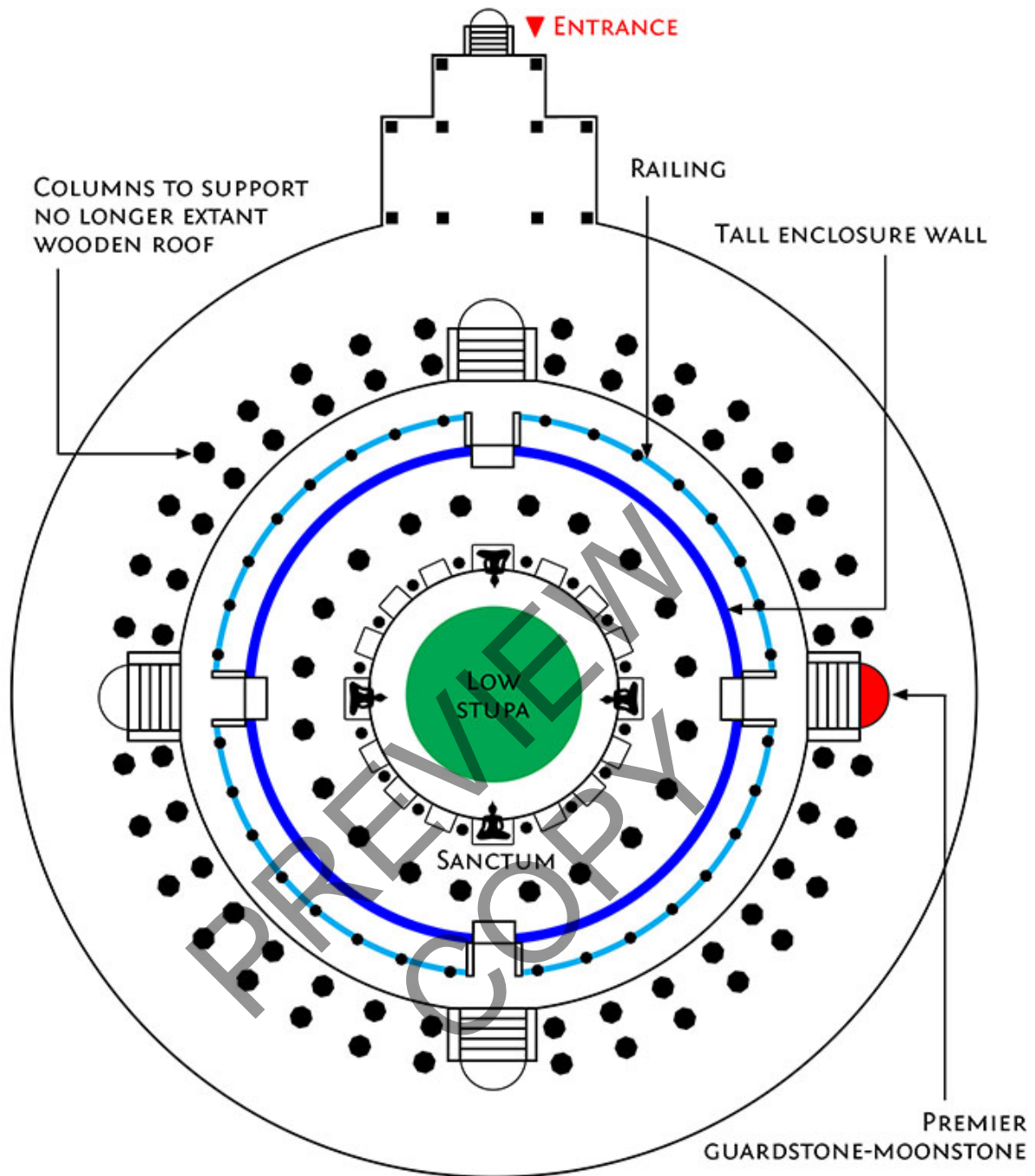


Fig. 88. Layout, Vatadage.

Layout

Vatadage showcases many of the same features that we saw at Anuradhapura's Thuparama, only refined to an even higher standard.

