



In the Field with Siran and a Memorable Visit to Beli-Lena: For all the Wrong Reasons

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Those of us who had the good fortune of knowing Siran will agree that his greatest pleasure was to be out in the field. It was in the field where his unerring instinct, his ability to read the archaeological record from the surface landscape or the excavated section was at its supreme best, and Siran was at his most comfortable. And being in the field meant more than just the archaeology of a site. It was the full experience, from dawn starts to cool river baths after hard work, communal camp meals and evenings sitting under the stars discussing the findings of the day or sharing stories and jokes. This love of the field came from his childhood experiences exploring and collecting with his father, and from his own dedicated early PhD research surveys in some of the remotest parts of the island.

I was lucky enough to serve an apprenticeship in Siran's school of field archaeology. While I was formally trained at the Institute of Archaeology in London, my real education only began in 1988 when, with Siran, P.B. Karunaratne and W.H Wijeyapala, we formed a small project, run by the Archaeology Department and supported by Balfour Beatty, to survey the terrain within and surrounding the new Samanalawewa hydro-electric project. Sitting amid the hills above the Kaltota escarpment and the southern plains, Samanalawewa lay beyond the customary tank and temple archaeology of the Dry Zone hinterland of Tissamaharama and was then unexplored and had no recorded archaeological sites – a rare situation indeed for any part of the island.

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My interest was in the associations the region had with important iron and steel-making traditions, while the Archaeology Department sought a fuller archaeological impact assessment of the area. With the regular and vastly experienced field team from the Department, we set up camp in a patch of thick jungle on the edge of the Belihul Oya which ran in full spate directly down from Horton Plains.

It was my first field survey in Sri Lanka and I had little idea how to get started, the terrain was hilly and mostly densely vegetated, and to my eyes seemed impenetrable. Siran worked with us at the outset and then regularly throughout our three months in the field. That first week was a revelation. Setting out early every morning with no more than a basic map and field notebooks, our path first took us across the precarious pedestrian rope-and-plank bridge suspended above the unquiet river to the expanse of the Kinchigune paddy fields, all now lost below the reservoir. From there we headed in a different direction each day, walking anything from 10 to 15km, following faint tracks and guided by villagers. I learned by listening to and watching Siran, when to stop and look, closely at the ground surface and then up at the wider horizon. Talking to villagers we learned the names of the hills and valleys, the river crossings and remote hamlets. Siran would point to a distant ridge and we'd find our way there and, without fail, there would be a prehistoric campsite with a scatter of quartz knapping debitage and river-pebble hammerstones.

In time, I was also able to identify the west-facing hillslopes where we would find iron smelting debris. In the villages we scoured the lanes and compounds for pottery sherds and remnants of iron-making. And in the riverbanks and paddy terraces Siran would demonstrate how the land was formed and search for stone tools trapped within fluvial horizons. Along the way I learned about the trees and plants, methods for trapping animals in the forest, illicit gemming operations also hidden in the forest, the distribution of caste occupations, and where to find good iron ore. The whole landscape, temporal and spatial, became one. Most of all I learned from Siran to observe and record objectively. He was in his element in this environment, at ease with his team and with the villagers we met and who guided us, and equally at ease discussing the academic complexities of interpreting the archaeological record over rice and curry and a beer by lamplight late in the evening. Being objective and letting the evidence from the material record and the environment speak was what drew Siran to prehistory. He was never so comfortable with historical archaeology and his return to excavations in the Citadel of Anuradhapura in the mid-80s was intended to help bridge the chronological gap between prehistory and proto-history, and to show the way towards more scientific, stratigraphically-controlled, excavation methodologies. If pressed, he would say that excavating into the Early Historic period felt intrusive to him, as if he was excavating his own family.

One consistent thread through this time, and indeed throughout Siran's life, that many will recognise was his irrepressible humour and sense of fun, often bordering on wicked mischief. There was hardly a conversation or situation in which Siran couldn't eventually find some source of entertainment and humour. I hope this next anecdote doesn't raise too painful memories for some!

1990 marked the centenary of the Archaeological Survey Department of Sri Lanka. It was an occasion of great fanfare and celebration. The then Archaeological Commissioner, Dr Roland Silva, was also the Director-General of the Central Cultural Fund and lavished the resources of both the Department and the CCF on hosting an ambitious programme of events and entertaining an international audience of invited guests, all VIPs from the world of South Asian archaeology and architecture. In Colombo, there was an opening ceremony at the BMICH, a conference in the Hilton hotel over several days, the publication of a series of books on all aspects of the archaeology of Sri Lanka and a number of field trips to see landmark sites. By then I was fully immersed in my research at Samanalawewa and had results to present from our first field survey so joined in the occasion enthusiastically.

