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An Introduction to Concept and Evolution of the Guardstone and Its Architectural Visualization of the Contemporary Religious and Cultural Diversities

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ABSTRACT

This specific study deals with a unique piece of Buddhist architecture, the Guardstone found almost in every part of ancient kingdoms in Sri Lanka spanning from Anuradhapura to Kandy period significantly. The Guardstone is an excellent piece of structure placed on either side of the first step of the flight of stairs at the entrance of ancient religious buildings or palaces in Sri Lanka. The origin of this architectural masterpiece is still to determine. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted in an evolutionary point of view that the guardstone has passed through several developmental stages from a simple slab to a highly sophisticated artifact in its dimensions, complexity and artistry. The numerous inclusions as well as exclusions from time to time to this artifact still remain uncertain as to whether they were due to secular or ecclesiastical reasons or simply due to the creators own culture influenced imagination. This study will peruse all the possible evidence that are available architecturally and to develop a logical reasoning for any identifiable characteristic and to elucidate with reasonable legitimacy as to how and why such a character is present or absent in a particular guardstone. This study in no way has any intention of rejecting or amending any proposition available at present but will pursue its best to shed light only on the attributes of a guardstone and to concentrate on the diversities of this beautiful monastic artifact that deserves serious academic study and meticulous aesthetic evaluation.

Keywords: Ancient Sri Lankan Architecture, Buddhist Architecture, Building Entrance, Stone Sculpture.

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1. Introduction

The task of a researcher on any historical site, process, incident or on an artifact is to place an evidence based record of the historicity of the ruler and his governing principles, intentions and the characteristic features of the cultural and religious environment that prevailed and influenced at large during that era.

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A historical artifact predominantly does not provide concrete evidence about the rationale or the perceptions of the sculptor or the creator's insights, awareness and smartness which has gone into the artifact at the time of engraving it. This is where the descriptive equation of historical architecture becomes challenging and arduous. Nevertheless, with meticulous observation corroborated by contemporary socio-cultural and eclectic evidence a reasonable interpretation could be presented on a historical artifact.

The study of religious architecture is comparatively an ancient discipline which has its roots scattered all over the Asian sub-continent. In fact, the existence of a word called 'Ecclesiology' which means the study of religious architecture itself provides the uniqueness and the importance of the discipline even today. According to the chronicles it is an undisputed fact that the ancient architecture in whatever form started to flourish with the advent of Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BC. Therefore it is widely accepted that ancient architectural remains are mostly of religious or monastic nature. They explicitly display Buddhist civilization in one or more forms not only for admiration but also to experience some of the tangible aspects of Buddhist philosophy.

Although no monument has been clearly discovered which belongs to the period before Arahath Mahinda's visit to the island in 3rd century BC, the chronicles record that the earliest form of Buddhist Architecture in Sri Lanka was the *Mahiyanganaya* and *Girihadu* Dagabas which are believed to have been built well before the Parinibbana of Lord Buddha circa 543 BC. The most historical architectural remains found here; provide reasonable evidence to conceptualize the origin and the initial stage features of the carvings of the guardstone. The *Patimaghara* (Image house) is the simplest living example to observe a guardstone in some form or the other. Having an image of the Blessed one a higher platform with a stairway supported by balustrades and standing guardstones in front of each balustrade is the most basic form of monument that is visible even today.

Basically this paper attempts to classify and demarcate the evolutionary process of the guardstone paying attention to the different stages it has passed through. It will also attempt to define the carvings embraced by the guardstones whether or not they bear any religious or cultural significance to that particular era or simply creative visuals conceived in the aesthetic mind of the sculptor.

