

## Timber Structures as Identified in the Early Epigraphs from Sri Lanka

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Judging by the number of early Brahmi cave inscriptions that are engraved under the drip-ledges of the brow of the caves, it can be very well proved that there had been a distinctive tradition among the people of Sri Lanka to donate shelters to the Buddhist *sangha*. These inscriptions sometimes for to professions and trades of those practitioners who had the wealth or the strength to provide places of residence to the *sangha* and display their concern in supplying dwellings that fitted the aspirations of the *sangha*.

The practice of donating dwellings such as caves by the kings and the people can be ascribed to a date after the introduction of Buddhism to the island by Thera Mahinda in the third century B. C. *Mahavamsa*, the chronicle explains how on the fourth day after Thera Mahinda's arrival in Anuradhapura, King Devanampiya Tissa (250-21-B.C.) commenced the work of building edifices as residences for the *sangha* in the Maha Megha Vana, the royal park. (*Mahavamsa*, Geiger tr. p. 99) There had been two types of dwellings as recorded by the chronicles.

1. The *aramas* in and around the city
2. The *avasas* in secluded places.

A monastic residence situated in a park or a grove was called an *arama*. The word *arama* denoted a pleasure

garden, situated not too near and not too far off from a city and owned by a king or a wealthy citizen. There is evidence in the chronicles that the monastic residences founded in the parks and groves in and around Anuradhapura city were called *aramas*. The first of its kind was established by Devanampiyatissa in the Maha Megha Vana and was known as Tissarama. The permanent buildings put up for the benefit of the *sangha* and for the performance of the religious acts such as the *uposatha kamma* or the ceremony of reciting *patimokkha* were regarded as an entire unit under the name of *arama*. In the second century inscriptions we find the term *vihara* being used for the entire residential complex of the *sangha* with its ecclesiastical buildings such as *cetiya*, *uposathaghara* and so forth. (M. Dias, Ph. D. thesis, in print)

An *avasa* was a temporary set-up limited strictly to the three months of the rainy season and could have been dismantled thereafter. The rock-cells or caves of the *guha* type were *avasas* and were temporary abodes put up for the rainy season. The inscriptions engraved in nearly 1200 caves in various parts of the island describe the caves as *lenas* meaning private abodes. It is equivalent to Skt. *layana* derived from the root *li*. A natural rock-cavern protected by a wall and a lean-to roof

would have been made fit for the *sangha* to live during the rainy season. The lean-to roof, designed as a shelter from the wind and the rain, most probably would have been a timber structure of rafters and wall-plates. (M. Dias, Ph. D. thesis, in print)

At the time these caves were being established in secluded places, large edifices mainly of wooden construction were being built in monastic residences at the capital city of Anuradhapura. (Paranavitana, S. 1970. p. CXXII). It appears that these structures have left no traces except for their stone-foundations for the reason that they, like the buildings of a similar character in contemporary India were of wood.

There were two types of buildings.

1. Buildings required by the members of the *sangha* for residence and for the performance of the acts of the rules of the Order.

2. Buildings required for popular cult rituals adopted by the *sangha* to be performed in collaboration with the laity.

#### Prasadas

The first category of buildings included the residences of the *sangha* in the *aramas*, usually referred to as *prasadas*. The buildings raised as residences for the eminent monks were distinguished by the name *pasada* in the inscriptions. It was equivalent to Skt. *prasada* and Pali *pasada* and later became *pahata*. *Parivena* had the meaning of a monastic residence, assigned to a particular *thera*. These two types of residences could be identified in the following inscription.

.....*Naka teraha parivaniya pahatahi dini*

..... given to the mansion which is the residence of the Elder

Naga (Paranavitana, S. Inscriptions of Ceylon, Vol. II, Part II. p. 210. 85) Here again, it should be noted that this term was applicable even to the abodes of royalty and the nobility. The places meant for the performance of the acts of the Order such as the *Uposathagaras*, were known as *pasadas* as well. *Lohapasada*, built by king Dutthagamini (161-137 B. C.) was the Uposathahouse of the *Maha Vihara*. (Mahavamsa Geiger tr. Chapter XVII, V).

..... *Me vavi dine pana lohovahatehi bada gabehi labiti* .

