

**A TIME OF CHANGE:
QUESTIONING THE 'COLLAPSE' OF
ANURADHAPURA, SRI LANKA**

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Contents

Preface	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Aims	1
1.3 Significance of the study	2
1.4 Structure	3
Chapter 2: Anuradhapura: Geography, Environment and History of Research	5
2.1 Introduction	5
2.2 The Geographical Context	5
2.2.1: Geology	5
2.2.2: Topography	5
2.2.3: Climate	6
2.2.4: The Palaeoenvironment	7
2.3 A History of Research at Anuradhapura	8
2.3.1: Historical Topography	9
2.3.2: Research driven archaeology	12
2.4 Conclusion.....	13
Chapter 3: Collapse	17
3.1 Introduction	17
3.2 What is collapse & what collapses?	17
3.2.1: What is collapse?	17
The Collapse	17
The Aftermath	18
Diachronic Aspects	18
3.2.2: What Collapses?	18
3.3 Collapse Theory.....	19
3.4 Collapse Theory in South Asia	20
3.5 Sri Lankan Collapse Studies	21
3.5 The “Collapse” of Anuradhapura.....	22
3.5.1: The Invasion Model	22
3.5.2: The Malarial Model	24
3.5.3: The Imperial Model	26
3.6 Conclusion.....	28
Chapter 4: Methodology	29
4.1 Introduction	29
4.2: The Datasets.....	29
4.2.1: Defining the Citadel	29
4.2.1.1: The Citadel Dataset	30
4.2.2: Defining the Sacred City	30
4.2.3: Defining the Hinterland	31
4.2.4: The Pali chronicles	33
4.3 The chronological sequence.....	33
4.3.1: The Architectural Sequence	33
4.3.2: Ceramics as Chronological Indicators	36
4.3.3: Other Chronological Indicators	36
4.4 Methodological Approaches to Cultural Change.....	36
4.4.1: The Anuradhapura Ceramics	37
4.5 Population Estimations	39
4.6 Archaeologically characterising the models.....	39
4.6.1: The Invasion Model	40

Chapter 5: The Citadel	57
5.1 Introduction	57
5.2 Population & Monumental Construction	57
5.2.1: The Structural Sequence	57
5.3: Traditional elite	67
5.3.2: Luxury goods	69
5.3.3: Summary	70
5.4: New Elite	70
5.4.1: Violence	70
5.5: Long distance trade, craft specialisation & manufacturing.....	74
5.5.1: Glazed ceramics	75
5.5.2: Metalworking	79
5.5.3: Glass artefacts (excluding beads)	80
5.5.4: Glass beads	81
5.5.5: Worked and precious stone artefacts	83
5.5.6: Summary	86
5.6: Conclusion.....	86
Chapter 6: The Sacred City	98
6.1 Introduction	98
6.2: Population & monumental construction.....	98
6.2.1: The Structural Sequence of the Sacred City	99
6.2.1.1: Period F	99
6.2.1.2: Periods C,D&E	100
6.3: Traditional elite	104
6.3.1: The Padhanaghara Parivena and the rise of Asceticism	105
6.3.2: The Pabbata Vihara & the rise of Mahayanism	105
6.4: New elite	106
6.4.1: Violence	106
6.4.2: A South Indian Influence?	107
6.5: Long distance trade, craft specialisation & manufacturing.....	108
6.5.1: Imported Artefacts	108
6.5.2: Manufacturing	110
6.6: Conclusion.....	112
Chapter 7: The Hinterland	124
7.1 Introduction	124
7.2 Population	124
7.3: Traditional Elite	128
7.3.1: Late monastic construction	129
7.4: New Elite	131
7.4.1: South Indian Influence	131
7.4.2: After Collapse	132
7.5: Monumental Construction	132
7.5.1: Monumental monastic architecture within the hinterland	132
7.5.2: The Hydraulic Landscape	132
7.6: Trade and Manufacturing.....	137
7.6.1: Long Distance Trade	137
7.6.2: Craft Specialisation	137
7.7: Conclusion.....	137

