
***Sēla Chetiyas* : A forgotten Form of Religious Architecture in Sri Lanka**

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Abstract:*This article explores the origins of a unique religious architectural form that emerged during the early history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The focus is on a type of ground-stone structure characterized by a circular base. Numerous examples of this architectural form have been unearthed, enriching our understanding of ancient Sri Lankan architecture. However, the absence of superstructures—likely due to the deep antiquity of these monuments—precludes a comprehensive reconstruction of their original architectural style. The study begins with an examination of textual references, seeking parallels between historical descriptions and the features identified through archaeological findings. This is followed by a survey aimed at situating these monuments within their probable social context. A detailed discussion on Sri Lanka's pre-Buddhist cultural environment is provided, aiming to highlight the cultural and religious interactions that might have influenced the development of this architectural form. The essay seeks to shed light on the religious significance of these long-overlooked structures, exploring their historical and cultural contexts to better understand their role in the early Buddhist landscape.*

Keywords: *Ancient, Buddhist Architecture, Monasteries, Sri Lanka, Sēla Chetiyas etc.*

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Introduction

The study of religious architecture in Sri Lanka has a history that dates back to the mid-19th century. The earliest field documentation was carried out by British colonial administrators, who conducted extensive studies on Buddhist architectural remnants found among the ruins of ancient cities such as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Tissamaharama (v. ASCAR 1893, 1894, 1911). These sites, located in the north-central and south-eastern dry zones of Sri Lanka, served as focal points for early research.

The descriptions provided by these early explorers remain invaluable and continue to serve as key references for students of ancient Buddhist architecture in Sri Lanka. The primary aim of these initial studies appears to have been comprehensive documentation of the architectural remains of ancient Buddhist monasteries. Rather than offering interpretative insights or contextual explanations, the early efforts were predominantly focused on cataloging and recording the structural and architectural details of these religious sites. This foundational work laid the groundwork for future studies and remains a cornerstone for understanding Sri Lanka's ancient Buddhist architecture.

In addition to the enthusiastic studies conducted during the 19th and early 20th centuries, historical sources and inscriptions dating from the early 1st century CE onward have also provided valuable insights into Buddhist religious constructions in Sri Lanka, showcasing their diverse functions. Though inscriptions often offer brief and fragmented information, their significance cannot be understated, as they contain crucial data worth considering despite their brevity (v. Somadeva 1992).

This essay focuses on a particular type of ancient religious structure, rarely mentioned in historical sources: the *sela chaitya*. This architectural form has not yet been sufficiently examined in terms of its historical background and architectural importance, despite its potential relevance to the history of Buddhist architecture in Sri Lanka and perhaps even to a broader South Asian context. Before delving deeper into its historical and religious significance, it is essential to explore the etymology of the term *sela chaitya*.

Sela Chetiya

The term *chetiya* (Sanskrit: *chaitya*, Pali: *chetiya*) typically refers to funerary monuments or structures with commemorative significance. In the ancient chronicles of Sri Lanka, the terms *thupa* (Sanskrit: *stupa*) and *dāgāba* (Sanskrit: *dhātu-garbha*) were often used interchangeably with *chetiya* to describe these monuments (v. Paranavitana 1946:1). According to the *Thupavamsa* (Thu.94), a 13th-century literary work narrating the history of stupas, some of the major stupas contain within their inner chambers either the bodily relics (*śārīrika dhātu*) of the Buddha or the remains of other religiously esteemed individuals, emphasizing their commemorative purpose (v. Berkwise, 2007).

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In certain instances, significant material relics associated with sacred figures, such as the remains of objects used by them (*paribhogika dhātu*), were also enshrined within these stupas. Collectively, these items were designated as *dhātu*, which led to the term *dāgāba* (Sanskrit: *dhātugarbha*, meaning "chamber of relics") being employed as a synonym for *chetiya* in the Sinhalese chronicles. Today, the terms *chetiya*, *stupa*, and *dāgāba* are still used interchangeably to refer to the same type of religious monument.

The preceding term *sela* (Sanskrit: *shaila*, meaning "ground stone") serves as an adjective modifying the term *chetiya* in the compound *sela chetiya*. This indicates that the architectural structures referred to by this name were specifically constructed using ground stone. Historically, the construction of *sela chetiyas* was not a common practice in Sri Lanka, with only a few rare examples documented in historical sources. These structures are notable for their distinctive use of stone as a primary building material, setting them apart from more widespread Buddhist architectural forms in the country.