The document by which this tank has been granted has been deposited to the Treasury vault of the Lohapasada.<sup>2</sup>

An elaborate description is given in the *Mahavamsa* on the construction of the *Lohapasada* by king Dutthagamini. One whole chapter is dedicated to the construction of the *Lohapasada* and had been titled, "The consecrating of the *Lohapasada*". (*Mahavamsa*, Geiger tr. ch. XXVII) The construction of this edifice was designed and the drawings were made on the instructions of the king. The chronicle continues thus:

"When the king full of joy saw it he went to the splendid *aramu* and caused the *Lohapasada* to be built after the drawing.

.....The *pasada* was four-sided (measuring) on each side a hundred cubits, and even so much in height. In this most beautiful of places there were nine storeys and in each storey a hundred window chambers...

Among the edifices built by king Dutthagamini, *Lohapasada* is said to have been a nine storeyed structure built for the benefit of the *sangha*. *Lohapasada* or the brazen palace as it was known for its roof of copper tiles flourished as a religious establishment

with royal patronage for a long time to come. The description given in the chronicle discloses a storeyed construction of several hundreds of chambers. The large number of pillars now remaining at the site and speak of a building of such magnitude, and the account given in the chronicle gives infers that the *pasada* was a timber structure. This conclusion finds support in an account found in the *Mahavamsa* saying that the *Lohapasada* was burnt down during the reign of king Saddhatissa, younger brother of Duthagamani and that it was rebuilt by the same king with seven storeys.

The second category of buildings consisted of *tuba (stupa)*, *cetiya gaha (cetiya ghara)*, *bojanahala (bojanasala)*, *asanahala (asanasala)*, *catusala (catussala)* and so forth. Remains of brick-stupas, erected in most parts of the country bear witness to this main architectural feature of the Anuradhapura period which may have been introduced with Buddhism. As the *stupa*, with Buddhism was introduced from North India, it is reasonable to assume that the oldest relic-shrines of Sri Lanka were similar to those of the early Buddhist period in India. (Paranavitana, 1946, p. 12).

In view of the large-scale restorations and repairs carried out on the *stupas* throughout a period of two thousand years by various kings, it is almost impossible to visualize the nuclei of a *stupa* of the early Anuradhapura period. However, it is not difficult to reconstruct some of the architectural features of a *stupa*, with the inscriptional evidence. Inscriptions do contain references to some of the architectural features of the ancient *stupas* in the island.

The earliest inscriptional evidence

of an existing *stupa* comes from a desolate place known as Rajagala which now lies in the wilderness. From the statements found in the inscription it is obvious that there had been a *stupa* enshrining the relics of Thera Mahinda and Thera Itthiya, who had come to the island as the missionaries of the Buddhist Faith. The inscription records in clear Brahmi characters:

*Ye imadipa patamaya idiya agatana Idika teraha Mahinda teraha tube.*

This is the *stupa* of the elder Idika and the elder Mahinda, who came to the Island by its foremost good fortune. (Paranavitana, 1983, No. 468)

This *stupa* would have been erected soon after the demise of the two arahats enshrining their relics during the reign of King Uttiya (207-197 B. C.) who was the younger brother of King Devanampiyatissa and the reigning king at the time.

The *stupas* dating from the third century B. C. are not preserved in their original form but can be studied from the various descriptions given in the chronicles. The gold reliquaries serving as miniature *stupas* deposited in the relic chambers of the *stupas* are of interest in reconstructing the shape of the early *stupas* in Sri Lanka. Two such reliquaries, found in *stupas* at Minhintale and at Deliwala shed light on the superstructure of the early *stupas*.

S. Paranavitana's description of the inherited form of a *stupa* is as follows:

"Encircling the *stupa* is a second processional path enclosed by a massive balustrade (*vedika*). The summit of the dome is surmounted by a pedestal (*harmika*), surrounded by a stone railing, from which rose a stone shaft supporting a stone umbrella (*chattra*) or a series of umbrellas (*chattravali*). The outer balustrade of stone had four

entrances at which were ornamental gateways (*toranas*), subsequently added, (Paranavitana, 1946, p.13)

#### **Timber Railings on the Stupas:**

References in the chronicles and the inscriptions testify to the existence of railings on the base of the dome and the summit of the *stupa*. This leads to the investigation of how the railings came to be constructed on the *stupas*. According to the *Mahavamsa* the terraces of the *stupas* had been, originally, built with brick and were faced with white limestone. At the top of the facing of the lowest terrace of Ruvanveli Seya there had been a band right round with a railing pattern. The topmost terrace of this *stupa* had heads and fore-parts of kneeling elephants 10 or 12 in. from the face of the wall. There had been one hundred and thirty three in number and were placed at regular intervals of about 6 ft. 3 in. from centre to centre. (J. G. Smither, p. 27)

This architectural feature of the Ruvanveli Seya is referred to in the *Mahavamsa*. King Mahanaga (573-575 A. D) is said to have made the *hatthi-vedi* or the elephant-railing of the three great *stupas* of Anuradhapura (*Mahavamsa*, XLI, 95). Paranavitana conjectures that the elephant heads were placed on wooden posts which could have been those of a railing.