- **Overall round plan.** One of Vatadage's distinctive features is the use of a round platform, mirroring the shape of the stupa at the center, a sharp break from the square platforms of non-enclosed stupas (Fig. 88).

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Itinerary

The Hit List

The tour follows the natural east-to-west progression through the caves (green highlights in [Fig. 125](#)). Our picks for Dambulla's best sites are marked with asterisks (*).

- **Cave 1.** This small cave has an impressive reclining Buddha that dominates the enclosed space.
- **Cave 2.*** Dambulla's highlight, it features an excellent range of sculptures and fantastic 18th century Kandy style paintings on its ceiling.
- **Cave 3.*** The primary Buddha image is the quintessential example of the Kandy sculptural style.
- **Cave 4.** Most similar to Cave 3, it features Kandy style decoration throughout.
- **Cave 5.** Excavated in the 19th century, it is the most recently-excavated cave. Its decoration is the weakest of the group.

Visiting

- **Visiting hours.** Daily from 7am - 7pm.
- **Tickets.** The ticket booth is located at the base of the hill, just off the main square and parking area. We have marked its precise location in [Google Maps](#). Once you have your tickets, follow signs for "Rock Temple."
- **Getting around.** You have got one more climb to go! But it's an easier one than at Sigiriya. Expect to climb for 10-20 minutes to reach the ticket checkpoint at the entrance to the caves. The caves themselves are tightly grouped, so there are no further challenges once you are up.

Author tip: Make sure you are all set before you start climbing. Don't begin climbing before you have secured your tickets. Also, be sure to wear appropriate clothing: for both men and women, shoulders and knees must be covered or you will not be allowed to pass through the ticket checkpoint at the caves' entrance.

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Cave 2 *

Author tip: It's why you climbed the hill! Cave 2 is what makes a visit to Dambulla more than worth the effort. While its sculptures are certainly first rate, its Kandy period paintings delight with their bright colors and compelling storytelling.

