



# Platform Task Regaining the Next Generation of Archaeologists in Sri Lanka

**Sudharshan Seneviratne PhD. FSLCA. FNASSL**

Former Professor of Archaeology. University of Peradeniya and currently Emeritus Professor. Former Director Director-General Central Cultural Fund (custodian organization for UNESCO) Declared World Heritage Sites).

Former High Commissioner to India and Bangladesh.

Executive Director-General IORA – Sri Lanka Secretariat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[susenevi@gmail.com](mailto:susenevi@gmail.com)

---

*“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high:  
Where knowledge is free:  
Where the world has not been broken-up into small fragments by narrow domestic walls:  
Where words come out from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit:  
Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening thought and action:  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”*

[Rabindranath Tagore. The Freedom of Heaven]

I begin this article with the poetic sentiments expressed on the *beauty of knowledge, truth, perfection, clarity of mind and freedom* by Rabindranath Tagore. This sage along with Ananda Coomaraswamy, represents the once brilliant intellectual ethos of modern South Asia. I wish to dedicate this discourse to young archaeologists, the primary stakeholders of Sri Lanka’s heritage, expressed within an archaeological site, which also happens to be your professional sacred space.

Space is central to the topic I selected for this discourse. This space is essentially identified with the present and it is related to the past and future. Together, the past and the future are pivotal to the identity and sustenance of the archaeologist. I recognize the archaeologists of today and the future generations investigating the past as the lifeline of this profession. Considering the ongoing dynamics of professional archaeology - tomorrow is vital for the science of archaeology (Sutton, 2012). It is my personal and professional view that my generation of archaeologists did not treat your generation with greater dignity and magnanimity.

ANCIENT LANKA 

Volume 2 (2023)

© 2023 by the author/s. <https://doi.org/10.29173/anlk667>

This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This indeed is a sorry state of affairs as your generation represents the primary stakeholders of our profession. It is important therefore that you recognize your professional platform, the way in which it must be structured and its futuristic vision of regaining your professional status. If you do not grasp the essential gravity of this situation here and now, it may be fatal to the very professional status of archaeology.

One cannot divorce archaeology from the living reality of Sri Lanka. That reality has reached a critical juncture. As things stand today, reading the past in Sri Lanka is situated between social fascism and anarchism (Kearney, 1983), while liberal thinking in this sphere is dangling on a thin wire. The contemporary archaeologist has their task cut out and faces the enormous challenge of initiating a dialogue with the past within the above context. How then do archaeologists consolidate a professional platform to make that space for liberal thinking, so urgently needed in interpretative studies, devoid of biases and prejudices?

How should the very future of the profession be contextualised? The decision rests in your hands and as professional archaeologists, it is important that you situate this platform within a time and space context. In doing so, how do you resolve the vision of archaeology in the past few decades? What was the nature of archaeology under Colonialism (Ojala, 2019). How much did it influence the Orientalists involved in archaeology? What was its impact on archaeology through postcolonial nationalism (Kohl, 1998). How did this total scenario provide a basis for archaeology in contemporary times, especially conditioning parochialism in the practice of archaeology? It is you who must take cognisance of the reality by evaluating the positive and negative aspects of this situation and induce constructive changes.

The responsibility and the role played by my generation will end in a few years and we must accept this situation with humility. Unfortunately, some archaeologists of my generation are unable to accept this reality. Some of them actually believe that they will continue to remain at archaeological sites even after their passage to a next dimension. Some others in my generation also harboured the illusion that they held perpetual hegemonic power over archaeological sites and decision-making authority that guide the fortunes of Sri Lankan archaeology. A direct consequence of this thinking process was the subversion and the lumpenisation of archaeological thought in Sri Lanka and the creation of subservient 'archaeology-student surfs' by particular schools of thought. The exploitation of the labour and ideas of the young archaeologists stand out as ugly and despicable feudal remnants of a bygone era in the post-Colonial period. You must not be deterred by this retarded behaviour of some among your predecessors. Such impediments must be corrected and the profession is thrust towards a progressive agenda with a new vision.