It is noteworthy to mention that the guardstone has few synonyms such as 'Doorstone', 'Guardianstone' and 'Keerthimukha'. From a simplest form to a sophisticated artifact it has gone through several development stages. However all the scholars do not agree to a uniform development process and therefore the stages differ in number from four to six according to the explanations of the individual scholar. Some of the characteristic features of the guardstone are yet to establish their exact resemblance as to what they early represent. The plain slab is the earliest form accepted by all without any reservation. At a later stage the top of this slab was made slightly curved, followed up by a carving of the pot of plenty on it. Sometime later the dwarf images were introduced and finally they were substituted by "Nagakings". At this stage in addition to the Naga Raja (King of Nagas -Cobras) image a 'Makara -Pandol' (image Capricorn) was added into the curved top position producing a majestic appearance to the artifact. The guardstone which is one of the most striking architectural monuments in Sri-Lanka has not so far been given the in - depth attention it deserves. Many scholars have analyzed and explained the guardstone along with the physical development process based on the readily observed motifs and trimmings. Less attention was given to the variety of the numerous carvings it contain and logical reasoning for a particular set of carvings to be present or absent from time to time.

This paper will peruse the historicity and the existence of the guardstone through the passage of time and will make every effort to appraise the intricacies of sculpture and to explain whether they were engraved on the basis of religious and cultural attributes or simply as aesthetic artistry.

2. The concept and the origin of the Guardstone

The guardstone, as the semantic value of the word itself suggests, would have been a structure erected as a guarding unit to a place which requires a such protection. However the placement of its base suggests that it is a structure erected as a supporting unit to another structure called the balustrade.

It is obvious that an elevated terrace requires a flight of steps to reach the surface level above. A pole or a rail may have been there to hold and provide ease to the climb. Through the passage of time this rail would have developed into an abacus decorated with depictions of artistic stone carvings on it. However, it seems that this stony rail structure did not contain any structural support itself to avoid a sudden collapse or a slide towards its front. A strong stony wedge deeply inserted into the ground would have solved this requirement which laid the foundation for a more advanced and a sophisticated guardstone to emerge.

3. The Guardstone and the tri-component assembly

The tri-component stony assembly which comprises of guardstone, balustrade and the moonstone associating the flight of steps at the entrance in most of the ancient buildings is a common sight whether or not they are religious in nature. Even in any particular location if a single independent guardstone is found devoid of other associating structures (except nāga image) it is reasonable to assume that it could probably be due to the decay or destruction or removal of the other two component structures.

4. Early forms of the Guardstone

The earliest form of the guardstone is identified as a simple square shaped stone slab erected just in front of each balustrade. It contained no carvings whatsoever on it and thus believed to be the earliest form of the guardstone. Out of numerous such examples the most striking guardstone in this category is seen at *Vatadageya* in *Haththikuchchi Viharaya*, an enclosure for the stupa, situated about 5 km.s off *Galgamuwa* township on the *Maho – Anuradhapura* road.

Apart from the architectural significance of the guardstone, the visual examples provided in this study depict ample evidence to an evolutionary process that had taken place not only of the guardstone but also in the other two aforementioned components of the collective triple structure viz. the moonstone and the balustrade.



Plate 1: Line diagram depicting the placement and the associating structures of the Guardstone

1. Pot of plenty 2. Dragon structure 3. Motif of festoon extending from the dragon mouth 4. Guardstone 5. Flight of steps 6. Moonstone.



Plate 2: The tri-component assembly of an entrance.



Plate 3: Guardstone at Haththi kuchchi Vihara at Rajangana



Plate 4: Entrance to the Somawathi Stupa at Polonnaruwa

5. The earliest form

At the first stage of the evolutionary process of the guardstone, it was only a square shaped slab of stone, rectangular in shape and bore no carvings. (Plates 3 and 4)

6. Second stage

At the next stage possibly in the same century or little later, the rectangular shape became slightly curved with a small pointed hump on the upper middle of the slab. (Plate 5)

This would be the beginning of the introduction of carvings to the guardstone. Other two components of the entrance viz: moonstone and balustrade are without decorations.



Plate 5: Location – Kaparamula Entrance, and Athpokuna Entrance, Anuradhapura

7. Stage 3

At the next stage the pot of plenty was introduced. In the Sri – Lankan cultural context the pot of plenty is considered as a symbol of prosperity and abundance, the first eye – contact a welcome omen at an entrance.