Chapter 8: The Discussion	147
8.1: Introduction	147
8.2 Does Anuradhapura Collapse?	147
During Collapse.....	147
After Collapse	148
8.3 Testing the Invasion Model	150
8.3.1: The Invasion Model – The Citadel	150
8.3.2: The Invasion Model – The Sacred City.....	151
8.3.3: The Invasion Model – The hinterland	152
8.3.4: The Invasion Model – Summary	153
8.4 Testing the Malarial Model.....	153
8.4.1: The Malarial Model – The Citadel	153
8.4.2: The Malarial Model – The Sacred City	154
8.4.3: The Malarial Model – The hinterland	154
8.4.4: The Malarial Model – Summary	155
8.5 Testing the Imperial Model	155
8.5.1: The Imperial Model – The Citadel	155
8.5.2: The Imperial Model – The Sacred City	156
8.5.3: The Imperial Model – The hinterland	157
8.5.4: The Imperial Model – Summary	158
8.6: The Wider Early Mediaeval Milieu	158
8.6.1: Mantai	158
8.6.2: North and East of Sri Lanka	159
8.6.3: Polonnaruva	160
8.6.4: Indian Ocean Region.....	161
8.7 Anuradhapura’s Collapse.....	161
8.7.1: The Economic Power of the Sangha	162
8.7.2: Royal power and legitimation	163
8.7.3: Theoretical Perspectives	164
8.7.4: Choosing to Collapse	164
8.7: Conclusion.....	165
Chapter 9: Conclusion	175
9.1 Introduction	175
9.2: The Expanded Imperial Model	175
9.3 Future Directions.....	176
9.4 Problems encountered.....	178
9.5 Significance of research.....	178
References	179
Websites Accessed:	197

Figures

1.01: The ruins of Jetavana Vihara, Anuradhapura, 1896 (after Cave 1897: Pl.XXXIII)	4
2.01: Sri Lanka within the Indian Ocean (after Coningham et al. 2006: 3)	14
2.02: Topographic map of Sri Lanka (after Coningham et al. 1999: 13)	15
2.03: Schematic diagram of Anuradhapura soilscape with associated land-use and archaeological features (after Simpson et al. 2008b: 30)	16
2.04: H.C.P. Bell at Polonnaruva (after Karunaratne 1990: 34)	16
4.01: Plan of Anuradhapura showing Citadel and three primary Buddhist fraternities (after Coningham et al. 1999: 29)	49
4.02: ASW2 plan of the Citadel (after Coningham et al. 1999: 32)	50
4.03: Diagrammatic plan of Anuradhapura (after Coningham et al. 1999: 30)	51
4.04: Anuradhapura hinterland survey area	52
4.05: Anuradhapura Hinterland survey results by site type (after Coningham and Gunawardhana 2013) ...	53
4.06: Diagrammatic layout of pabbata viharas (after Bandaranayake 1974: 68)	54
4.07: Diagrammatic layout of pancayatana parivena (after Bandaranayake 1974: 87)	55
