

The “Stone Four Legged Quern” (Bench) recovered in the oldest Maritime Archaeological Site at Godawaya (Ambalantota) in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The stone bench that was recovered at the oldest Maritime Archaeological site at Godawaya (Ambalantota) in Sri Lanka is an unusual archaeological artifact which has become instrumental in turning the history of Maritime Archaeology in Sri Lanka in a new direction. It has been recovered for the first time in the area of Godawaya (Ambalantota) in the Hambantota District in Sri Lanka. The particular object is a Stone Bench with four legs where the whole thing is carved out of a single stone. The main purpose of this article is to describe this stone bench and to discuss the symbols it carries with its making. Also an attempt will be made to look into the site where the object was found and other certain related aspects as well.

In August 2008, Maritime Archaeologists attached to the Department of Archaeology and Central Cultural Fund (CCF) under the aegis of UNESCO launched an exploration in the area where this stone bench had been found. The location was around 30 meters under the sea at a place 4 km away from the fishery harbor in the coastal area of Godawaya village in the proximity of Ambalantota Town in the Hambantota District in Southern Province of Sri Lanka.

Stone Bench

An unusual artefact, which has become instrumental in turning the history of maritime archaeology in Sri Lanka towards a new direction, has been recovered for the first time in Godawaya (Ambalantota) in the Hambantota District. This particular object is a stone bench with four legs carved out of a single stone. The main purpose of this article is to describe this object and to discuss the symbols it carries. Also an attempt will be made to analyze the site and associated materials where the object was found.

In October 2008, maritime archaeologists of the Maritime Archaeology Unit (attached to the Central Cultural Fund and the Department of Archaeology) under the aegis of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched an exploration in the area where this Stone Bench was found. The location was around 30 m under the sea, 4 km away from the fishery harbour in the coastal area of Godawaya village.

This exploration did lead to recovery of a number of significant artefacts. The MUA observation of remains spread over the area of concern pointed to the possibility that this place could very well be the oldest maritime archaeological site to date to have been found in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, a number of significant samples have been collected for further studies and, at present, the research work is in progress.



Figure 1. Stone Bench Site. (Photo by R. Muthucumarana - M.A.U)

In fact, the story behind the recovery of this stone bench found in the Godawaya area is rather interesting. One day in March 2003, I was participating as the officer in charge of the excavation work carried out on the premises of the Godawaya (Buddhist) Temple. In the meantime, two people named Peminda and Sunil who were commercial divers who collect conch shells for their living brought an object they had over their shoulders and placed on it the ground before me. They said that they had found it in the sea while diving and discussed its uniqueness in finding something like this on the seabed around this area. They went on to say that there was a large number of pottery shards widely scattered over the same area.

Having listened to them attentively, I examined the Stone Bench very carefully. Some parts of the object were covered with sea shells and plants. On the flat surface (top part of the bench) there were three symbols which were very artistically carved. Those symbols can be identified as Nandipada, Sri Vatsa and Mathsya (fish). Interestingly a number of similar stone benches had been recovered in the excavations performed at the Yatala stupa terrace and the surrounding area which are now kept in the Yatala museum in Tissamaharamaya. In addition, some stone benches which are similar to those mentioned above, have been found in the past excavations carried out at Akurugoda and Sarwodayawatta in Tissamaharamaya (Sanath 2008:9). It was clear to me that this stone bench possessed a significant historical value in addition to its unusual recovery from the seabed. Therefore I chose to show this stone bench to Mr. Oliver Kessler, a German Archaeologist, who had come here to assist in the excavation work. His opinion was the same as mine. When I explained the situation to Peminda and Sunil, they agreed to keep it at the Godawaya (Buddhist) Temple to be preserved as an archaeological object. Subsequently this stone bench paved the way to the underwater archaeological exploration around the Godawaya area.