### **Time and space**

Speaking of "time", you must possess a vision and a plan. It could be identified as short, medium and long-term and your action plan could be situated accordingly. Then take up "space" in your agenda. It is critical that you contextualise space within your professional platform. As you are aware, context is pivotal to the science of archaeology. What is retrieved and studied in archaeology has no value devoid of context. I wish to situate space in multiple contexts. Taken together they comprise the platform of the archaeologist. These multiple contexts are organically interconnected to each other. If even one is disconnected it then has a direct impact on the very survival of the genuine professional archaeologist.

*Professional space*

The archaeologists have two alternatives with reference to their professional space:

1. Arrive at the work site in the morning, sign the register, dabble with some artefacts and return home at the end of the day
2. To conduct oneself as a professional archaeologist in your body and mind and consolidate one's professional dignity. This means your professional thoughts and actions must be one.

The first of these two does not befit an archaeologist. In a bygone era, under colonialism, some aspects of archaeological work overlapped with the Public Works Department (PWD) in the country. You have been appointed to these positions endowed with a modern professional degree not to think and behave like a desk clerk. Departments of Archaeology were established in the University system (Perry, 2014), to produce professional archaeologists. Not schoolteachers and definitely not office clerks. The second aspect is entwined with the very existence of the archaeologist. If we do not understand this, the demons waiting in the wings to consume the archaeological sites could easily sever our roots. Consequently, this will lead to the cannibalization of cultural sites. Sigiriya had a near miss in the recent past. If we do not protect our existence it will only dilute our identity. When our identity is lost we cannot justify our existence. This is dialectics for you!

Precisely due to these reasons we must essentially protect our professional space. We project ourselves to the world as professional archaeologists. There is a fine line that demarcates the professional archaeologists from all other professionals who fiddle around with archaeology. There are those in the medical profession and administrators who are self-proclaimed archaeologists. They work within an antiquarian and Orientalist mental rubric. It is therefore imperative that you safeguard your professional status and identity. To consolidate this, one needs professional security. Security is found only when our professional status is recognized and announced. This status was legally recognized through an Act of Parliament establishing the Sri Lanka Council of Archaeologists (Sri Lankan Archaeology Acts and Ordinances, n.d.), our professional body. This act has enforced and secured the sacred space for our professional status. It will indeed be a tragedy if you lose what is rightfully yours. We reserve the right to carry out professional work at heritage sites because we maintain a conscious identity as archaeologists. The decision-making positions in archaeology-related bodies *must* be in the hands of professional archaeologists. This could be achieved by establishing an intellectual hegemony that sustains qualitative levels of professional priorities at such establishments.

In view of this, the conduct of the professional archaeologist becomes a critical factor. There must be a high level of the professional standard applied in the science of archaeology. We do not benefit from sub-standards. As we are responsible for public funds, transparency and accountability must be displayed at the highest level. The international community of professionals keenly observe our conduct during this era of globalisation. Our professional standards will directly come to play in our collaborative work with them. If we are unable to maintain standards, they will, as did the Orientalists and Colonials, scorn upon our inability to measure up to them. However, we must reach the highest standards not for their sake but for ourselves. It is incumbent upon the senior archaeologists to work out standards of quality assurance and also to maintain them at all costs.

To be a sound professional, the archaeologist must necessarily adhere to a professional code of ethics. If one does not practise this code of ethics, we will be deprived of security and the law of the jungle will prevail. Senior archaeologists must act as role models, reach out to junior professionals and impart their knowledge without reservations. The seniors must never fear the junior professionals, as the former must endeavour to be several strides ahead of the latter. If the senior archaeologists do not permit the juniors to advance, if their ideas are exploited, pirated and

plagiarised, it will then pose an abysmal situation to the profession of archaeology and its professional pride. Each generation must be connected to the other and maintain professional standards. Links in the chain must remain unbroken. If and when the chain disconnects it will only dilute the expected level of professionalism. For our progress and sustenance, we must maintain and develop professional standards, skills, ethics and humanism. If and when any one of these cornerstones is dislodged, the structure will then collapse and disintegrate.