Among the notable religious contributions by King Lajjatissa (119-109 BCE), he constructed a *sela chetiya* on the eastern side of the Thuparama monastery in Anuradhapura. This *sela chetiya* is referred to as the *Dīgha Thupa* in the *Dipavamsa* (Dp ix:35). Another reference indicates that a *sela chetiya* was built during the reign of King Gajabahu I (114-136 CE) (*Mahavamsa* xxxv:188).

While editing the *Dipavamsa*, Oldenberg noted an architectural feature termed *sila thupa* (Dp xix:17), which is linked to the construction of the Abhayagiri Stupa. The relevant passage reads: '*abhayagirim patittapesi silathupam chetiya ma-ntare*'. Cousins (2012) translated this as, "(He) erected the Abhaya Hill shrine with a stone stūpa inside" (*op.cit* 75). This statement is particularly intriguing because it implies that before the construction of the Abhayagiri Stupa by King Vattagamini Abhaya (89-77 BCE), a stone-made structure, identified as a *sila thupa*, already existed at the site. This strongly suggests that another form of *sela chetiya* was present in the early period of Sri Lanka's history, highlighting the significance of stone-based religious architecture even before more prominent structures were erected.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the veneration of *sela chetiyas* was a common practice in Sri Lanka prior to the introduction of brick-made *chetiyas*. These early stone-based monuments were gradually replaced by brick constructions, influenced by the North Indian Buddhist tradition. This shift coincided with the arrival of Buddhist missionaries from North India, led by the monk Rev. Mahinda during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BCE). The first stupa constructed in Anuradhapura, Thuparama, was a brick-made (*ittika karne*) structure, marking the beginning of a new architectural trend in Sri Lankan Buddhism. Numerous examples of brick stupas from the historical period illustrate the growing preference for this material, aligning with the architectural styles seen in North Indian Buddhist practice.

As previously mentioned, the term *ittaka* was used in ancient literary sources to refer to bricks (*Mahavamsa* xxx : v). For example, during the construction of the Ruvanveliseya stupa in Anuradhapura, King Gamini Abhaya (161-137 BCE) requested the assistance of bricklayers and

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carpenters to carry out the technical work needed to build the grand monument. According to the *Mahavamsa*, a source of suitable clay for producing the necessary bricks was pointed out to the king by a Veddha, a forest dweller.

There are several historical references that emphasize the use of bricks in construction. An inscription by King Mahaculimhatissa (77-63 BCE) specifically mentions *itaka* as the term for bricks (Paranavitana 1970:830). By the 4th century CE, the term *ittaka* had evolved into *ulu*, a word that remains in modern Sinhala. The contemporary Sinhala word *gadolu* (*gada* + *ulu*) is derived from *ulu* and is still used to refer to roofing tiles. In Sanskrit, the term *gada* holds several meanings, including "a screen," "a covering," and "fence" (MWSED 278, col.3), which ties back to the concept of bricks and tiles as protective or covering elements in construction.

Deegha thupa

The term "*Deegha Thupa*" indeed carries potential insights into understanding the identity and heritage of the *sela chetiyas* (stone-built stupas) as distinct from the more familiar brick stupas in Sri Lanka. The use of the word "*deegha*," meaning "long" or "extended," is historically significant and appears multiple times in early Sri Lankan texts and inscriptions. It suggests a notable lineage or tradition that could illuminate the origins or characteristics of the *sela chetiyas*.

In the *Mahavamsa*, an ancient chronicle of Sri Lankan history, the word "*deegha*" is associated with notable figures such as Deeghayu and Deegha Gamini. These individuals were the grandfather and father of King Pandukabhaya, who ruled around 343 BCE. This connection places the antiquity of the term "*deegha*" far back into the early historic period of Sri Lanka, indicating that the tradition or significance it represents has deep roots.

If the term "*Deegha Thupa*" reflects a specific architectural or cultural tradition linked to the *sela chetiyas*, it might imply a continuity of practices or symbolic meanings associated with length, duration, or lineage that dates back to these early historical references. Further exploration of inscriptions and material evidence associated with "*deegha*" contexts could provide more clarity on how this term connects with the stone-built stupa tradition, distinguishing it from the brick structures that became more prominent in later periods.