One of the organised field trips, hosted by Siran, was to the prehistoric cave-shelter at Beli-lena, near Kitulgala. Excavated by Siran in the late 1970s, Beli-lena saw the first application of radiometric dating in Sri Lanka and revealed an occupation sequence from 31,070 to 3,878 years BP. The site was well-known in South Asia and there were many eager to sign up for the trip. In the main these were senior archaeologists from South Asia and Europe who prided themselves on their knowledge and many years of field experience. Among them were several who wanted to see first-hand, and perhaps contend, the claims made for the site, not a little sceptical that island Lanka could produce such rich evidence. Another characteristic shared by this audience was that all had gained their experience working on mainland South Asia, in primarily dry and arid environments, and were not familiar with the tropical rainforest conditions of southwest Sri Lanka.

Kitulgala, lies in the lower foothills of the central massif of Sri Lanka and is a few hours' drive from Colombo. Its first claim to fame is as the location of the filming of *'The Bridge over the River Kwai'* starring Alec Guinness. Its other claim to fame is for having the highest recorded rainfall in the island. The site of Beli-lena itself lies in the heart of a large rubber plantation and requires a trek through the plantation of perhaps half a mile. As we wound our way up the hairpin bends towards the plantation the potential disaster that awaited us slowly dawned on me. I quietly leaned forward and asked Siran, 'have you warned any of them about the leeches!'. Only a faint smile crossed Siran's face.

A rubber plantation is a gloomy environment. The canopy of the trees blocks out the sky which, being in the wet zone, is most often grey anyway. The ground runs with rainwater and is covered with a leafy moss that is the happy home to legions of leeches who feed on the small herds of cattle that live beneath the canopy as part of the plantation management system. It's an effective ecosystem to stumble into. Unable to get closer to the site, the coaches stopped, and the passengers alighted, happy to be away from the conference hall and out in the field where they could chat informally and reform old alliances and antipathies. With Siran leading the way, some 30-plus archaeologists set off in single file, chatting merrily, through the plantation.

The trick in leech country is to be first in line and to avoid being third or fourth. Once the leech has sensed the first human it is the third or fourth they are ready to leap on to. It took a few hundred yards before the first squeal was heard and then a hundred more before a ripple of shared anxiety began to run through the line of walkers. By halfway, and beyond the point of no return, pinpricks of blood had started to appear on pristine khaki trousers and all-out panic had gripped the group. The shrieks and squeals, and curses drowned out all attempts to explain, or suggest tactics – don't stop, walk briskly, roll up your trousers so you can see them, don't attempt to remove them until we are on dry ground, they won't do you any harm.

Some stood transfixed not knowing whether to go forward or back. Others hopped from foot to foot while frantically batting at their ankles, and others still barged ahead at full speed pushing all out of their way. The pinpricks turned to bloody blotches and started to appear further up trouser legs, and on waist bands and shirts. Black wriggling fringes of leeches formed around shoe tops like sea anemones. Meanwhile, Siran led from the front and kept a smile on his face.

On finally reaching the cave-shelter and dry ground, the group had taken on the appearance of having come through a minor massacre. There was a frantic collective-inspection and furtive self-inspections behind boulders, with lowering of trousers and raising of skirts and shirts. Bars of soap were distributed to help remove the most tenacious creatures. Further shrieks as the most adventurous invaders were found on necks and in hair. All the while dark mutterings of opprobrium formed the backdrop as Siran calmly proceeded to give his description of the archaeology of the site and his excavations. Unfortunately, or otherwise, the anticipated questions and debates were short-lived as the prospect of retracing the route back to the coach distracted everyone's thoughts.

The group that arrived back in Colombo at the end of that day was subdued, compliant and exhausted. Only Siran wore a smile of one-upmanship. He had put one over not only the Europeans but also those from mainland South Asia who saw island Lanka as a minor sibling. He had entertained his compatriots and those of us who worked with him. No one was the worse for the experience and most were secretly pleased to add a new adversary to the menagerie of snakes and scorpions they regularly faced in the field.