#### *Intellectual space*

An archaeologist is a humanist who develops a philosophy of life through our prescribed profession. Thus, an archaeologist is most certainly not an individualist. Archaeology is essentially a team-based profession. We must therefore recognize that time and space in our profession must be based on a vision and philosophy. This philosophy is absorbed into our purview through an intelligent vision because we have essentially the need to create an intellectual space for ourselves. Our primary scientific and professional task is to recognize the manner in which past human beings thought and behaved in their ecological niches. Since it cannot be a fantasy or an imaginary situation, it is imperative that we read that past in an objective manner. Our intellectual space must be structured to read ancient material culture and appreciate its cognitive values. To practise this, the professional archaeologist must necessarily possess the required freedom of thought within their intellectual space.

This is augmented to a great extent by dialectics and dialogues in archaeology. This dialogue must be carried out not only among ourselves but also as a 'dialogue with the past' in order to grasp the dynamics of the 'dialectics of the past'. This is why freedom of thought becomes an essential ingredient in this process of reading the past in an objective manner. The one who seeks the truth must essentially shed various shades of biases, prejudices, fears and ignorance, was the sublime message given to humanity some 2500 years ago by Siddhartha Gautama. An archaeologist who seeks the past must therefore be free of such fetters. This is the ultimate factor that determines and defines the professional status of the archaeologist.

#### *Research space*

This particular aspect has a direct bearing on the University Departments of Archaeology, Central Cultural Fund and the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka. The research agenda is an integral component of professional archaeology. Archaeology devoid of research is unthinkable. Archaeology directors administering their respective sites must secure proper cadre positions for the research program. We must structure our agenda towards problem-oriented and issue-related archaeology and endeavour to provide the required research atmosphere.

If there are archaeology-related institutes that oppose or downplay the value of research they may want to revert to the PWD work of the colonial period. In this connection, I wish to lend a word of caution to the managers of the Central Cultural Fund (CCF). The very survival of the CCF will be undermined if you oppose or dilute the Training and Research agenda engraved in the 1980 Act of the Central Cultural Fund. We had on several occasions drawn your attention to the highly productive research centres that could be founded at each site, as we possess sufficient resources for that purpose. It is essential that we utilise the existing intellectual resources in order to facilitate the broad basing of the research infrastructure for the junior archaeological officers. In this regard, there is a large responsibility resting on the shoulders of the Directors of the CCF in making this effort a reality. While there is a mysterious process underway to isolate the archaeologist from the archaeological site, there is also a bizarre policy of undermining research at the heritage sites. We had suggested research programmes emanating from heritage sites that could ultimately provide us with the bigger picture of the regional history of the north-central

province. It is now the responsibility of the Archaeological Directors to reverse this pathetic situation at heritage sites and be research facilitators and not feudal lords within a small mud hole.

### **Archaeology and contemporary political realities**

This is an extremely complex and volatile topic. In general, most Sri Lankans hold political views and are sensitive to political ideologies. Politics is organically linked to the social, economic and religious realities of the land. Politics also has a direct bearing on the study and practice of archaeology. Since the Colonial period, the archaeological agenda of this country was determined by the political reality. This need not continue to be so. We cannot accept the long arm of the politician or the administrator to interfere with archaeological research. Archaeologists must possess an independent workspace to preserve their intellectual and professional supremacy.

Within this highly volatile political structure, archaeologists must conduct themselves as scientists. In the process of interpreting the past, that task must be executed devoid of distortions. If we, as archaeologists, consciously distort and subvert the past we have then willfully undermined our professional dignity and the right to be identified as professional archaeologists. The reality of the situation is the tremendous amount of political interference that has come to play in the field of archaeology. How do we maintain our intellectual and professional independence in this situation? Ultimately, we must decide the status quo about our professional independence.

How must the archaeologists perform their professional tasks? We cannot divorce ourselves from the social realities of Sri Lanka. While we are aware of the prevalent ethnic and racial tensions, we must also be able to either accept or negate them. Archaeologists must face and question the realities of identities and racism. The issues of racism in the North and the South are slowly pushing this country towards fascist alternatives. Distinguished humanists such as Lakshman Kadirgamar, Neelan Tiruchelvam, Rajini Thiranagama were denied the gentle breath of their valued lives by such forces of fascism. Precisely due to such reasons, we must make every effort to read the past and understand history with a balanced mind. Be it an excavation, field reconnaissance or analysis, the ensuing interpretation cannot be based on preconceived notions shaded by biases, prejudices or fears.