The *Kuduwil* Brahmi inscription from the Ampara District, referring to the traders of *Deeghavāpi* (present-day Ampara), provides a fascinating glimpse into the ancient commercial networks and identity-building practices in Sri Lanka. The mention of "*Digavapi poran vanijhana*" highlights not only the geographical importance of the region but also the merchants' effort to link themselves with a long-standing trade tradition.

In this context, the term *Deeghavāpi* (now Ampara in Eastern province) was historically part of the larger geopolitical entity of *Ruhuna*, a crucial center in early Sri Lankan politics and economy. The relationship between the words *deegha* and *porana* in the inscription is indeed significant, as it underscores the emphasis on heritage and continuity. Here, *deegha* indicates something long-lasting, potentially referring to an enduring legacy or extended lineage, while *porana* translates to "ancient," further reinforcing the idea of a venerable, established tradition.

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The phrase *porana vanijha*—meaning "ancient merchants"—reflects the merchants' deliberate attempt to affirm their status as custodians of a prestigious and long-standing commercial legacy. By identifying themselves as *porana vanijha*, they were not merely asserting their presence in the present but emphasizing a deep-rooted connection to a past lineage of traders, suggesting a claim to ancestral rights or privileges tied to their identity and possibly their trade routes.

This identification of merchants with the term *porana* highlights how economic actors in early Sri Lankan history sought to legitimize and distinguish themselves through references to antiquity. It indicates a conscious effort to construct an enduring socio-economic identity, one that implies stability, respectability, and authority in the region. These notions of inheritance and antiquity may also have played a role in reinforcing local networks of power, alliances, and patronage, essential for maintaining influence within the dynamic socio-political landscape of *Ruhuna*.

The word "*deegha*," derived from the Sanskrit *dirgha*, indeed carries connotations of longevity, continuity, and far-reaching significance. In the context of early Sinhala and its use in inscriptions and historical texts, it suggests not only a physical dimension of length but also an enduring legacy or tradition. This understanding can significantly enhance our interpretation of cultural and architectural terms in ancient Sri Lankan history.

When examining the *deegha stupa* referenced in the *Dipavamsa*, the emphasis on the term "*deegha*" reinforces the notion that this stupa is associated with an archaic or longstanding tradition. The connection between "*sela chetiya*" (stone stupas) and "*deegha stupa*" is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that both terms may have been used interchangeably or in close association to underscore a shared heritage. This interchangeability indicates a conscious effort by the authors or scribes of the *Dipavamsa* to link the *sela chetiyas* to a respected and ancient architectural tradition.

By framing *sela chetiyas* within the context of *deegha stupas*, the author of the *Dipavamsa* may have sought to convey a message of continuity and respect for the architectural lineage in Sri Lanka. This association reflects a broader cultural understanding of the significance of monumental structures as embodiments of spiritual and historical narratives. It not only highlights the physical attributes of these structures but also serves to legitimize their place within the evolving landscape of Sri Lankan Buddhism and architectural practice.

This interplay between language and tradition suggests that the cultural memory surrounding *sela chetiyas* and *deegha stupas* played a crucial role in how communities understood their heritage. It highlights the importance of preserving and venerating ancient practices as foundational elements of identity in the context of changing political and social landscapes. Thus, the terminology used in historical texts not only informs us about architectural styles but also about the values, aspirations, and historical consciousness of the societies that produced them.

The association of *sela chetiyas* with mountain tops and elevated rock formations is indeed a notable characteristic that sheds light on the early Buddhist landscape in Sri Lanka. This

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pattern indicates that, prior to the arrival of Rev. Mahinda and the formal introduction of Buddhism, ritual centers were strategically located in elevated areas. These high-altitude sites not only provided physical prominence but also carried significant spiritual and cultural meanings.

The terms *pabbata vihara* (mountain monastery) and *giri vihara* (hill monastery) in ancient texts reflect the historical practice of establishing Buddhist centers in such elevated locations. These sites likely served as ideal places for meditation, contemplation, and spiritual gatherings, aligning with the Buddhist ideals of seeking higher states of consciousness and enlightenment. The choice of mountains and hills as sacred spaces emphasizes the connection between the natural landscape and spiritual practice, allowing practitioners to engage with the divine in a serene and elevated environment.

Before the institutionalization of Buddhism through the efforts of Rev. Mahinda, these high places may have already been significant for indigenous spiritual practices, possibly linked to animistic beliefs or other religious traditions. As Buddhism began to establish itself, these elevated locations might have been adapted into Buddhist ritual centers, integrating existing cultural practices with new religious ideologies.