Figure 2. Profile of bench showing legs / close-up of symbols in bench.
(Photos by Gamini Saman – MAU)

This bench measures 37.5 cm in length, 16cm in width and 17cm in height and has four legs. There are three symbols finely carved along a border at the top. However, when those symbols are closely studied with the available historical evidence it becomes clear that those symbols have their origin from Hindu religious symbols but were later treated as Buddhist symbols (Wimalaratana 1991:63), It is also a fact that those symbols have been simultaneously accepted in both Buddhism and Hinduism during a certain period (Wimalaratana1991:63), Nandipada and Sri Vathsa can be seen on Amarawathie Stupa in India while the same symbols are found among Buddhist carvings available in Sri Lanka (Sanath 1979:167-193), Samuel Beal holds the view that those symbols are used to depict Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha in Buddhist iconography (Beal 1884:60), The opinion of Samuel Bell is that the Nandipada has been employed to depict the Triple Gem (Rathnatra) and Buddhahood (Beal1884:60), "Sri Vathsa" is considered to be a symbol found on the chest of the god Vishnu (Basham 1995:385; Senaratna 1992:26).

There are ideas which argue that the Nandipada is only another symbol or a figure representing the Trishula symbol (Wimalaratana 1991: 64), which can be found in Hinduism. However as the Trishula is not accepted in Buddhism, a majority of scholars agree that this symbol is used to denote the Triple Gem (Rathnatra) (Beal 1884:60). The Sripada Stone (The Buddha's Footprint carved on a stone slab) which was recovered in Anuradhapura and is, at present, preserved in the museum in Colombo carries all three symbols and is thought to belong to the second century Anno Domini (A.D.) (Karunaratna1979:167-193). The widely recognized view is that they tend to symbolize the Chakrawartha Status (Holding Universal Sovereignty) or Buddhahood (Karunaratna1979:167-193). There is also evidence available to show that the Mathsyas or the "fish" symbol had been used to imply auspiciousness (Subha mangala Sanketha or the auspicious symbol) (Senaratna1992: 26).

A Sripada Stone (Buddha's Foot Print) bearing the Symbols of Mathsyas (fish) Nandipada and Sri Vathsa has been found at Amarawathie Stupa in India which is also identified as belonging to the second century A.D. (Senaratna1992: 26). This further supports the hypothesis that during a certain period those symbols had simultaneously been employed in Buddhist iconography in both Sri

Lanka and India. In addition to use in contemporary works and creations, those symbols have been utilized in the gateway structure (Archway for Entrance) of the Sanchi Stupa in India, Also, a few similar stone benches found in the excavations carried out at the Yatala site in Tissamaharama have been identified as artefacts from the first and second centuries B.C.E; (Somadeva 2006:197-198). Further, there is one stone bench on which a few Brahmi letters, which are believed to be of first or second century B.C., have been inscribed (Somadeva 2006:197-198). Karunaratna, in his book *Shanthiya*, has classified the eight Auspicious symbols (Asta mangala Lakshanas) by allocation them to different cardinal directions (Karunaratna1979:167-193); only four of them given here:

- Sri Vatsa - Ravi (Sun)- East
- Mathsya - Rahu (Shadow of the moon) - South
- Nandipada - Shani (Saturn) - West
- Conch - Budha (Mercury) - North

Therefore, it has been suggested, that the symbols were used to indicate direction (Karunaratna1979:167-193). The begging - bowl (Patra) recovered in Abhayagiri bearing those three symbols along with the eight auspicious symbols (Asta Mangala Lakshanas) has been judged to belong to the sixth century A.D. (Senaratna1992: 26).

However there is available evidence to suggest that there have been instances where stone benches of similar shapes have been utilized as grinding stones for domestic purposes - perhaps for kitchen work or medicinal preparations (Karunaratna 2008:9; Somadeva 2006:197-198). A number of such quern stones as well as a host of grinder stones and upper grinder stones (or Doogala,) have already been recovered in the excavations performed at Sarvodaya watta and Akurugoda in Tissamaharamaya (Karunaratna 2008:9). Hans Josim Waighsaar (Director KAWA project-Tissamaharama), who inspected the marks on the quern, said these objects were used for domestic purposes or medicinal preparation (KAWA Excavation Unpublished Report 2008-2010).