There is evidence to show that there was a railing on the topmost terrace of the Ruvanveli Seya as well. According to the *Mahavamsa* King Bhatika Abhaya (19-9 B. C.) is said to have constructed two *vedikas* or railings for the *stupa*, and the *Vamsatthappakasini*, the commentary to the *Mahavamsa* names the two railings as *muddha-vedika* and *kucchi-vedika* (p. 666). In the canonical Pali literature and in the early Brahmi inscriptions of India *vedi* or

*vedika* denoted a railing. *Muddha* means 'head' or 'top' and, the two words, '*muddha*' and '*vedi*', coined together as a compound would mean 'top railing'. At the great *stupa* of Sanchi there was a railing on the summit enclosing the *harmika* (Sir John Marshall, *Guide to Sanchi*, p 33).

It has been observed that the term *kucchi-vedika* was used for a railing which had some relation to the base of the dome. At the *stupa* of Sanchi there had been a railing encompassing the terrace and in the bas-relief representing *stupas* found at Sanchi and Bharhut, a railing is shown in precisely the same position. The conclusion reached was that a wooden railing existed in ancient times at the corresponding position of the Ruvanveli Seya and possibly of other ancient *stupas* as well (Paranavitana, 1946, pp. 18-19). Looking more closely at these architectural features of a *stupa* known as *muddha-vedika* and *kucchi-vedika*, similarities with the type of the ancient *stupas* in India becomes quite apparent.

Paranavitana, when writing about the superstructure of a *stupa* conjectures that the *muddha-vedika* and *kucchi-vedika* were railings made of wood. He had come to this conclusion after careful consideration of the references found in the chronicles.

"Amanda-Gamani Abhaya (circa 78-89) had two railings constructed at the same shrine and one of these was called the *muddha-vedi*. The earlier railing constructed by Bhatika Abhaya must have decayed when Amanda-Gamani replaced it with another, less than fifty years later. This clearly shows that the railing on the summit, like those lower down was of wood, a conclusion which, as we have seen, accounts for the disappearance of the railings mentioned in

the chronicles. (Paranavitana, 1946, p. 33)

Deliberating on *muddha-vedikas* in his later writings on a second century Brahmi inscription, Paranavitana confirms that *muddha-vedika*, described in the chronicle was actually a railing on the summit of a *stupa* and that it was a wooden construction. The inscription as read by Paranavitana is as follows:

1. (*Siddham Maha*) *raja Vahabaha ma (ha)-rati (ya Cula-Rohana)-bojika-amatiya Honayaha pu.*
2. *-(ta) (amati De) va Nakaya paji (naka) ra bujamini ..... (kani) (maha)-tube karavaya raja Vahabayaha.*
3. *aracaya Pa(ha)ni(ya)-ketahi .....kara-viharaahi mahatubahi dine*
4. *vape-de-dake (hi) ..... ha ka ..... KA kuba ..... kubara KA4 Karahenaya KA2 Ba (ma)-*
5. *navilahi KA3 Mahacapahaniya (hi) ..... KA Kiridivataya KA2 Pahanavila-*
6. *-tahi kiri (1) Me (do-vi) siti kiriyakahi ..... mahatubahi dakaraniya cata-mudaveti.*
7. *-yahi havajara tini-kala tela makanake utirika ati hitu tubahi jina-padisatari-*
8. *-ya daja-aruvanake ca tubahi kama karana divasa hamanana ataya bata hada (raka)-*
9. *hata dina Kolahobakahi dokarihake KA 2.*

Translation:

Success - (The Minister De) va Naga, son of Honaya, (the Deputy Governor of Rohana and the Chief territorial Officer) - a Minister of the great King Vasabha, while administering the Eastern Coast, caused to be built the

great *stupa* of ..... and having informed King Vasabha, gave to the great *stupa* of ..... *kara* monastery ..... in the field of *Pahaniya* ..... (ploughed for) sowing during the two rainy seasons..... a field of a *karisa* ..... four *karisas* of fields in ..... two *karisas* in *karahenaya*, three *karisas* in *Bamanavila* ..... in *Mahacapahaniya* ..... *akarisa* ..... two *karisas* in *Kiridivata*, a *karisa* in *Pahanavilata* ..... of these twenty-two *karisas* ..... for the purpose of smearing with oil, once every three years the water spout and the railing at the summit of the great *stupa*; and, if there be any residue, for the spreading (of carpets) of antelope skins and the raising of banners at the *stupa*, The two *karisas*, at *Kolahobaka* are granted for the maintenance of meals for the monks on the days when ceremonies are performed at the *stupa*. (Paranavitana, 1983, No. 48).