Moreover, the elevation of these sites also symbolizes a journey toward spiritual ascent, reflecting the Buddhist philosophy of overcoming worldly attachments to attain enlightenment. The continued significance of these *pabbata* and *giri vihara* in the Buddhist tradition not only demonstrates their importance as centers of worship and community but also illustrates the dynamic relationship between geography, spirituality, and cultural identity in Sri Lanka.

In summary, the construction of *sēla chetiyas* on mountain tops highlights a rich tradition of elevating spiritual practice, suggesting that these high places were central to the religious life of early Sri Lankan communities, both before and after the advent of formal Buddhism. This emphasis on elevated sites underscores the importance of landscape in shaping the spiritual and cultural narratives of the region.

The term *pabbata vihara* (Sanskrit *parvata vihara*), referring to Buddhist monasteries built on elevated or rocky landscapes, is indeed a significant concept in the study of early Sri Lankan Buddhism. The frequent appearance of this term in inscriptions from the second and third centuries CE highlights its relevance to the monastic practices of the time. The synonymy between *pavata* and *giri*—both meaning "rock"—underscores the preference for constructing monasteries in rugged terrains, which provided a natural setting conducive to ascetic practices.

As you noted, rocky outcrops and elevated terrains in Sri Lanka are typically less accessible, making them ideal for monks seeking solitude and a tranquil environment for deep meditation and spiritual focus. The association of these sites with asceticism aligns well with the Buddhist ideal of renunciation and detachment from worldly distractions. Such locations not only facilitated a peaceful atmosphere for meditation but also symbolized the monks' quest for enlightenment, representing a physical and metaphorical ascent toward higher states of consciousness.

The evolution of the term *pabbata vihara* to *girivihara* in later inscriptions, such as those from the 9th century, indicates a continuity of this monastic tradition while reflecting regional

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linguistic variations. The enduring use of these terms throughout centuries emphasizes the longstanding significance of rocky monasteries in the Buddhist landscape of Sri Lanka.

Wijesuriya's observation (1998) about the typical locations of meditation monasteries on mountain slopes or rocky outcrops further reinforces this connection between geography and monastic life. He states;

The meditation monasteries are generally located on the slopes or tops of mountains or at the very least on an outcrop of a rock.... (1998:4).

By situating monasteries in challenging terrains, the early Buddhist community fostered environments that encouraged introspection and spiritual discipline. This practice not only reflects the geographical realities of Sri Lanka but also illustrates the intentionality behind monastic settlements designed to support the spiritual objectives of the monks.

In summary, the *pabbata vihara* and *girivihara* represent vital aspects of the architectural and spiritual heritage of early Sri Lankan Buddhism. The choice of rocky, elevated locations for these monasteries speaks to the enduring values of solitude, meditation, and asceticism that are foundational to Buddhist practice. These sites remain significant in understanding the historical and cultural contexts of Buddhist monasticism in the region.

The Vinaya texts, which outline the disciplinary codes for Buddhist monks, emphasize the importance of selecting appropriate locations for monastic living. The guidance to find a place that is neither too close nor too far from villages, avoiding congestion during the day while ensuring tranquility at night, reflects the practical needs of monks in their pursuit of spiritual development. This careful consideration of residential locations underscores the relationship between environment and practice in early Buddhist communities.

As Wijesuriya notes, the summits and slopes of mountains align perfectly with the requirements laid out in the canonical texts. These elevated terrains not only provide the necessary seclusion but also foster an atmosphere conducive to meditation and reflection. The presence of natural rock shelters in these landscapes further supports the idea that monks utilized the resources available to them to create conducive living spaces. These shelters offered protection from the elements while allowing for a degree of isolation that was vital for ascetic practices.

The archaeological evidence of such rock shelters, particularly those adorned with inscriptions in early Brahmi characters, serves as a crucial testament to their historical use. These inscriptions often commemorate acts of merit performed by laypersons for the benefit of the monks, indicating a symbiotic relationship between the monastic community and the laity. The act of inscribing these records in rock shelters also highlights the significance of these locations as sites of spiritual and communal importance.

