

An archaeological study of Snake sculpture of ancient Sri Lanka

Ven. Uduwila Uparathana

Introduction

Amongst the faiths or beliefs that had been practised in pre-Buddhist Sri Lankans, the snake faith took a prominent place. The great chronicle Mahavamsa describes the arrival of the Buddha to Lanka for the second occasion, by an artistic presentation of has a dispute between Snakes had been resolved by the Buddha at Nagadeepa of Sri Lanka.¹ At this historic accession, the Snakes took the refuge of "*Thisarana*" Ancient literature too, describes of the snakes being taken towards "*Thisarana*"² According to Legends, Kelaniya stupa had been erected in memory of Buddhas visit, by a king of the Snake or (*Naga*)³ Taking into consideration the situation in Sri Lanka before arrival of Buddhism, and of the manner in which Buddhism had been prevailing and practised in neighboring India, it is not surprising to note, the use of snake sculpture in artistic images of Sri Lanka.

Details

The oldest sculpture of Sri Lanka is the gateway sculpture. It could be noted that, for the first time the snake image had been embodied in gateway sculptures during the period 2 to 4 centuries A.D. The gateways of all the four directions of Stupas, namely, Mihintalaya Dagaba, Kantaka chaitiya, Southern Stupa (dakkina chetiya) of Anuradhapura, Ruwanweliseya, Mirisawetiya, Abhayagiriya and Jethavanarama, depicts the Indian sculpture art of Amarawathi and Nagarjun conda. These artistic images

are similar to those images of the above mentioned stupas. It seems that, when considering gateway sculpture, as the oldest, the snake symbol had got into the roots of the sculpture art of Sri Lanka. The purpose for which the gateway has been built, would decide as to how the sculpture with the snake symbol should be carved on the rock guard stones on both sides of the gateway⁴ Most of these carvings of the snake symbol which resemble the human features as well are very much closer to "Amarawathi region", Snake symbols, and there seems a close relationship with them. These carvings of the snake picture, created as semi carving sculptures, depict, three, five or seven heads snakes and humanly snakes and female snakes. What idea and purpose had been, behind these creations of artistic expressions is a matter to research and examine. The sculpture of Kantaka stupa which relates to Indian, Sanchi and Buddha gaya traditions, would mean that, the snake symbol being identical in both places, the same concept may have been practised by Buddhists of Sri Lanka as well as India. A.K. Coomaraswami expresses the thinking that, the sculpture carvings of the picture of snakes that had been carved very artistically with a style on both sides of the Eastern gateway of Kantaka Chaitiya, is typically the same artistic style with that of the carvings of, Amarawathi art.⁵ These practices of sculpture of snake carvings are also considered by some experts in the research, as architectural expressions of how the pre-Buddhist era people had faith in various objects such as, age old teas, snakes and deities as commonly venerated and offered poojas.⁶ Originally, the gateways had been used as a venerable object, is the beliefs and the manner in which the pillars of both sides of gateways, depicts the snake images, does not agree with each other! Although the snake was a venerated object and an asset, it had been related or entangled with Buddhism, as a guardian. According to Buddhist literature, Snake is the guardian of Buddhist venerated objects and assets. The Altar is a

supporting unit of a sacred offering of Amisa Pooja. Therefore, to consider, the pillars on both sides of the altar with decorated artistic sculpture, carvings of the snake, as providing security for the altar, are very much appropriate.

The next event, where we come across artifacts with snake sculptures, are in Stupa tombs, with sacred relics deposited and which belongs to 4th century AD. The researcher Mr. Hocket, who engaged in the research of relics wombs of ancient Sri Lanka, described and have notes of what he had discovered, three Amarawathi Marble carving with the symbol of the snake like picture at a hole in Sigiri dagaba, womb of relics. The purpose and meaning of which is to say that, it provides security for the relics that had deposited in it. Another discovery of snake picture carvings have been found at "Thopawewa Stupa" womb of the relics; the casket which had been divided into several sections, had been deposited with snake pictures in every section, and it had been located safely, at the bottom of the "Meru gala. Mr. Bell discusses that, the world of the Snake, being situated below the "*Maha Meru*", these snake pictures symbolizes the World of *Naga* (Snakes)⁷ There is another opinion as to why these pictures of the snake had been deposited within the womb of the relics. But the opinion that, it had provided security for the relics is considered as correct and appropriate.