It was allowed to sit on those noble symbols which had highly and widely been accepted and respected in both Sri Lanka and India altogether? If the symbols inscribed on the stone bench represent the Lord Buddha, Buddha hood or the triple gem there is no way that these benches were used for the purpose of sitting. Some scholars argue that these comparatively shorter stone benches could possibly have been constructed to go with the Rank / hierarchy of the chief reverent / Bhikkus (Buddhist Priests) so they may have been prevented from sitting on comfortable seats in terms of a disciplinary code enacted then (Anandamaithree 2006:135-140).

My idea is that either those structures could very well be the direct offerings for the Lord Buddha himself or the structures upon which offerings would be placed before being proffered to the Lord Buddha. Such structures, in this case the stone benches, in my opinion would be placed in the image House of the Temple (Aramaya). (It represents the "Great Enlightenment of the Buddha" Scholars believe it was the first brave step by the Greek Buddhists, who wanted to create a sculpture of Buddha according to the style of the more familiar Greek tradition of sculptures. Before the image of the Buddha was created, Buddhists

believed should never be created or represented as a figure of The Buddha with His Great Qualities (Wimalaratana 1991:64). Hence Buddhists considered some of the symbols in Buddha's likeness to be the "Representation of the Buddha" Bodhi tree (*Picas Religiosa*), which provides shelter, and the Seat (Asana-Vajrasana), which provides seating facilities for attaining "The Great Buddha Hood" under the Bo Tree (Basham 1995:134). These were venerated as a great honour from the beginning of Buddhism. It is very obvious in early paintings and sculptures that these represent those objects on behalf of the Buddha (Anandamaithree 2006:135-140). Wherever Artist wants to show the Buddha it appears as "Asana" or "Bo Tree". And this practice has been continuous for a long time, even after the introduction of the Buddha sculpture. I believe it is a very reasonable and widely accepted view that sailors carried "Asana" to areas of religious practices while they voyaged. It mean, they may have used these "Asanas" as the representation of their religious leader and as the protector of their life.



Figure 3. Grinding stones. Photo by Sanath karunarathna

Considering the above information it can be deduced that the symbols that we have discussed were used during the period of the second century Before Christ (B.C.) to the second century A.D. So far a number of Sri Vathsa Symbols carved out of the copper material have been recovered from the Katharagama area (Somadeva 2006:197-198). It could therefore be said that similar symbols had been very popular during that period.

The fact that this object has been recovered from the deep seabed, away from the shore, we also can think they were transported as merchandise on vessels. At the same time it could be assumed that those objects had acquired a degree of social recognition and were honoured with a sense of respect and sacredness. Nandadasa Samaraweera (Nandadasa 2010: 1-5) Has clearly

expressed his opinion that the glazed ingots found from the same site belong to a period spanning from the first century BC to the second century AD.

It has been firmly established that the Godawaya harbour, by the second century AD, (Gamini 2010:32-35) had been a well organized and highly active centre where even the tariffs and customs charges were duly collected (Kessler 2001:290-300), The stone inscriptions found at the Godawaya Buddhist Temple actively help to support this view (Kessler 2001:329). However, it is possible that this harbour was functional long before the specified period. Namely, the excavations carried out by Somadeva in the area surrounding the Kirinda Harbour (Somadeva 2006:163-165) can be cited as proof that the Kirinda Harbour had been operational prior to the Christian era. Considering the archaeological findings obtained in that area, Somadeva holds the view that the functional city situated in the Akurugoda area in Tissamaharama was linked to the Kirinda Harbour while the settlement, situated at Ridiyagama close to Ambalantota, had been linked to the Godawaya Harbour via the Walave River (Somadeva 2006:115-120).

