# E-Book

HIGN



Fa-shien cave (site code YF), the largest known cave in Sri Lanka, is situated at **80°12′55″E by 6°38′55″N** in **Yatagampitiya village** near **Bulathsinhala** in **Kalutara District**. It is popularly known as Fa-shien cave because of the popular belief that the famous Chinese Buddhist monk **Fa-shien** had stayed in the cave for a while on his pilgrimage to **Adam's Peak** (Wijayapala 1997).

It is a complex of interconnected rockshelters, eroded into an almost vertical, southwest-facing cliff in **gneiss of the Highland Complex** (Cooray 1984). The humus-stained cliff that hosts the rockshelters drops from a forested summit to the banks of a small stream (Figure 1).

This shelter faces **northeast** and is easily accessed via a stone path. The mouth has a width of ca. **30 m** and an average height above the floor of **20 m**. The interior is ca. **10 m deep** and slopes down from west to east. The site was first examined by **S.U. Deraniyagala** in 1968 before its excavation over several seasons between **1986 and 1988** by W.H. Wijeyapala (1997).

Two areas of the cave, labelled A and B, were probed with a view to understanding the cultural sequence of the cave (Deraniyagala 1992).

**Area A**, located in the middle of the main chamber, used to be a higher and extensive occupation deposit. Wijeyapala (1997) observed a stained line on the cave walls, approximately 3 m above the present floor, which he identified with the original floor of the shelter, before the Buddhist occupants levelled the deposit to transform it into a place of pilgrimage.

A considerable amount of deposit appears to have dumped at the front of the shelter so as to build up the entrance. Area A currently comprises roof-fall with vestiges of prehistoric occupation within it at ca. 6.2m below the surface.

**Area B** is located approximately 20 m east of the main chamber. It was excavated according to a 2 × 7 m grid whose one-metre squares were labelled **K6, K7, M6, M7, M8, M9, N5, N6, N7, N8, O6, and O7**. The excavation was conducted stratigraphically down to bedrock and yielded a sequence from ca. **38,000 to 5400 years ago**, including reports of **Sri Lanka's oldest human burial** and **microliths**.

# Stratigraphy and Radiocarbon Dating

(Deraniyagala 1992; Wijeyapala 1997). The top layer 2 occurred as due to levelling of the floor. Beneath it, Layer 2 occurred as light brown grey silty sand, approximately 50 cm thick, with a high density of cultural material and the fractional remains of two interred individuals.

The layer is dated by a radiocarbon determination on charcoal to ca. 5400 cal BP (Table 1).

The next layer down, Layer 3, is light brown, loose sandy silt which is very rich in cultural material. Two radiocarbon dates have been secured on charcoal — ca. 7700 cal BP and 7900 cal BP.

## The Dominant Occupation

The dominant occupation deposit at the site occurred in **Layer 4**, comprising dark brown silty sand of medium compactness, approx. **25 cm thick**, with a high density of occupation debris (Wijeyapala 1997). The contents included:

- A partial human interment in the lower horizon without red ochre
- A grindstone smeared with red ochre
- Seven post holes

The three radiocarbon dates (on charcoal) calibrate to between approx. **30,000 and 38,000 BP**.



## **Excavation Details**

The site is represented by **Layer 5**, which is a moderately loose sandy silt deposit.

#### **Excavation:**

(a) The main Late Pleistocene – Early Holocene habitation deposits previously excavated by Dr.
Wijepala.

(b) Pit fill **52 F to 6 F** capped by juxtaposed hearth deposit.

(c) Lenses of charcoal, small shells, and bone fragments.

(d) Charred *Canarium zeylanicum* nuts from the main occupation deposit.

(e) An ash-rich layer (above trawler tio marks) — an occupation deposit.



# **Cultural Material & Dating**

The deposits ranged from dark brown to yellow in colouration. They are very rich in cultural material, including:

- Faunal remains
- Stone artefacts
- Burnt shell

These were dated on charcoal to around 38,000 BP, but possibly in excess of 40,000 BP.

### Historical Summary

Fa-shien cave represents habitation during:

- The Late Pleistocene (prior to the Last Glacial Maximum LGM)
- The early Holocene

However, it lacks any dated evidence of occupation between the LGM and early Holocene.

## Fa-Hien Cave Burials and Human Remains

Excavations revealed burial areas **smeared with red ochre** and traces of **five postholes**. Four individual burials were identified by **K.A.R. Kennedy** from the human remains excavated by **Wijeyapala** at the site.

# The Deepest Burials:

- Fa Hien 4 and Fa Hien 3:
  - Described as **commingled remains of secondary burials**.
  - Dated to 38,000 years ago (cal.)

#### Fa Hien 1:

- Another commingled burial containing:
  - Two infants
  - One child
  - One sub-adult
  - One female adult
- Only postcranial material found: **seven cervical vertebrae** of the child
  - Suggested burial of head with neck attached

# • Fa-shien 2:

• Contained **fragmentary skull and teeth** of a child

Notable anatomical observation: **severe wear on** adult's teeth

#### **Mortuary Practice Insight:**

Early Sri Lankan human remains suggest a tendency to bury the head or parts of the skull.

## Excavation of 2009

The limited excavation was conducted in **Area B** as part of the Department's programme on **palaeoclimatic change and human adaptation**, in collaboration with **Stirling University in the U.K.** The excavation was directed by the author, and the period spent in the field **lasted from 2 March to 12 April 2005**.

#### Excavation Insights - 2009

The 2009 excavation focused on the eastern section of the previously excavated area, as it contained deposits from all of the layers recognized during the 1986 excavations.

Careful cleaning of the exposed 3 metre reveals a complex stratigraphy. This section provides an intricate example of prehistoric cave stratigraphy in Sri Lanka including roof fall and pit outlines as well as the sedimentary history of the deposits.

**Over 95 discrete contexts** were recognized along the section in the 2009 excavations.

# Insights from the 1986 Excavation

Based on the 1986 excavation, the contexts were related to the five layers recognized by Wijeyapala. This year's reexcavation of the previous trench revealed that what was previously interpreted as bedrock comprised occupation deposits reaching at least 50–60 cm underneath the lowest levels of the previous excavation.

A 5–8 cm thick habitation layer is present within this earlier rockshelter fill, reflecting human use in times perhaps as early as 40,000–45,000 years ago or beyond, thus making Fahien-lena one of the earliest sites of modern human settlement on the route of late Pleistocene human dispersal to South–Southeast Asia and Australasia (Oppenheimer 2003; Mellars 2007).

Exotic items of marine origin and microliths were found in these earlier layers, reflecting behavioural modernity in humans in southwestern Sri Lanka during the Late Pleistocene.

In a remarkable departure from other Late Pleistocene rockshelters in southwestern Sri Lanka (e.g. Kithulgala Belilena, Batadomba-lena).