The archaeologist must come to terms with the multicultural and inclusive reality of this country and grasp the essentials of the diversity that prevailed in Sri Lanka in the past. At Jetavanarama, there is ample evidence to establish multicultural and multi-religious vestiges. In addition to Mahayana remains there are Hindu statues and Islamic pottery unearthed at this site including the discovery of a Nestorian cross at the Citadel of Anuradhapura. A balanced interpretation of this material is called for, while accounting for the past community as stakeholders of a pan-island culture. The prevalence of a multicultural, inclusive society as our pan-island culture in the past is one way of challenging the parochial exclusive social image projected by terrorists or by the State. We as professionals reading the past must break the shackles imposed by Orientalists who believed this island was populated by a single 'race' that professed a single belief system. Archaeological investigations carried out in the past three decades have conclusively contested these notions as invalid.

### **The Sri Lankan archaeologist and the overseas archaeologist**

Overall, it is necessary to situate the professional basis of the Sri Lankan archaeologists' vis-à-vis the overseas archaeologist. There is a slow but a definite thrust made by Western archaeologists towards South Asia. The professional body must acknowledge its line of work in Sri Lanka. Critical questions include: what is the role of overseas archaeologists in Sri Lanka? Who are their local partners? What are the modalities of monitoring their work? What are training opportunities they can provide Sri Lankan archaeologists? These are some valid questions that

must be raised in relation to overseas archaeologists. If these issues are not resolved, Sri Lankan cultural sites may face the same situation as Pakistan (Saeed, 2022), an international ‘killing field for archaeology’. This is more a reason why the heritage sites coming under the purview of the CCF must be transformed into high-profile research sites. For this purpose, young archaeologists must develop state-of-the-art cutting-edge research techniques and gain proficiency in international languages. Parallel to this, they must also develop skills in the Classical South Asian languages.

Today archaeology is recognized as a skill-based profession. Dissemination of skills has to be carried out through awareness programmes and discourses. A major time investment by the senior archaeologists as facilitators are now called for. If this is carried out with all earnestness, there is a possible chance of averting the anarchy that is slowly but surely seeping into the profession of archaeology. The need to develop a professional platform regaining the next generation of archaeologists must be understood in the above context.

### **Mission Statement to the Next Generation of Archaeologists**

“The science of archaeology is problem-oriented and issue-related. It is essentially a multi-disciplinary study investigating, documenting, interpreting and presenting human expressions, experiences and behaviour patterns of the past to its rightful inheritors, the next generation. The archaeologist investigating the past is a scientist who is objective, unbiased and unprejudiced. Above all, an archaeologist is a humanist and social activist who does not fear the past or compromises the future” [Sudharshan Seneviratne]

*This article stems from the speech delivered on September 1, 2005 at Abhayagiriya to the Archaeology Graduates Association of the Central Cultural Fund celebrating the launching of their research journal, Welipila.*

### **References**

- Andrew Robinson, W. (2023). Rabindranath Tagore. In *Encyclopedia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rabindranath-Tagore>
- Kearney, R. N. (1983). The political party system in Sri Lanka. *Political Science Quarterly*, 98(1), 17–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2150202>
- Kohl, P. L. (1998). Nationalism and Archaeology: On the constructions of nations and the reconstructions of the remote past. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27(1), 223–246. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.27.1.223>
- Ojala, C.-G. (2019). Discussion: Colonialism past and present archaeological engagements and entanglements. In *The Sound of Silence* (pp. 182–201). Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1850hr9.12>
- Perry, S. (2014). Professionalization: Archaeology as an “expert” knowledge. In *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology* (pp. 6150–6159). Springer New York. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-0465-2\\_1002](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-0465-2_1002)
- Saeed, T. (2022). Cultural heritage of Pakistan: Conservation problems and techniques for its protection. *The Nucleus*, 59(1), 25–30. <http://thenucleuspak.org.pk/index.php/Nucleus/article/view/1241>
- Sri Lankan Archaeology acts and ordinances*. (n.d.). Archaeology.lk. Retrieved August 20, 2023, from <https://www.archaeology.lk/sri-lankan-archaeology-acts-and-ordinances/>
- Sutton, M. Q. (2012). *Archaeology: The Science of the Human Past*. Pearson.
- Encyclopedia Britannica. (2023). Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ananda-Kentish-Coomaraswamy>