Take a Virtual Walk through Dambulla's Cave 2

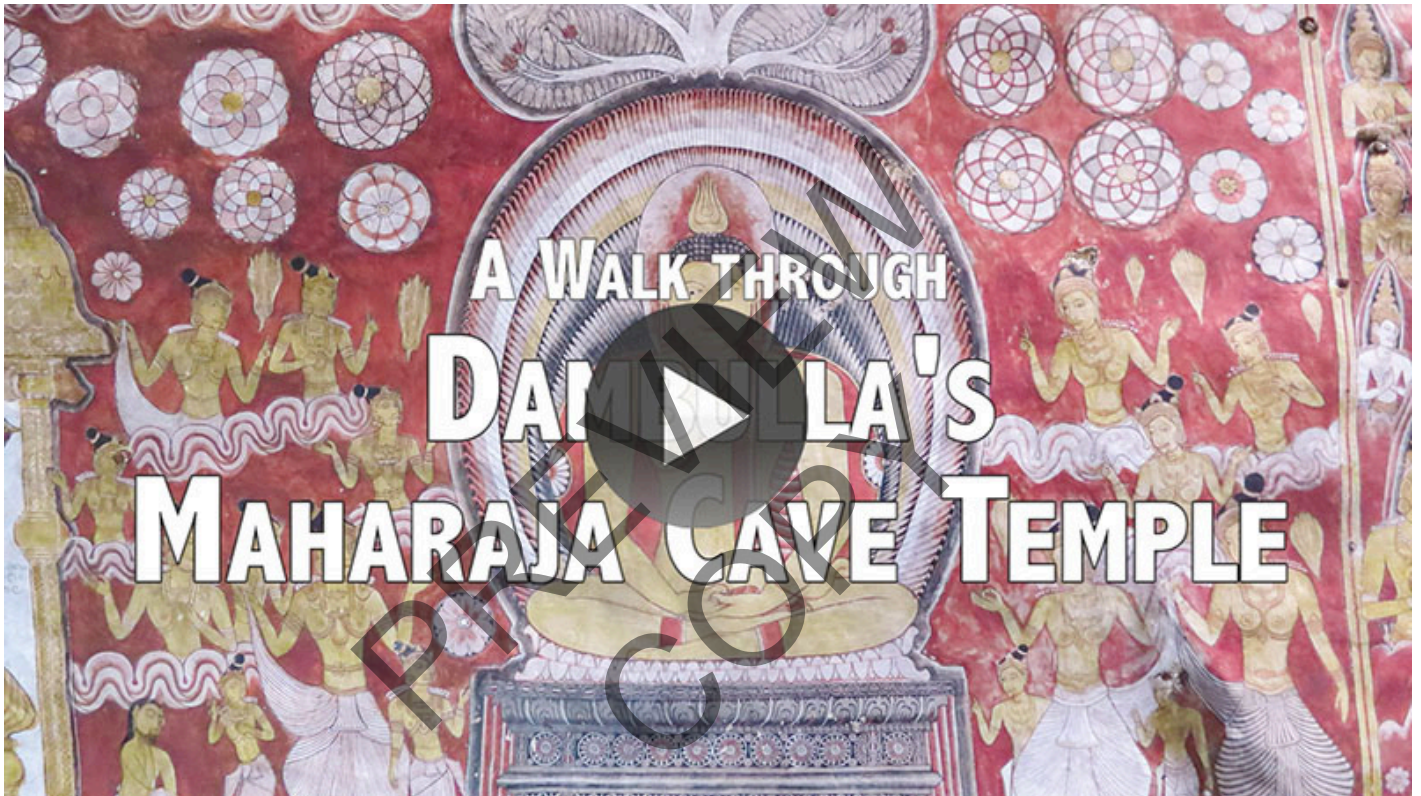


Fig. 128. Watch the video.