During the Polonnaruwa era, the practice of depositing Snake pictures in Stupa wombs of the relics had been very popular with small scale snake sculptures. There had discovered 36, thirty six snake pictures at the "Bassmavasesa Stupa" of Polonnaruwa. One with a pair of snake made of bronze, and other large scale picture depicting a pair of snakes.⁸ Ven. Kamburupitiye Wanarathana thera describes it as a snake family, and does not reveal of the symbolic expressions of the bronze images of snakes. But he discusses further and, points out

opinion that, it represent of a world called the “under grounder world”⁹ The “pabaluvehara” ruins provide, snake pictures of far importance than all the other. On the rock of the stupa one snake picture, a picture of the Buddha with the picture carving and giving shelter by the snake “Muchalindas” head. Another snake image, picture depicting the snake suppression at Urawillawa, in an alms bowl were amongst the ruins of pabalu vehara. In a small stupa at “Padaviya”, within its womb of relics, a creation of a snake picture had been discovered. Also a picture of a snake with its head in fall spread was discovered. This is thought to be of 10th century AD. As described by D.T. Devendra, these creations are a mode of showing the meanings of Guard stones of ancient periods. The sculpture of the snake figure that has been discussed by Ven. Kamburupitiye Vanarathana thero at ‘pabalu vehera’ and the sculpture discussed by D.T. Devedra at the stupa in padaviya, has some link and are similar, it is important to note. In Sri Lanka’s Buddhist Architecture, encircling of stupa takes a prominence, and it has emerged from the western Indian Mahayana tradition of stupa architecture to provide satiety and security for the sacred relics of the Buddha. Mahavamsa describes it as a creation of the world of the snakes.¹⁰ It is a solid fact, there had been a link of the snake and veneration and guarding the sacred relied. The writera of ‘thupavamsa’ had made it a point to name the chaitya of the snake world as ‘Datughara’ the Mahavamsa writer too, describes of a stupa that, carrying sacred relics by two snakes, and had made a safe places for it. The fires example of a circular house encircling the stupa of Bharahut. Facts have been discovered, to the effect that, in order to protect a stupa from natural forces, and also to provide facilities to the people who come to venerate and offer poojas, a house had been erected covering the stupa. The roof of the house must have been designed and erected to suit the style and size of the stupa. It had generally taken the circular of semi-

circular shape roof. The concept of snake had been a part of these creations, and that is the important point of this discussion. A special component of guard stone in the temples and viharas of Sri Lanka had also been a conventional part the stupas. At both these architectural creations of guard stones carrying of the snake symbols have been a notable phenomenon. Thiriyaya, Polonnaruwa and Medirigiriya the oldest circular houses had been decorated with guard stones with snake symbol carving as a common item of the creations.

Snake carrying had received had received prominence in the construction of encircling houses of stupas and its interior decorations and finishing touches, in Indian history. Even in Sri Lanka the picture of the snake king (*Na Raja*) had been used in most of the historical construction of cultural and religious building. The Mahavamsa describes of by the snakes at these stupas with image houses.¹¹

At the beginning the snake symbol sculpture carrying are had been used for the creation of stupa wombs and gateways of the stupa premises, but latterly the art of caring snake pictures had got into creations of guard stones as well. Mr. P.H.Prematilaka is of the opinion that, snake sculpture carving of gateways, which took the shape and style of human, must have been extended on to guard stone carvings as well.¹² Hovewver originally the guard stone had decorated with the complete or full pot and the picture of the ‘Bahirava’ (the horde of the hand) During 5th and 6th century AD. The guard stone decorations had been effected with snake and Bahirava carvings. After the 10th century AD; the guard stone with snake sculpture, carvings had been popuar.¹³ The pot in its complete form, that had decorated the guard stone with the expectation it being a symbol of prosperity, the purpose for which the snake symbol had been used, is somewhat of a piglet! The ‘*nagaraja*’ stone, that has been discovered from