4.08: Example of double-platform site (after Wijesuriya 1998: 59)	56
5.01: Southern section of ASW2 trench, with strata of structural periods displayed along the left axis (after Coningham et al. 1999: 87)	88
5.02: Plan of structural period F (after Coningham 1999: 111)	89
5.03: Elevation of Period F pillared hall (after Coningham 1999: 113)	90
5.04: Plan of structural phase D&E of ASW2 (after Coningham 1999: 116)	91
5.05: Plan of Building A (after Paranavitana 1936: 07)	92
5.06: Plan of Gedige (after Bandaranayake 1974: 204)	93
5.07: Plan of Structural Phase B1 (after Coningham et al. 1999: 119)	94
5.08: Plan of Structural Phase B3 (after Coningham et al. 1999: 120)	95
5.09: Plan of period B street (after Ayrton 1924: 51)	96
5.10: ASW2 Faunal Assemblage by Class (after Young et al. 2006)	96
5.11: ASW2 metal artefacts by type (after Coningham & Harrison 2006: 27-76)	97
6.01: The Sacred City, Anuradhapura (after Wijesuriya 1998: 172 & Bandaranayake 1974: 34)	114
6.02: ASW2 structural periods and Abhayagiri Vihara Project typological periods	115
6.03: Anuradhapura's Hydraulic Network (after Nicholas 1960; Seneviratna 1989: 94)	116
6.04: Example of double-platform monastery from the Western Monasteries (after Wijesuriya 1998: 56) ...	117
6.05: Example of a decorated urinal stone from the Western Monasteries (after Bell 1914d: Plates IV & V)	118
6.06: Site plan of Puliyankulama (after Wijesuriya 1998: 54)	119
6.07: Bronze of Indra recovered from Puliyankulama (after Bell 1914c: Plate DD)	120
6.08: 10th century Durga statue from Anuradhapura (ex situ)	121
6.09: Stucco heads from Building 21, Pankuliya & Building 11 of the "Hindu Ruins" (after Bell 1914a: Plates XXIX, XXX; Bell 1914b: Plate XXXV)	121
6.10: 10th century Sri Lankan bronze seated Buddha, found in Thailand (image ref. von Schroeder 1990: 206)	122
6.11: 9th and 10th century Sacred City ornamental pillar capitals (after Bandaranayake 1974: 349)	123
6.12: Evolution of balustrades and guardstones (after Bandaranayake 1974: 335)	123
7.01: Map of Hinterland sites discussed in Chapter 7 (image by author)	139
7.02: Site B009 showing postholes of single structural phase (image by Anuradhapura Hinterland project)	140
7.03: Depth of cultural material at F102	140
7.04: SF1647 Polonnaruva style appliqué ware (image from Anuradhapura Hinterland project)	141
7.05: Trench at A155 (Veheragala) showing structural sequence (image from Anuradhapura Hinterland project) ..	142