These guardstones seem to have been incised very lightly and in later stages in high relief. Most of these pots are filled with coconut fronds or with lotus flowers which again characterize those as symbols of prosperity and wealth



Plate 6: Guardstones at Uththaramula Entrance, Anuradhapura

8. Stage 4

The next stage of the evolutionary process introduces dwarf images typical to most of the religious buildings in any era. These dwarf images are also called as '*Bahirawas*' and they are the attendants of the God *Kuvera*, known as the god of wealth. Among the *Bahirawas* there are two popular figures of *Sankha* who holds a conch shell and the other, *Padma* with a lotus. The conch shell and the *Padma* are carved mostly in the headdress. Both Indian and Sri-Lankan view of this concept is that they are custodians of wealth and *Bahirawas* protect wealth. As such their presence at a religious site is debatable and needs a more pensive clarification.



Plate 7: Guardstones at Wijayabahu Royal Palace



Plate 8: Nāga Guardstone at Twin pond entrance, Anuradhapura

9. Stage 5

Sooner or Later the naga image was introduced to the guardstone. The naga image has its roots and prototypes in many ancient architectural and historical

designs spanning several centuries in Sri –

Lanka as well as in India. The Naga image was depicted as multi-headed Naga in most cases.

At a subsequent stage the emphatic value of the naga image was shifted to an anthropomorphic figure and was blended with a multi-headed naga headdress to be precisely called a naga-raja image.

The Nāga Raja guardstone has been further explained by scholars who identify them in relation to Buddhist tradition as four guardian gods namely *Dhartarashtra*, *Virādha*, *Virupaksha* and *Vaishravana*. They are said to guard the four distinct directions East, South, West and North respectively. They were earlier placed at Vahalkada (*āyaka*) facing the four directions. Before the introduction of the human form to naga image they were depicted in guardstones in the same form for a long period of time.

To distinguish the four directions on the guardstones, sculptures adapted four animal symbols on to them, namely elephant, bull, horse, and lion to depict the East, South, West and North respectively. The use of these animal symbols according to the directions is a concept familiar to Sri Lanka Buddhism.

The Nagaraja image on most of guardstones is seen in 'thribanga' (thrice bent) posture, having the pot of prosperity by one hand and a stem of flowers by the other hand. The flat or slanted top surface has converted to semicircular arch in in most of the examples in this stage.

This particular guardstone also needs an explanation with insights of archaeological reasoning for its existence and also for its rarity.

It is noteworthy to mention that the nāga concept has originated in the Indian sub-continent during or after the parinibbana of Lord Buddha. Before the advent of the human form of the Buddha image the nāga symbol was used to represent The Blessed One. Therefore one can safely assume that this figure is in some way a definite symbol of religious or sacred value.

10. Stage 6

The most sophisticated creation in the records of the guardstone is seen at *Ratnaprāsādaya*, *Polonnaruwa*. This recognition to the guardstone at *Rathnaprāsādaya* is no doubt owes to the complexity of many delicate carvings that adorns the Nāga Raja image. Apart from the 'tribanga' posture of the Naga Raja image

the upper part of the guardstone is decorated with a dragon arch with three dragon heads: One in the middle and the other two at the two bases of the arch. From the two sides of the dragon mouth a lion is thrown out from each side along with a dancing couple whose destiny is to fall into the dragon mouth below. A set of seven cobra heads adorn the Nagaraja Head and an elephant head as well as a dwarf image at each foot base respectively. The above symbolic inclusions which possess meticulous



Plate 9: Elephant symbol on a guardstone



Plate 10: Lion symbol on a guardstone



Plate 101: Bull symbol on a guardstone



Plate 92: Guard stone at Vatadage, Polonnaruwa.

sculptural artistry has accorded it to become the finest outstanding and beautiful sculpt in the guardstone-sāga.