The inscriptions not only document the religious and cultural practices of the time but also reveal the ways in which laypeople supported the monastic community, reflecting a broader network of patronage and spiritual exchange. This relationship emphasizes the role of the lay community in sustaining monastic life and highlights the interconnectedness of monastic and secular practices in early Buddhism.

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In summary, the Vinaya prescriptions for suitable living locations for monks, coupled with the archaeological evidence of rock shelters and inscriptions, illustrate the practical and spiritual considerations that shaped early Buddhist monasticism in Sri Lanka. These elements contribute to our understanding of how geography, community support, and ascetic ideals were woven together in the establishment and maintenance of monastic life.

The archaeological exploration in Sri Lanka during the late 19th and early 20th centuries significantly contributed to our understanding of ancient Buddhist monasteries, particularly those located on mountain tops. The discovery of these monasteries, often associated with natural rocks and rock shelters, highlights their architectural and spatial significance in the landscape.

One notable example is the ancient monastery at Ritigala, which has been recognized as a prominent Buddhist center since the first millennium BCE. Its function as a religious hub for ascetic monks underscores its importance in the broader context of early Buddhist practices in Sri Lanka. The continuous occupancy and use of the site over centuries resulted in alterations to the original architectural layout, demonstrating the dynamic nature of monastic life and the adaptations made to accommodate the needs of the community. This ongoing evolution reflects both the persistence of Buddhist practices and the influence of changing cultural and historical contexts.

Similar cases can be observed at other ancient monasteries such as Mānakanda, Veherabādigala, and Nuvaragalakanda. Each of these sites reveals a pattern of architectural development that incorporates natural features, demonstrating how monks utilized the landscape to create conducive environments for meditation and ascetic living.

The mention of Kukkuṭapabbata in Ruhuna, where the *lalata dhatu* (forehead relic) of the Buddha was venerated, adds another layer to this narrative. The presence of a monastery on a rock named Kukkuṭa during the reign of Viceroy Mahanaga suggests that such sites were not only important for meditation but also served as key religious centers for relic veneration. The discovery of ruined *chetiyas* (stupas) made of ground stones on these rocky summits indicates their role in fulfilling the ritual needs of the monasteries. These structures likely served as places of worship and relic enshrinement, reinforcing the connection between the physical landscape and spiritual practice.

Overall, the archaeological evidence of ancient Buddhist monasteries on mountain tops illustrates the significance of these elevated locations in the development of monastic traditions in Sri Lanka. They reveal how natural landscapes were integrated into the religious and cultural fabric of early Buddhist communities, fostering environments that supported meditation, asceticism, and ritual practices. The continued study of these sites contributes to our understanding of the historical evolution of Buddhism in the region and the interplay between geography and spirituality.

The archaeological evidence of ground stone structures found on the summits of elevated terrains is indeed suggestive of ancient *sēla chetiyas*, particularly in areas where inscriptions refer to *pabbata viharas*. This connection between the physical remains and the historical texts provides valuable insights into the architectural and cultural practices of early Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka.

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The construction of *sela chetiya*s using locally sourced stone reflects a pragmatic approach to building in challenging, elevated landscapes. These structures likely served both ritual and commemorative purposes, functioning as stupas that housed relics and facilitated religious practices. Their location on mountain tops aligns with the ascetic ideals emphasized in Buddhist texts, where elevated sites are seen as conducive to meditation and spiritual reflection.

Over time, however, there was a notable shift in architectural practices, leading to the decline of ground stone constructions in favor of brick structures. This transition can be attributed to various factors, including changes in available materials, evolving construction techniques, and perhaps shifting cultural preferences within the Buddhist community. Brick constructions allowed for more elaborate designs and durability, which may have contributed to their widespread adoption as the primary material for monastic architecture.

Conclusion

The decline of ground stone *sela chetiya*s reflects broader trends in the evolution of Buddhist architecture in Sri Lanka, as well as the influence of regional and historical contexts. As brick constructions became more prevalent, they may have overshadowed the earlier stone structures, leading to their eventual abandonment or transformation. Nevertheless, the archaeological remains of these ancient *sela chetiya*s continue to provide crucial insights into the early stages of Buddhist monastic architecture and the practices that shaped the spiritual landscape of Sri Lanka.

In summary, the identification of ground stone-made structures as potential *sela chetiya*s is significant in understanding the architectural evolution of Buddhist monasteries in elevated terrains. The transition from stone to brick construction reflects not only changes in material culture but also the dynamic nature of religious practice and community needs over time.

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