7.06: Map of padhanaghara pariveṇa sites (after Wijesuriya 1998: 171)	143
7.07: Section showing tile collapse in moat of C112 (image from Anuradhapura Hinterland project)	144
7.08: Thirappane cascade system (after Jayatilaka et al. 2001: 02)	145
7.09: Site Plan of Ritagala (after Wijesuriya 1998: 192)	146
8.01: Distribution of Epigraphia Zeylanica inscriptions (image ref: author)	170
8.02: Distribution of Epigraphia Zeylanica inscriptions (image ref: author)	171
8.03: Positive feedback loop of alienation of Royal power	172
8.04: Graphic visualisation of exchange between monarchy and sangha	172
8.05: The marginal product of increasing complexity in Greek agriculture (image ref. Tainter 1988: 97)	172
8.06: Parenthetical flow chart of Anuradhapura's collapse (after Phillips 1979; Renfrew 1987; Tainter 1988; Mortazavi 2004)	173
8.07: Mobility of Sri Lanka's Capitals (Image by author)	174

Tables

4.02: Anuradhapura Hinterland transect survey sites	32
4.03: Late chronologically significant ASW2 coarseware forms	36
4.04: Functions of diagnostic ceramic types from ethnographic parallels found in modern Anuradhapura District, Sri Lanka (after Davis 2008: 35)	38
4.05: Coarse-ware ceramic types by function (after Davis 2008: 36)	39
4.06: The Invasion Model's Archaeological Signature	46
4.07: The Malarial Model's Archaeological Signature	47
4.08: The Imperial Model's Archaeological Signature	48
5.01: ASW2 Faunal Assemblage (after Young et al. 2006: 592)	63
5.02: Major exploited species (after Young et al. 2006: 592).....	64
5.03: Other species identified in periods B through F (after Young et al. 2006: 593-595)	65
5.04: The functional groups of coarsewares at ASW2 by Structural Period (after Coningham et al. 2006)	68
5.05: Total weight and sherd count of coarsewares at ASW2 by period	69
5.07: ASW2 Metal artefacts by type (after Coningham & Harrison 2006: 27-76)	70
5.08: Human Remains at ASW2 (after Knusel et al. 2006)	71
5.09: Appliqué ware sherds from Alahana Parivena, Polonnaruva	73
5.10: Appliqué ware sherds from ASW2, Anuradhapura	73
5.11: Origin of glazed ceramics at ASW2 by period (after Seely et al. 2006)	75
5.12: West Asian glazed wares at ASW2 (after Seely et al. 2006)	76
5.13: East Asian glazed wares at ASW2 (after Seely et al. 2006).....	78
5.14: Evidence of late metalworking at ASW2 (after McDonnell et al. 2006)	79
5.15: Glass Artefacts recovered from ASW2	80
5.16: Geographical source of ASW2 glass vessel fragments (after Coningham 2006: 333-376)	81
5.17: ASW2 glass bead assemblage (after Coningham 2006)	82
5.19: Geographic source of ASW2 stone artefacts (after Coningham et al. 2006).....	83
5.20: Stone artefact forms at ASW2 (after Coningham et al. 2006).....	84
5.21: ASW2 stone types (after Coningham et al. 2006)	85
6.01: The Bhojanasalas of Anuradhapura (after Bandaranayake 1974: 297)	101
6.02: The Major Urban Tanks of Anuradhapura (modern state)	103
6.03: Clay "bullets" from Abhayagiri Vihara Project site one (after Wikramagamage 1984: 10)	107
6.04: Abhayagiri Vihara Project glazed ceramics (after Bouzek et al. 1993: 87)	109
6.05: Jetavanaramaya Project Bead Assemblage (after Ratnayake 1984: 115-116).....	111
6.06: The Sacred City's Archaeological Signature.....	113
7.01: Anuradhapura Hinterland Survey Ceramic Scatters	125
7.02: Size and sherd density of Transect Survey Ceramic Scatter sites	126
7.03: Late chronologically significant ASW2 coarseware forms	127
7.04: Monastic Sites identified on transect survey	128
7.05: Yoda-elas of the North Central Province (after Seneviratna 1989: 92)	136
7.06: The Hinterland's Archaeological Signature.....	138
8.01: Anuradhapura's Archaeological Signature	166
8.02: The Invasion Model's Archaeological Signature	167
8.03: The Malarial Model's Archaeological Signature	168
8.04: The Imperial Model's Archaeological Signature	169

Preface

This book represents the publication of my doctoral thesis and while I have edited, nipped and tucked, and expanded some sections, I have resisted the urge to extensively rewrite. Consequently, the structure of the original thesis remains, with its data heavy chapters and a focus upon methodology. However, I believe this “showing of my workings” has value, as I have written before (Strickland 2011) regarding the methodological challenges that archaeologists face in studying societal transformation and “collapse”.

The text reassesses the Early Mediaeval “collapse” of Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, through explicit reference to the archaeological record. The study of Anuradhapura’s terminal period has been dominated by a reliance upon textual sources, resulting in a monocausal and politically charged narrative depicting an eleventh century invasion by the South Indian Cholas as resulting directly in the collapse of Anuradhapura (Codrington 1960), bringing to an end over a millennium of rule from Sri Lanka’s first capital. Such is the dominance of this collapse narrative, few alternative explanations for the abandonment of Anuradhapura have been posited, and just two alternative collapse models, a “malarial” model (Nicholls 1921; Still 1930) and an “imperial” model (Spencer 1983; Indrapala 2005), have been propounded. This book thus aims to test whether Anuradhapura truly “collapses”, and to test the established model for this apparent collapse.

