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 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 Theravada Mahinda in the third century B.C. Mahavamsa, the chronicle explains how on the fourth day after Theravada 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, uposathagaha 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 pasaḍa and later became pahata. Parivena had the meaning of a monastic residence, assigned to a particular therā. 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.²

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 arama 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 con-
struction of several hundreds of cham-
bers. 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 sup-
port in an account found in the
Mahavamsa saying that the Loha-
pasada 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
(cetiyaghara), bojanahala (bojan-
asala), asanahala (asanasala), catussala
(catussala) and so forth. Remains of
brick-stupas, erected in most parts of
the country bear witness to this main
architectural feature of the Anuradha-
pura period which may have been intro-
duced 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 Bud-
dhist period in India. (Paranavitana,
1946, p. 12).

In view of the large-scale restora-
tions and repairs carried out on the
stupas throughout a period of two thou-
sand years by various kings, it is almost
impossible to visualize the nuclei of a
stupa of the early Anuradhapura pe-
riod. However, it is not difficult to
reconstruct some of the architectural
features of a stupa, with the inscrip-
tional evidence. Inscriptions do contain
references to some of the architectural
features of the ancient stupas in the is-
land.

The earliest inscriptions 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 Bud-
dhist 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 Utiya (207-197 B.
C.) who was the younger brother of
King Devanampiyatissa and the reign-
ing 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 in-
terest in reconstructing the shape of the
early stupas in Sri Lanka. Two such
reliquaries, found in stupas at Minhintale and at Deliwalla 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 mas-
sive balustrade (vedika). The summit
of the dome is surmounted by a pedestal
(harmika), surrounded by a stone rail-
ing, from which rose a stone shaft
supporting a stone umbrella (chattrat)
or a series of umbrellas (chattravalai).
The outer bulustrade 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 *hattivedi* 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 Ruvanvali 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 *Vamsathappakasini*, 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. (Siddhamaha) raja Vahabahama (ha)-rati(ya)Cula-Rohana)-bojika-amatiya Honayaha pu.
2. -(ta) (amatide) va Nakaya paji (naka) ra bujamini .......... (kani) (maha)-tubes karavaya raja Vahabayaha.
3. aracaya Pa (ha) ni(ya)-ketahi .......... kara-viharaahi mahatubahi dine
4. vape-de-dake (hi) .......... ha ka
............... KA kuba ............
5. navilahi KA3 Mahacapahaniya (hi) .......... KA Kiridivataya KA2 Pahanavila-
6. -tahi kiri (1) Me (do-vi) siti
kiriyakahi .................
5 mahauubahi dakaraniya cato-mudayeti.
7. -yahi havajara tini-kala tela
makanake utirika ati hitu tubahi jina-padisatar-i
8. -ya doja-aruvana ca tubahi kama
karana divasa hamanana atuya bata
hada (raka)-
9. hata dina Kolahobakahi do-
karihake KA 2.

Translation:
Success-(The Minister De)va Naga, son of Honayla, (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 chastras 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 chastra. 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 1). 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 Silasobhhakandaka 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 Tiriya have been named as Vadadage in the thirteenth century Sinhala writings. The shrine over the stupa at Attanagalla is referred to in the Mahavamsa as vatta-dhatu-ghara (Mv. LXXV, 73) and its Sanskrit form vrttam-caitya-grham is found in the inscription on the porch at the Vadadage 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 gharā is interesting as an example of what may be called the metathesis of words (pada- perali). The form is also found in the Habarana inscription which is about two centuries later in date than the epigraph" (Paranavitana, 1983, p. 42). Sīla-cetiya at Ambasthala referred to in this inscription is the small stupa, now called Ambasthala Dagaba. The cetiya-ghara built by Kanitha 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 Kanitha 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 dhatu-geha at one time and from it has been
formed the term vata-da-ge. The addition of the adjective vata (Skt. vrata, 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 Polonnaruwa 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 Buddhagosa, 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 concentric circles of stone pillars with an enclosing 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 caiya-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). Patanagala 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-mahaviharahti taba-viti

.................. mahavata catusalatahi ca tabaviiti

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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