Anuradhapura: City, Monastery and Long-Duration Urbanism

Chronology, low-density urban form, irrigation, religious institutions and Indian Ocean connections

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Direct answer. Anuradhapura was not simply a compact royal capital surrounded by monuments. Excavation and landscape survey reveal a long sequence from early settlement through a large, low-density city whose citadel, reservoirs, monasteries, villages and productive hinterland formed an integrated system. Chronicles illuminate royal and Buddhist memory, but stratigraphy, radiocarbon dating, ceramics, inscriptions and regional survey provide the independent framework for its chronology.

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1 Scope and evidence

This review integrates stratigraphic excavation, radiocarbon chronology, ceramics, inscriptions, landscape survey, hydraulic features, architectural study and chronicles. Archaeological context is used as the chronological control, while texts are evaluated by genre and date.

2 Formation and chronological sequence

Deep citadel deposits document change from Early Iron Age settlement to urban forms. Published context matrices, ceramic classifications and radiocarbon series are more reliable than assigning isolated artefacts to named reigns.

3 Urban morphology

The citadel formed only one element within a dispersed landscape of reservoirs, monasteries, settlements and fields. Low-density urbanism explains the functional integration of these spaces without assuming continuous dense occupation.

4 Monastic political economy

Large monasteries accumulated patronage, storage and land and mediated pilgrimage, learning and welfare. Landscape survey suggests parallel religious and secular settlement hierarchies, supporting a heterarchical interpretation.

5 Hydraulic infrastructure

Reservoirs and canals reduced dry-season risk and sustained rice cultivation, urban residents and institutions. Construction was cumulative and operation depended on recurring maintenance; hydraulic scale alone does not demonstrate centralised control in every period.

6 Writing, trade and connectivity

Early inscriptions and imported materials place Anuradhapura within South Asian and Indian Ocean networks. Claims for the earliest Brahmi require transparent stratigraphy and dating, while imported artefacts cannot be equated automatically with migrant communities.

7 Textual history and transformation

Chronicles provide indispensable evidence for remembered kingship and Buddhism but are not contemporary annals for the whole sequence. The later contraction of the urban landscape is better modelled as redistribution and institutional change than total societal disappearance.

8 Research and conservation priorities

Priorities include open publication of legacy excavations, Bayesian reassessment of dates, residue and materials analysis, remote sensing of the hinterland, and heritage planning that treats the archaeological city as a living sacred landscape.

9 Evidence assessment

Strong	Anuradhapura developed into a long-lived, low-density urban and religious centre integrated with monasteries, reservoirs and a productive hinterland.
Probable	Courtly, monastic and rural institutions formed overlapping hierarchies whose cooperation sustained the city.
Contested	The precise beginning of Brahmi, population estimates, phase-by-phase city boundaries and correlations with individual rulers.
Unsupported	A single founding event, a uniformly dense urban core, or simple archaeological confirmation of every chronicle episode.

10 Conclusion

Anuradhapura's significance lies in duration and integration. Its citadel, great monasteries, reservoirs, villages and routes formed a changing urban landscape for more than a millennium. Archaeology supplies the chronology and spatial evidence; inscriptions and chronicles deepen interpretation when their contexts and purposes remain visible.

References

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This paper is an evidence review for public scholarship.

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