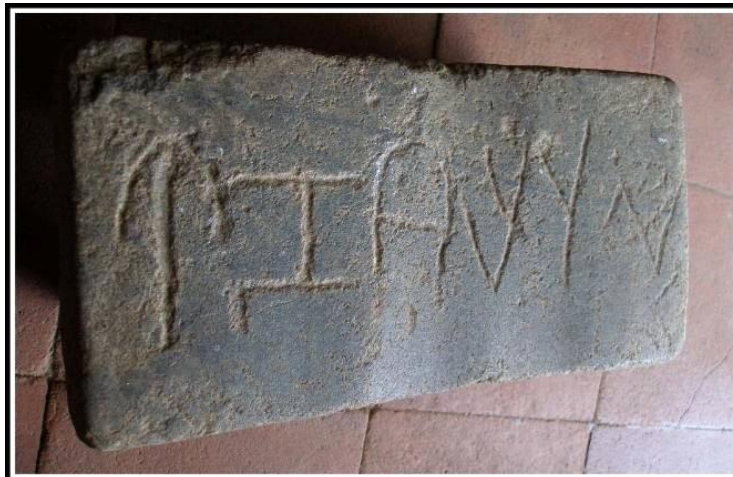


Figure 4. Bench like stone object with Brahmi Letter's perod between 250-100 BCE (Somadeva 2006:197-198). Photo by R. Muthucumarana

When the above facts are carefully studied and analyzed we could readily accept that those archaeological findings and the old Harbours could easily be traced to the same social era in the 2nd century AD (Paranavithana 1983: 101). However, the research is still ongoing so a valid conclusion has not been reached.

Other Findings

After the 2008 exploration another two small scale explorations have been conducted. The main one took place at the end of 2010 as a collaboration project of MAU, UNESCO and the Government of Netherlands. The Godawaya shipwreck discovery generated much interest among the local archaeologists as well as international historians and archaeologists with interests in Asian

underwater cultural heritage. It caused for much enthusiasm in the international layer, which provided allocation of funds towards a UNESCO training programme in maritime archaeology (post-field activity MAU 2010). The international team comprised of experts in diving and underwater archaeology from India, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines who participated in the assessment with the MAU team on the shipwreck at Godawaya. According to the previous exploration the site was identified as spread over an area of 40 X 22 m. Before initiation of the actual site survey, the team had to explore what had been previously collected such as jars, cooking vessels, stone benches and unidentified parts of the main wreckage (possible timber stacks).

- Investigation of the exploration was mainly concern with the following:
- To inspect and survey of the site and identify possible artefacts and antiques apparently visible on the sea bed.
- To make a surface plan with the finds using measuring equipments.
- To photographically document the site with digital cameras and other documentary equipment.
- To make an evaluation of the site with available data and resources.

The exploration team was comprised of underwater archaeologists, selected on the basis of their experience in multi-disciplinary approaches A well balanced team was thus engaged in the exploration activities for extracting maximum information and taking firsthand experience through non-disturbance survey. This survey produced observation of a large number of artefacts on the seabed, including varieties of pottery and a large area in the north-western quadrant covered with the remains of shipwreck (including the unidentified cargoes). During the exploration we found that there were more stone benches scattered around the site and most of them are different in style and size from each other and required close inspection to identify any symbols carry on them. I suppose that early mariners may have carried these stone benches in their personal belongings for making individual religious rituals and offerings. Keep in Possession these benches as in personal properties which brings symbolic message of the “Great Victory” (The Attainment of Buddha hood) of their religious leader may bring them self-esteem to do the uncertain voyages

The main obstacle in this case is the fact that all the recovered archaeological objects seem to have relationships to regional countries, especially to India and Sri Lanka during certain time periods. Nevertheless, wooden remains of the wreck are in very fragile condition and worn out, so its origins deduced by construction methods is difficult. This problem could hopefully be reached by proper documentation of the site and the scientific analysis of the findings in the near future.

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