After archaeologically defining collapse, the three collapse models are synthesised and translated into archaeological signatures (archaeologically visible characteristics and sequences). This book then presents and analyses data from over a century of archaeological investigations at Anuradhapura, focussing upon the datasets of the ASW2 excavations within its Citadel (Coningham et al. 1999 & 2006) and the recent Anuradhapura Hinterland Project (Coningham & Gunawardana 2013) survey of the hinterland. The data is summarised and presented graphically, facilitating comparison with the theoretical archaeological signatures of the three collapse models. The presence or absence of the archaeological characteristics of collapse are identified in each zone, testing whether Anuradhapura actually collapsed. The archaeological signatures of collapse for each of the three zones are then compared with the anticipated signatures developed from the three collapse models, before, finally, the archaeological “collapse” of Anuradhapura is related to collapse theory in an attempt to best understand the underlying dynamic processes

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Anuradhapura is emphatically a city of the dead. Scarce a step can be taken, but they eye falls upon some memorial of the past. The mounds one carelessly passes are the sepulchres of Kings; the bricks that the foot strikes the remains of palaces... Amidst a silence as profound as that of the grave, rise the colossal remains of a city whose walls were 64 miles in circumference, once echoed with the merry voices of children, while processions of kings and priests wound along the broad pavements of the now deserted courts...”

(Liesching 1869: 193)

1.1 Introduction

The ancient city of Anuradhapura was the capital of Sri Lanka for over a millennium; its massive stupas rising over the jungle, its gigantic reservoirs turning an arid land green and its Kings and Queens ruling over the island of Sri Lanka. Pilgrims came all the way from China (Hulagalle 2005: 14), envoys were sent to Emperor Claudius in Rome (ibid.: 2), traders from all across the Indian Ocean and the Near East (Coningham 1999 & 2006), and on several occasions rival kingdoms sent soldiers to sack the city (Mvs; Cvs). After its 11th century collapse, Anuradhapura lay undisturbed for nearly a thousand years in ruins, drowning beneath the roots and leaves of the jungle tide, until the nineteenth century when the British began the active re-colonisation of the island’s dry-zone and initiated more than a century of archaeological research on Anuradhapura.

If the past truly is another country, then nowhere, and nowhere, attracts as many visitors as the “lost” or “dead” civilisations of the past; Ancient Rome, the Khmer, the Maya, the Indus, Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, Mycenae... These are names that resonate through the ages, conjuring images of huge cities, majestic monuments, and breathtaking feats of engineering and architecture that still inspire us today.

Certainly in Sri Lanka the halcyonised era of Anuradhapura has remained very much a part of the public consciousness (see Coningham & Lewer 1999 for a full discussion); appearing on stamps, bank-notes as well as being a major centre of international Buddhist pilgrimage and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In May 2009 the Sri Lankan government declared victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), bringing to an end a civil insurgency lasting three decades. However, while this insurgency officially started in the 1980s, factions upon either side of the conflict have long used archaeology to root this ethnic

conflict in the events of the first millennium AD (Tambiah 1986; Coningham & Lewer 1999 & 2000), and a key aspect of this politically charged narrative is the eleventh century collapse of Sri Lanka’s first capital, Anuradhapura, recorded in the great Pali chronicles of Sri Lanka (Mvs; Cvs; Geiger 1928 & 1934).

The capital of Sri Lanka for over a millennium, Anuradhapura was a major Indian Ocean centre. Broadly divided into a fortified Citadel, a surrounding monastic zone (the Sacred City) and hinterland, it remains highly politicised and idealised today (ibid.). A key element of this public consciousness is the widely accepted explanation for the city’s Early Mediaeval collapse, recorded in the Culavamsa, one of the great Pali chronicles of Sri Lanka (Geiger 1929 & 1934). This describes an eleventh-century sacking by an invading Cola army, leaving Anuradhapura “violently destroyed” (Cvs.lv.21), bringing to an end nearly 1500 years of Buddhist rule from Anuradhapura, and leaving the city in ruins (see Fig. 1.01).

This “sacking” has been integrated into the narrative of the civil conflict, portrayed as a clash of religions and ethnicities; the Saivite Tamils invading and destroying the golden age of the Sinhalese Buddhists (Coningham & Lewer 1999 & 2000). As an anonymous Tamil historian wrote recently; “Archaeology has always been political in Sri Lanka” (cited in Page 2010), and it is sadly impossible for the archaeologist to control how their findings are used, or who they are used by.