Here again, it is quite significant that greater emphasis is laid by the kings and the nobles on preserving the main features of the *stupas* such as railings, at the summit of the *stupas*, the *chatras* and so forth. As soon as the *stupa* was built by the Minister Deva Naga in the *monastery* his first task was to inform King Vasabha and to bestow the income of certain fields for the maintenance of the newly built *stupa* at the *vihara*. The main purpose of the grant was to provide for the smearing with oil of the railing at the summit of the *stupa*, and the *chatra*. Paranavitana observes thus;

"This railing was presumably of wood and the application of oil on it once in three years was a preservative measure. The particular oil made use of for this purpose must have been a wood

preservative” (Paranavitana, 1983, p. 74).

It appears that the donations were made in order to safeguard the timber railing from deterioration. It was a known fact that the timber, if unattended for sometime, would be subjected to decay, and this particular oil may have been used to preserve the timber of the railing at the summit and the base of the *stupa*. It may not be out of place to suggest that the railing at the base may have been introduced as a safety measure for protecting people who were perambulating at the *stupa*. After the 4th century, the chronicles and the inscriptions contain no reference to these wooden railings. Therefore we may conclude that they ceased to exist on the *stupas* thereafter.

#### Cetiya-gharas

*Gaha-ceta* or the *cetiya*-shrine in a monastery was conjectured to be as a circular structure with a domical roof of wooden construction, supported on pillars (plate I). King Vasabha is said to have constructed such a shrine for the *stupa* of the *Thuparama*. According to the chronicle, having constructed the shrine over the *stupa*, the king ordered an alms-giving to the *sangha* to mark its completion. King Gothabhaya (235-266 A.D.) is said to have renovated the *stupa-shrine* of the *Thuparama* and built a similar shrine for the *Ambasthala Thupa*. It is stated that Aggabodhi (733-722) replaced the door of the house of the *Thuparama* and its pillars. (*Mahavamsa*, XLVIII, 66)

Another *stupa* of the same type is the *Lankarama* at Anuradhapura, conjectured to be identical with the *Silasobbhakandaka cetiya* known to have built by King Vattagamini Abhaya. (76 -62 B.C). A similar *stupa* of modest size is the *Ambasthala Dagaba*

at Mihintale. It is traditionally believed to have been built at the spot where king Devanampiyatissa and Thera Mahinda met for the first time. Similar edifices at Medirigiriya and Tiriyaya have been named as *Vatadages* in the thirteenth century Sinhala writings. The shrine over the *stupa* at Attanagalla is referred to in the *Mahavamsa* as *vatta-dhatughara* (Mv. LXXXV, 75) and its Sanskrit form *vrttam-caitya-grham* is found in the inscription on the porch at the *Vatadage* in Polonnaruva (Muller, A.I.C. p. 94)

In an inscription of the second century A. D. it is mentioned that the donations have been bestowed on the *gaha-ceta* of the *vihara* for which Paranavitana renders the meaning as *cetiya-ghara* and makes the following remark.

“With regard to language, the occurrence of *gaha-ceta*, the equivalent of the Pali *cetiya-gaha* or *ghara* is interesting as an example of what may be called the metathesis of words (*padaperali*). The form is also found in the Habarana inscription which is about two centuries later in date than the epigraph”. (Paranavitana, 1983, p. 42). *Sila-cetiya* at *Ambasthala* referred to in this inscription is the small *stupa*, now called *Ambasthala Dagaba*. The *cetiya-ghara* built by Kanittha Tissa must have been intended to enclose it. The stone pillars now stand in two circles around it date from about the eighth century, as evidenced by donatory inscriptions, engraved on them. They must have belonged to a shrine which replaced that of Kanittha Tissa and, probably, was of wooden construction.

