

Miniature art: female dominance of the terracotta figurines

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Terracotta figurines are found extensively in the dry zones of Sri Lanka. They are closely connected with river basins, canals, tanks and agricultural landscapes. In 2007, the Upper Malwathu Oya Archaeological Exploration Project has identified three Terracotta sites in this region. They are namely, Nikaweva, Keerikkulama and Waragoda. The main objective of this paper is to discuss the evidence of the terracotta findings.

The excavated Terracotta sites of Waragoda and Nikaweva in this region are private owned land, located in the Yoda-ela left bank that flows into the Nuwaraweva in the Anuradhapura city centre. One of the main objectives of these excavations was to establish the chronological sequence of this culture. The excavations findings of these two sites were remarkable in many ways and have had a major impact on our understanding of early agricultural society in Sri Lanka.

From these two excavations one hundred eight miniature objects were discovered which depict a large number of female figurines. The most common type of female figurines found from the excavations represents a popular artistic form. The hair style and dress of the female figurines express popular fashion designs which may have existed in this culture. The five female figurines which are sitting on a ship seem to have emerged as a classic artistic form and provide a clue to a particular socio-economic background of the contemporary society. These miniatures of the human form suggest a gender representation. This probably reflects female dominance of this culture. Also the decorated miniature figurines in various body positions, costumes, hair style, and ornamentation depict age, social rank and gender of specific ancestor.

The fact that many of the sites were located in agricultural areas suggests terracotta miniaturism might have served as cult images due to their significance in agricultural society. The figurines may have possibly acted as cult images of fertility in small shrines.

Key words: Dominance, Gender, Terracotta

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