However, the “collapse” of Anuradhapura has never been archaeologically investigated, let alone verified, indeed this “collapse” could conceivably be argued to be a transformation or transition resulting in a religious and geographical shift (this, and other alternatives to “collapse” will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three). Instead the Pali chronicles have been awarded great credibility within Sri Lankan archaeology and history, in the words of one excavator; “to study the history of Ancient Anuradhapura, the data available in the Pali chronicles is invaluable” (Ratnayake 2008: 158). Although they are undoubtedly valuable resources, the over-reliance and unquestioning acceptance of the vamsas has had a huge, and arguably stultifying, effect on the study of the “demise” of the Anuradhapura period.

1.2 Aims

The two core aims of this volume are to establish whether or not Anuradhapura can actually be said to have “collapsed”, and to test the propounded explanations for this apparent collapse against the archaeological record. These aims will be achieved through analysing the archaeological data produced by over a century of research at Anuradhapura, and utilising this data to test the three existing models for Anuradhapura’s collapse. These are the monocausal Invasion Model of

the vamsas, as advocated for example by Geiger (1929) or Codrington (1960), the Malarial Model advocated by Nicholls (1921) and Still (1930), and the synthetic Imperial Model as advocated by Spencer (1976 & 1983) and Indrapala (2005). All three of these models are based primarily upon textual studies of the vamsas and epigraphic data, and all three models identify the Cola invasion as the primary cause for the initial collapse of Anuradhapura. They are thus representative of the general consensus view that the eleventh century Cola invasion ended "the golden era of Sri Lankan history" (Dias 1990: 151).

1.3 Significance of the study

Geographically and culturally, Sri Lanka is a distinct regional unit within South Asian archaeology, and one that has been studied and investigated for over a century. However, the collapse of Anuradhapura itself has typically been confined to a postscript or footnote within the island's history. This is even more notable within the archaeological literature, with almost all of the focus formerly placed upon identifying sites mentioned in the Pali chronicles (or vamsas) of the Island (Ayrton 1924; Hocart 1924; Paranavitana 1936), and latterly upon the origins (Coningham 1999) or florescence of Anuradhapura (Deraniyagala 1957; Deraniyagala 1972, 1986; Coningham et al. 2007). Consequently, analysis of Anuradhapura's final phase has been confined to brief descriptive accounts of "squatter occupation" in the city's final structural phases; "ephemeral mud structures in the foundations of which fragments of the older buildings were freely used" (Paranavitana 1936: 03), none of which were recorded in detail.

The study of Anuradhapura's collapse has, therefore, been dominated by historians, in turn leading to explanations that are founded upon the vamsas. Such explanations do not all presuppose the complete accuracy of the great Pali chronicles, but they are guided by their dependency upon the vamsas and their lack of alternative data sources. This has resulted in a research environment where the most detailed examinations of Early Mediaeval Sri Lanka are to be found in studies of Cola warfare (Spencer 1976 & 1983) or Tamil ethnic identity (Indrapala 2005), works written by scholars whose primary research interests are external to Anuradhapura.

However, while these works are of good quality, it is a reflection on the field that the most detailed accounts of Anuradhapura's collapse are within works focussed externally, where the collapse is almost incidental. This same lack of research focus can be seen in other examples of hegemonic decline and urban collapse in Early Mediaeval South Asia, such as the thirteenth century collapse of the Colas (Heitzman 1987) or the fourteenth century collapse of Polonnaruva (Seneviratna 1998).

