

## **Stolen Treasure**

*Sri Lanka's treasure hunters are wrecking ancient cultural artifacts.* Colombo, Sri Lanka - The reclining Buddha statue in Danagirigala,

Sri Lanka now only has one eye. Treasure hunters pulled out the other one. The stone pillow that the Buddha rests his golden, curly-haired head on even has a hole in it.

"The perpetrators were hoping to find gold, silver, precious stones or ivory," says Senarath Dissanayake, director general of Sri Lanka's Department of Archaeology. Destructive treasure-hunting is a major problem in the island country off the tip of India.

"Treasure hunting is based only on folklore about great riches. It has no scientific basis," Dissanayake says.

The culprits in Danagirigala went home empty-handed, as did the ones who damaged a stupa (Buddhist burial mound) in Danowita or in Nurwarakanda where treasure-hunters drilled into the chest, belly button and pedestal of a seated Buddha statue.

Over the past two decades, police have come across more than 4,000 cases of such vandalism. The situation was particularly bad in 2012 and 2013 with the floors of caves dug up, the houses of former chieftains torn down and monks' dwellings destroyed.

On average there was more than one such act every day.

"The trend is a consequence of the fact that people no longer have morals and ethics," Dissanayake says.

Archaeologists have little chance of stopping the would-be thieves. According to the archaeology director, the small island has more than 250,000 historic sites, "the highest density in the world" of heritage places.

Items have even been taken from the National Museum in the capital Colombo. A stolen metal sword hilt from the time of the Kingdom of Kandy (late 15th to early 19th century) was later recovered - although by then it had been cut into four pieces.

The head of the special unit tasked with preventing the destruction and theft of antiquities is Udeni Wickramasinghe.

"The problem is that many people cannot distinguish between fact-based history and mythical epics," she says. In the case of the Buddha with three holes drilled into it, this was because of a story that the Buddhist monks hid their valuables inside the statue.

Wickramasinghe wrote her doctoral thesis on the excavations at the stupa in Neelagiri Maha Seya. Until 2009 this lay within an area controlled for several decades by LTTE rebels and so wasn't targeted by treasure hunters.

After the end of the civil war, Wickramasinghe and his colleagues spent several years excavating around the huge, semi-circular burial mound.

"We found inscriptions, 20 pots, pearls, 150 mini-pagodas and a few semi-precious stones. Much of spiritual but nothing of great material value," she says.

Nevertheless, there are persistent urban legends about a police chief who took treasure from the jungle or a man who used a digger to excavate a stupa and bought a million-dollar car with the riches he found.

"People who are greedy forget their religion," says monk and former member of parliament Ellawala Medhananda.

To the perpetrators it doesn't matter whether a building dates from the 4th or 5th century or is particularly symbolically important, says Medhananda, author of numerous archaeological books.

"I am so sad that our rich national culture is being destroyed," he says. "Unique things are being lost."

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