ruwanveli stupa premises, decorated with seven snake heads in full bloom, and the 'Naga rupa' guard stone from 'Rathna Prasdaya' (Ornaments) decorated with Jewelleries, are of special interest and importance, Abayagiri stupa which was owned by Mahayanians, provides notice boards made of one single rock, and carried with seven snake pictures on it. These snake pictures also relate to the snake pictures of the ancient times. A special feature of which is that, the snake head takes the shape of a flat position. D.T Devendra who and contents and provide exclamations on guard stone and more specifically the sculpture, carvings on it, the full of illustrating water, the *bahirawa* picture with the stomach of a half pot shape, further proves the illustration of water¹⁵ a retracts the snake which has connection with water had been interconnected with the *Bahirava* picture, to illustrating the same impressed of the water resource. Accordingly, the water resource, illustrated on the guard stone decorations of ancient times, demonstrates the symbol of prosperity. Therefore the snake sculpture too, should be regarded as a symbol of prosperity. A civilization took the snake symbol to demonstrate prosperity, nevertheless, it embodied with that of Buddhism, as a symbol of security and safety as proved by many facts. Fertility is a matter of wealth and resources. *Bahirava* is also connected with wealth. He provides protection for the wealth of the wealthy people. Some of the snake pictures are decorated with jewelry. The purpose of wearing jewelry is to display the ownership of wealth. The snake is also connected with wealth, It is mentioned in ancestral stories, how the ancient Indians had made and earned wealth by demonstrating snake dances.¹⁶ Ancient stories also describe of how prince 'Bosath' had been greedy of becoming the king of the snake word and achieved it. According to ancient Buddhist stories the world of the snakes (*Naa Lowa*) there are plenty of luxuries and wealth. The 'Ratana Sala,' which is practiced by Buddhists, to invoke

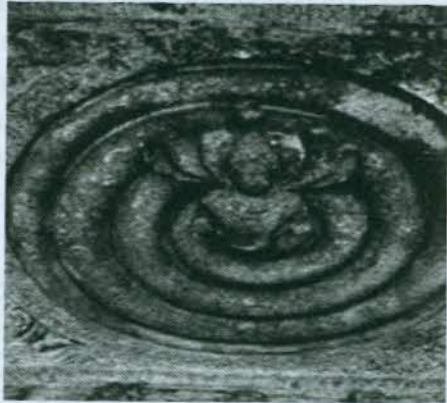
protection during day and night, gives a warning to 'Bhuttas' (evil forces) to refrain from doing. This is believed in this sutta that, there appear to have wealth within the Naa Lowa, but Lord Buddha is a greater wealth than¹⁷ the sutta 'Nidhikanda' it is mentioned that the wealth deposited by human robed or taken back by the Nagas, the snakes. But the sacred wealth deposited at stupas cannot be robed of taken by any force. These stories of the ancient times, disposes the fact of the passion of snakes for wealth. Therefore, the guard sculpture decorations of the picture of snakes, illustrates protection and security, is better to be noted. The snake symbol does not appear on auspicious carried objects and rock notice boards etc., is neither used as an auspicious sign in the root of the Buddha images. Hence, the symbol of the snake must not be taken as an auspicious, symbol.

Conclusion

The snake image which provided protection to Buddhist places of worship, with a religious background had been, also used for many other external purposes too. Ancient irrigation systems provide situations where the snake images had been used illustrate protection and also to the symbol is rain. The kovil by the side of minneriya Lake has been given protection by snake pictures. Abhaya Lake, Tisa Lake and many other of ancient times, these snake images and carvings had been displayed on the banks or the lakes, it has been discussed earlier that, snakes and water had been linked in ancient literature of importance. This had been a common practice of the writers of the ancient contemporary society. The Indian mess too, had a similar belief that snakes and water had a close link between them.



The guard stone with six headed snake at Rathnaprasadaya



The Snake figure at Abhayagiriya



The six headed snake at Abhayagiriya Stupa

End Notes

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5. Coomaraswamy, A.K., History of Indian and Indonesian Art, 1965. Dover Publication, Inc, New York.p. 161.
6. Senarath Paranavithana, 1963.p. 17.
7. Ibid, p.19.
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11. Ibid, (ch). 31.
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13. Devendra, D.T. Moonstone and Other Assays, 1970, M.D. Gunasena and Company, Colombo, p. 18.
14. Jathaka book, 1961, Bhuridattha jathakaya, p. 1446.
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16. Kuddhaka Nikaya, Rthanasuttha, A.P. De Soysa Translation, 1956, Dharmasamaya Publication, Colombo, p. 4.