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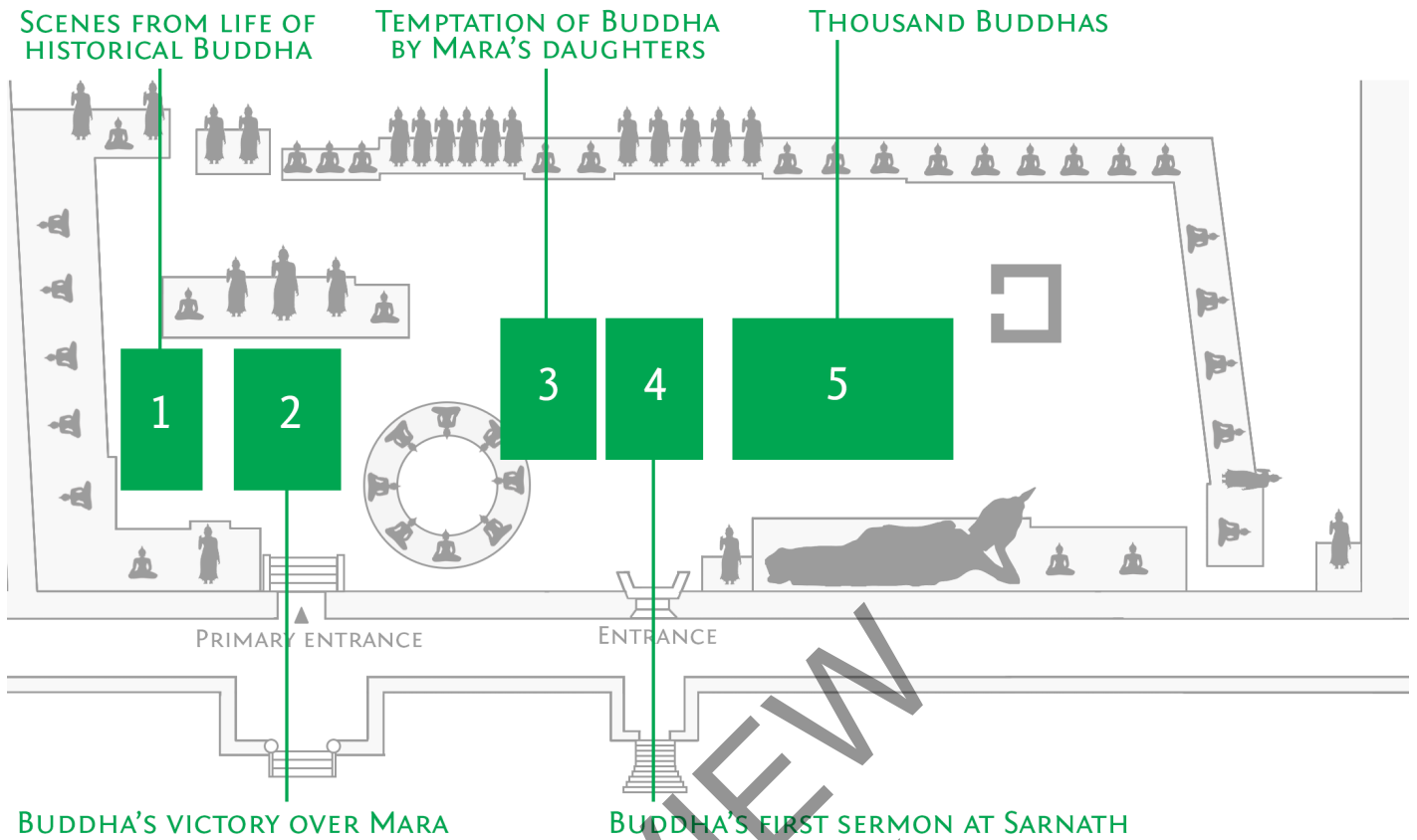


