

Ganapati in Early Buddhist Art of Sri Lanka: An Explanation of the Elephant-Headed Figure at Mihintale Kalaka Ctiya

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Abstract

The first Sinhalese literary evidence of Ganapati is found in a verse of Sasadāvata, a poetry work composed in 12th century CE during the Polonnaruwa period. Ganapati or Gatesha, who is one of the most worshiped gods in Hindu culture, is not found in Sri Lankan literature till the medieval period. However, a sculpture of an elephant-headed figure belonging to the 2nd century CE has been found on the cornice below the topmost register of one of the frontispieces of Mihintale Kaat ka Ctiya among the frieze of dwarfs, referred to as gatas in literature. The figure has been identified by scholars as the well-known Hindu god Gatapati owing to the elephant head. In comparison to Hindu sculpture, the figure can be correctly identified as an early depiction of Gatapati. This interpretation leads to a number of questions that need to be answered, such as: does the presence of this representation of Gatapati refer to the existence of the cult of Gatapati in Sri Lanka at that time? And further it also raises the question as to what was the intention of having a figure of Gatapati in a Buddhist temple? And it also prompts us to think about the nature of Buddhism that would have prevailed at that time in Mihintale that allowed a sculpture of Gatapati in the Mihintale monastery of Kataka Ctiya. This study intends to examine the social and cultural dynamics that would have allowed for the intrusion of such a non-Buddhist icon into a Buddhist building at an early stage of Buddhist history in the island. Arising from the facts available, this figure can, thus, be identified as an earliest depiction of this Hindu god at a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka, as the head of the gatas, in the form of Ēkadanta who has only one tusk as we know him today. The consciousness among the contemporary society of him as a divine being is evident from the archaeological context of the sculpture. Therefore, sculpturing Gatapati at Mihintale Kataka Ctiya can be identified as the early stage of absorbing this non-Buddhist deity into Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. Further, it can be concluded that the heterodox Buddhism was influential in sculpturing non-Buddhist icons in early Buddhist art. Simultaneously, the political