This is the most artistic guard stone found in Sri Lanka. Two lovers emerge from the dragon's mouth above the cobra king, who has in his hand the pot of abundance signifying prosperity. This is said to show that fertility generates prosperity. Indulgence in worldly life is like entering the mouth of a dragon is another interpretation. It belongs to the 7-9 century AD.

There are also some guardstones which depict the wife of that incumbent Nāgaraja but in a smaller scale than the nāgaraja figure. The guardstone at the Eastern part of the Mahasen palace depict an image of a woman believed to be god *Dratharashtra's* Queen – wife. The different dimensions of the two images can be attributed to the principle of patriarchy.

A novel form of a guardstone is found with an arch containing festoons coming out of dragon mouths. Even though a discourse in morphological evolution is evidently possible, a classification of all the guardstones based on a time scale seems impossible as it is extremely difficult to demarcate the periodic timelines in relation to the inclusions or exclusions of different images and motifs found in any guardstone.

The change of kingdom from *Anuradhapura* to *Polonnaruwa* resulted in many alterations

in most of the artistic spheres. Accordingly the guardstones at *Polonnaruwa* also depict these changes very lucidly. Though some scholars observe these changes as a decline in sculptural prowess this study is reluctant to accept this view axiomatically as the outcome of any sculpt in whatever form is mostly based on several background factors such as,

- The religion or the beliefs that prevailed in a particular era and the response of the kingship.
- Religion based culture
- Social ethics
- Influence of any foreign sculptural tradition/s.

The guardstone's in-situ function which has been endorsed by many as providing a protection to the premises has to be given serious re-consideration. The nāga-*raja* image of *Vahalkada* (*Ayaka*) and nagini image of a balustrade cast reasonable doubts about the blanket acceptance of the aforementioned protective function by many.

Therefore a further analytical review is needed regarding the complexity of the ornate carvings of the guardstone and the legitimacy of the popular and also its singular role as a guardian which had been in acceptance for several centuries.

The guardstone, predominantly a monastic artifact that has originated as a stop – wedge to the wing stone (balustrade) was a plain stone slab in the beginning with no carvings on its surface. Sooner or later it developed into an artifact having different motifs and images carved on its surface with a variable relief from low to half. Nevertheless, it is commonly accepted that except for the morphological development the chronological development process of the guardstone carvings is not possible as different sets of motifs exist all over the island which belong to a single period. The *Polonnaruwa* guardstone is somewhat uniform when compared to *Anuradhapura* having only few ornate changes, additions or alterations.



Plate 11: Guard stone at Rathna prasadaya, Abhayagiriya



Plate 12: Nagaraja Dratharashtra and his wife

This paper will take its course as introduction to analyze and differentiate to the maximum possible extent whatever the carvings that exist and to reach at some reasonable conclusive facts based on the archaeo-religious and cultural background that has prevailed from time to time. This paper proposes the numerous carvings observed on guardstones can be further studied under three lines of visual observations.

- 1) Anthropomorphic observations
 - a) Naga Raja image – Physical appearance
 - b) Naga Rajini (Queen) Image – Physical appearance
 - c) Facial expressions
 - d) Tribangha posture
 - e) Dress
 - f) Jewelry and ornaments
 - g) Items being held on the right hand left hand basis
- II) Observations on auxiliary features
 - a) *Bahirava – Sanka* image
 - b) *Bahirawa – Padma* image
 - c) Naga image
 - d) Pot of plenty and its fillings
 - e) Dragon arch and associated carvings
 - f) Postures and placement of the images
 - g) Dress forms and appearance
 - h) Jewelry forms and appearance
 - i) Animal images
 - j) The sprig and its proportions
- III) Architectural observations
 - a) Overall dimensions structural shape of the upper part.
 - b) Location and placement.
 - c) Nature and the variety of the stone.
 - d) Finishing
 - e) Possibility of any Indian sculptural influence in relation to different artistic traditions of the Indian sub-continent

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