Fig. 132. Location of ceiling paintings, Cave 2, Dambulla.

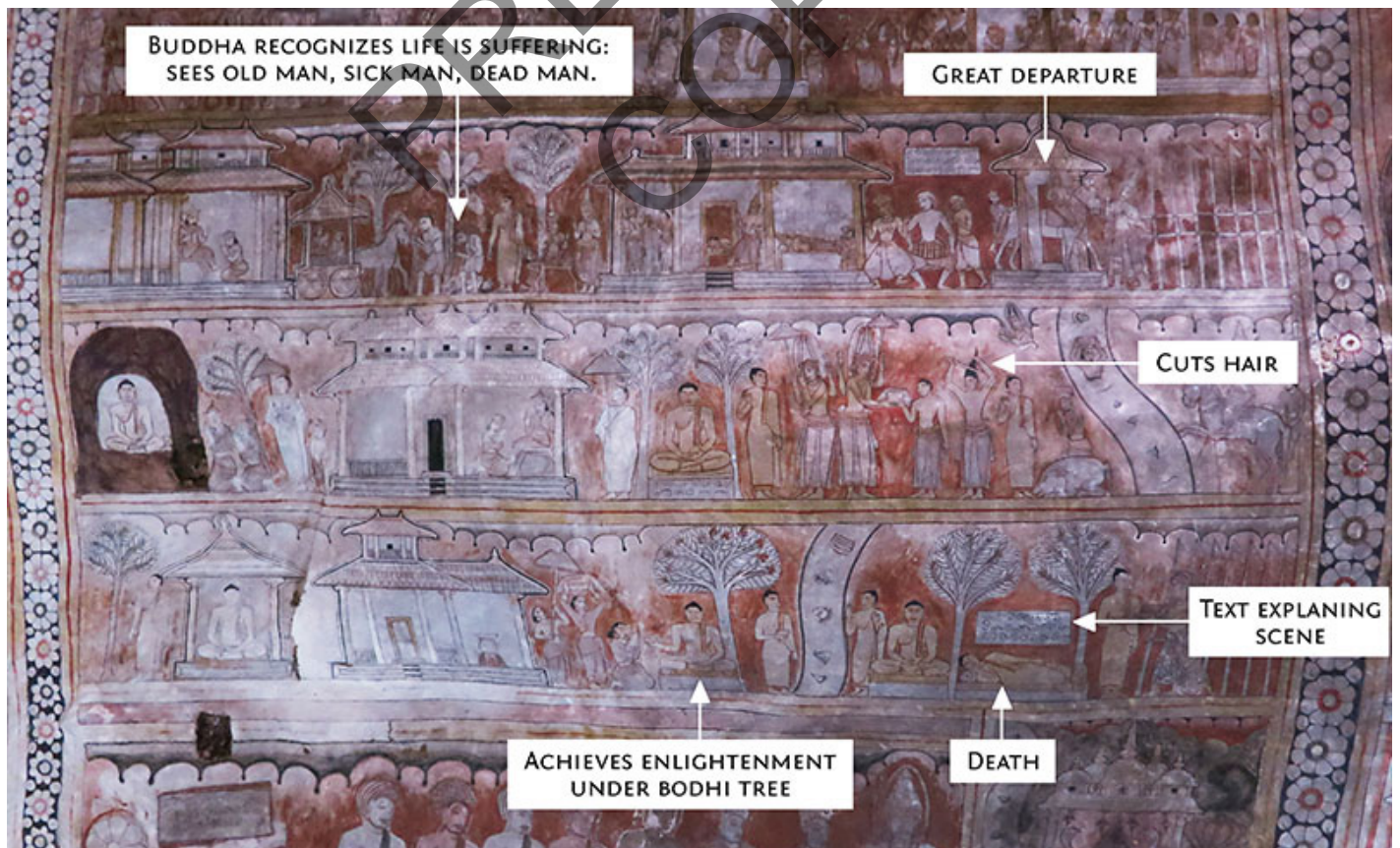


Fig. 133. Scenes from life of historical Buddha, ceiling, Cave 2, Dambulla.

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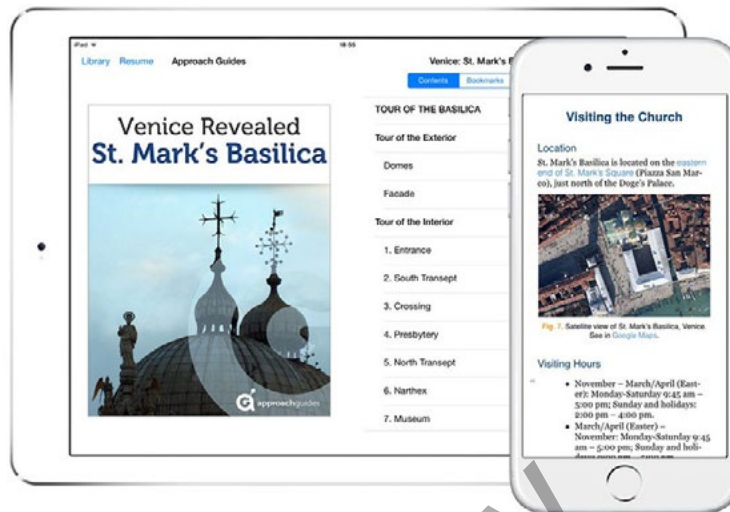
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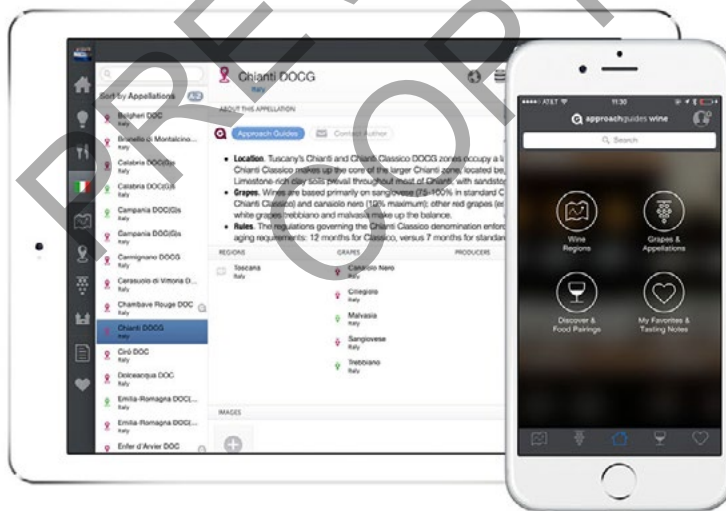
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