As ‘*ghara*’ and ‘*geha*’ are synonymous it could be said that this type of shrines was also referred to as *dhatugeha* at one time and from it has been

formed the term *vata-da-ge*. The addition of the adjective *vata* (Skt. *vrta*, circle) is self explanatory due to the circular plan of this type of structure.

There is ample evidence to prove that the pillars at Thuparama and other shrines had held a roof over the *stupas*. Stone pillars are arranged round the Thuparama *stupa* in four concentric circles. There are only three concentric circles of stone pillars encompassing the *stupa* of the Lankarama. The Ambasthala dagaba at Mihintale has two concentric circles of octagonal stone-pillars of the same type as those at Thuparama. Tiriyaya *stupa* has two circles of stone pillars and stands in the centre of a circular platform with a moulded retaining wall of stone. At Attanagalla there had been two concentric circles of stone pillars round the *stupa* which stood on a circular platform, retained by moulded stabs of stone. A new shrine has been constructed on the ruins of the old one in recent times. The *stupa* of *Vatadage* at Polonnaruva must have had three concentric circles of stone pillars. It differs from the others in having a second circular platform on a level. There seems to have been two concentric circles of wooden pillars. It is of significant value to note that Buddhagosha, the commentator, had taken Thuparama and its *cetiya gharas* as the example of a *stupa* and a shrine built to enclose it. Therefore it is not so difficult to conjecture that stone pillars arranged in concentric circles around a *stupa* were meant for the purpose of sustaining the roof, naturally of timber, which enclosed the *stupa*.

In a comparative study of all these monuments one can see a parallel in their architectural plan. In all these monuments the *stupa* built on a circular platform is surrounded by con-

centric circles of stone pillars with an encircling wall of brick. The only deviation from this general plan is in the *Vatadages* at Medirigiriya and Polonnaruva, having a screen in line with the outer circle of pillars. Paranavitana conjectures that there would have been a similar screen made of wood at Thuparama and other *stupas* mentioned above, but they had perished without leaving any traces.

The architectural concept behind the *cetiya-ghara* of Sri Lanka has been directly copied from the series of rock-cut caves in western India, some of which are referred to as *cetiya-gharas* in the inscriptions contained in them. Paranavitana comments that,

“These rock-cut *cetiya-gharas* of western India among which we may mention the celebrated examples at Karle, Ajanta and Ellora, can rightly be called the most important architectural monuments bequeathed to us by the early Buddhists of India and are, in the opinion of competent authorities, exact copies of structural shrines built of brick and wood (Paranavitana, 1946, pp. 88-89).

It is interesting to note that the term *gaha-ceta* is mentioned in an inscription as early as the 2nd C. A.D. Paranavitana was not aware of its existence when he was writing his monumental work—The *stupa* in Ceylon. It is surprising that he had not made any attempt to describe the *cetiya* shrine mentioned in the inscription when he was editing this inscription as an example to prove his point about the *cetiya-gharas*.

It may be suggested, with the evidence found in the inscriptions, that the *gaha-ceta* or *caitya-grha* was a timber structure later added over the *stupas* at Thuparama and Lankarama and the

*Vatadage*, a natural development from it was built as one whole structure, including a smaller *stupa*, and a roof over it.

A reference made in an inscription to *patanagala* or *padhanaghara* led to the identification of structures made for meditation of a certain sect of the *sangha* (Paranavitana, 1983, No. 45). *Patana-gala* is taken as the old Sinhala form of the Pali *padhana-sala*. *Patanagala* later became *piyangal*. This particular *padhanaghara* to be known as Sudassana was, in fact, the name of the monastic residence, where this inscription of King Vasabha was discovered. *Padhana ghara* has been identified as a twin platformed structure with a narrow pathway.

*Catusala* or the square hall mentioned in an inscription of King Mahasena (276-303) can be considered as an open pavilion in a monastic complex used by a large congregation of monks. This epigraph, an edict containing a public proclamation to regulate the monastic life of the community of the *Mahavihara*, was ordered by the king to be placed in this square hall for everybody to see.

.....*Abagiri-mahaviharahi  
taba-viti*

.....*mahavata catusalatahi  
ca tabaviti*

.....placed in the great monastery of Abhayagiri.....caused to be placed in the interior of the Square Hall on the High Road.

It becomes clear that the architectural features of the buildings such as *patanagala* and *catusala* cannot be fully determined from the inscriptions and that they are the uncommon types of structures built with wattle and daub walls. But there is conclusive evidence in these epigraphs to show that the

types of structures exemplified by these epigraphs monuments have existed in the monasteries in the early Anuradhapura period.

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