The few studies that have paid attention to Anuradhapura's collapse were primarily carried out before the outbreak of violence (e.g. Nicholls 1921; Still 1930; Codrington 1960; Spencer 1976 & 1983) and in the subsequent years the disciplines of archaeology and collapse studies have made great advances in both theory and practice (e.g. scientific dating, geoarchaeology, geophysics etc.). Furthermore, a huge quantity of new archaeological data has been generated for Anuradhapura's hinterland by the Anuradhapura Hinterland survey (Coningham & Gunawardhana 2013) within which I carried out five seasons of transect-survey and excavation, as well as for the Citadel by the ASW2 excavations (Coningham 1999 & 2006). Consequently, an archaeological re-evaluation of Anuradhapura's collapse has the potential to be extremely rewarding, not to mention timely. Such a study would be of significance to historians and archaeologists in Sri Lanka, and indeed South Asia as a whole.

However, such a study has greater potential than simply casting new light upon Anuradhapura's collapse, it could also greatly contribute to the archaeological study of collapse, and the formulation of archaeological collapse theory. Scholars have discussed collapse for millennia, unfortunately however, archaeology has arguably never fully engaged with the subject, and archaeological collapse studies have become increasingly marginalised over the past 50 years. Almost as if, as archaeologists, we have become so trained in the reconstruction of ruins and the reading of debris that we now focus automatically upon the mature form of any subject we study. This has left the archaeological world focussed upon the emergences, developments and golden-ages of civilisations and their cities. For example, one recent reprint of an archaeological textbook, *Patterns in Prehistory* (Wenke 2006), devoted over 350 pages to the origins and emergence of complex societies all over the world, over a period of nearly 10,000 years, but less than 10 pages to the theme of collapse. Fagan's *People of the Earth* (Fagan 2007) was little better and throughout excavation reports, books on any past civilisation, city or people; the focus seems again and again to be on emergences, rather than endings.

Despite this imbalance of focus, there is still a credible body of collapse theory examining how and why civilisations collapsed but within archaeology it is restricted to specific examples of societal collapse, predominantly that of the Maya (e.g. Culbert 1973; Sabloff 1973; Hammond 1977; Phillips 1979; Gill 2000; Lucero 2002; Webster 2002; Haug et al. 2003). In turn, the study of universal collapse theories has become dominated by academics from disciplines such as ecology, history, anthropology or sociology (e.g. Turchin 2003 or Diamond 2005, both primarily ecologists). During my master's thesis, back in 2005, I attempted to test several global the collapse models of Tainter (1988), Turchin (2003), and Diamond (2005) through explicit

reference to the archaeological record of six sites from three world civilisations (Strickland 2011).

However, despite all being comprehensively examined, excavated, and indeed published, there was simply insufficient archaeological data from the periods in question. In the conclusion I highlighted the need for archaeological data generation for collapse theory (Strickland 2011: 137). It is not enough to consider the issue as an afterthought when writing up the site report. The question must be there at the beginning of any such project and must be incorporated into the research design. This volume thus has the potential to act as an exemplar for archaeological collapse studies, integrating high level collapse theory (e.g. Tainter 1988) with the archaeological record, thus enabling the formation of archaeological collapse theory.

1.4 Structure

Having thus introduced the aims, content and significance of the study, Chapter Two will now lay the academic foundations for this volume by placing Anuradhapura into an environmental, geographical and academic context. Chapter Three will then define “collapse” as well as establishing “what” collapses, before setting out the history of collapse studies in South Asia, and finally examining the three models propounded for Anuradhapura’s collapse; Chapter Four will set out the methodology to be used in testing the three models against the archaeological record of Anuradhapura, before Chapters Five, Six and Seven present the archaeological data from Anuradhapura’s Citadel, Sacred City, and hinterland respectively. Having presented the data, Chapter Eight will attempt to answer the twin aims of the thesis, first establishing whether or not Anuradhapura collapses, before comparing the data with each of the three models, as set out in Chapter Four. Finally, Chapter Nine will conclude the volume by relating the collapse of Anuradhapura to collapse theory, and suggesting future research directions.



FIG.1.01: THE RUINS OF JETAVANA VIHARA, ANURADHAPURA, 1896
(AFTER BELL 1914A: PL.V.A)