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## **Musical Iconography in Sri Lankan Buddhist Art: A Reflection of Religious and Cultural Identity in the Anuradhapura Period**

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### ***Abstract:***

*This research investigates the role of music iconography as a critical source for understanding the music history of Sri Lanka during the Anuradhapura period. Music iconography, defined as visual representations or symbols related to music, provides valuable insights into the cultural and historical context. The study employs a three-tiered methodological approach: Description, Analysis, and Interpretation, focusing on the primary subject matter, conventionality, and symbolic meanings of visual representations of music. Through this framework, the research explores the evolution, independent characteristics, and indigenous elements of Sri Lankan music as depicted in visual art from the Anuradhapura period. Despite significant contributions from Western scholars to the field of music iconography in the West, Sri Lanka has seen limited formal research in this area. This study aims to bridge this gap, contributing to the global body of knowledge on music iconography while highlighting the distinctive features of Sri Lankan music. Additionally, the research examines the influence of Buddhism on Sri Lankan music during this period, identifying foreign elements and the underlying ideological shifts that shaped the evolution of the music. Ultimately, this study concludes that Sri Lankan music from the Anuradhapura period exhibits both indigenous characteristics and external influences, reflecting the societal needs and cultural exchanges of the time.*

**Keywords:** Music Iconography, Sri Lankan Music History, Anuradhapura Period, Buddhist Influence, Cultural History

## Introduction

After Mahinda, the son of King Ashoka, brought Buddhism from India to Sri Lanka during the 3rd century BCE, many aspects of Sri Lankan society underwent a revival influenced by Buddhist principles. Along with Buddhism, a rich Buddhist culture was introduced, leading to significant transformations in various fields, including the physical, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of life. This cultural shift included developments in religious institutions, language, architecture, painting, sculpture, carving, and music. The social context of public life also evolved under the influence of Buddhist concepts. Buddhism was organized under the leadership of monks, who received strong support from the king. The monks devoted themselves to preserving Buddhist teachings by adhering to the Vinaya rules and providing guidance to both the state and its citizens. As a result, they occupied a prominent position in society. The prior power held by Brahmins, Niganta, and other groups diminished, allowing Buddhist monks to emerge as the leading and most influential figures in Sri Lankan society. Anuradhapura was established as the first Buddhist capital of Sri Lanka. While the socio-cultural context before this era was a blend of various influences, it soon developed distinctive characteristics unique to the country within the framework of Buddhist religious concepts.

This research seeks to investigate how music iconography within Buddhist art from the Anuradhapura period provides insights into the development of Sri Lankan music, its indigenous characteristics, and external influences. Through a three-tiered approach—Description, Analysis, and Interpretation—the study examines the visual representations of music, exploring their symbolic meanings, conventional elements, and the impact of Buddhist ideology. By focusing on the intersection of music and Buddhist art, this research not only highlights the role of music in the spiritual and cultural life of the time but also sheds light on the foreign and indigenous influences that shaped the evolution of Sri Lankan music. This study ultimately contributes to a broader understanding of Sri Lankan music History while enhancing the global discourse on music iconography in Buddhist art.

In this study, various depictions of musical instruments and musicians were analyzed from sculptures, frescoes, and other forms of Buddhist art from the Anuradhapura period (377 BCE – 1017 CE). Thus, this study is arising the following research Question: How does musical iconography in Sri Lankan Buddhist Art from the Anuradhapura period reflect the religious and cultural identity of Music in ancient Sri Lanka?

## Methodology

The methodology for this research employs a multi-faceted approach to investigate the role of musical sculpture in Sri Lankan Buddhist art during the Anuradhapura period. A literature survey was conducted to gather scholarly works on Buddhist art and the representation of music. This literature review will provide a foundation for the study and help identify gaps in current research. A detailed analysis of Buddhist sculptures from significant religious sites, such as

Mahavihara, Mihintale, and Abhayagiri, was carried out. This analysis will specifically focus on the depiction of musical instruments, musicians, and their symbolic meanings. Fieldwork and site visits will facilitate direct observation, photographic documentation, and interaction with local contexts to enhance the understanding of the sculptures' significance. A comparative analysis with other Buddhist art traditions will contextualize Sri Lankan statuary within a broader cultural framework, highlighting potential cross-cultural influences. Textual analysis of historical Buddhist texts, such as the 'Mahavamsa' and other relevant documents, was utilized to explore the significance of music in Anuradhapura.

## Literature Review

Charles Godakumbura (1961) examined the carvings of the images of instruments in his research paper submitted to the art journal *Sinhala Drama and Music*. It should be noted that this research paper is a preliminary attempt to establish the existence of music in Sri Lanka. However, he did not focus his work on Buddhist art (Godakumbura, Charles, 1961, pp. 9).

Pandit Wimal Abhayasundara (1963), in his book '**Sangeetha Samhita**,' mentions that there is a musical tradition unique to Sri Lanka. It also mentions that Ravana, the ruler of Lanka, was a master of the subject of music. Abhayasundara also presents the engravings and paintings related to music in Sri Lanka in the appendix attached to his book. The depicted elements include a carving of a flute player on a pillar head at the Anuradhapura Lowamahapaya, a painting of a drum player on the chain of the Dedigama Elephant Camp, the Mulkirigala Purappattuwa, the first Devangam profile, a Raban player, a musical ensemble, a gatabere, a udekkiya, a pantheruwa, and a veena player (wood carving of Embakka), which are significant about Sri Lankan music (Abhayasundara, Wimal, 1963. Colombo, pp.1246, 1249,1253, 1255, 1269, 1270, 1273, 1277).

C. de S. Kulathilaka (1974), in his book 'The Origin of Music in Sri Lanka' (**Lankawe sangeetha Sambhawaya**), has given a comprehensive survey of the music of Sri Lanka from the prehistoric period to the Kandy period. However, the book does not present a comprehensive study of the unique characteristics of Sri Lankan music at any one time and does not present clear conclusions. There is no systematic research on the music of Sri Lanka from the prehistoric period to the Anuradhapura period.

Venerable Baddegama Wimalawansa Thero (1984) provides a brief account of musical instruments in Sri Lanka in the chapter 'Our Instruments' (Chapter 16) in his research book 'Our Culture' (**Ape Sanskrutiya**). He concludes that musical instruments, which were popular in India around the 2nd century AD, came to Sri Lanka with Buddhism (Wimalawansa, Baddegama, 2000 (Second Edition), pp. 560-582).

In **The Influence of Buddhism on the Sinhalese Music of Sri Lanka**, Wolfgang Laade explores the profound connection between Buddhism and the musical traditions of Sri Lanka, particularly among the Sinhalese people. Laade investigates how Buddhist religious practices, teachings, and rituals have significantly influenced the development of Sinhalese music in terms of both its structure and purpose. The study highlights the integration of music into Buddhist ceremonies, enhancing spiritual experiences and promoting meditative states. Laade discusses the role of music in temple rituals, where instruments such as drums, cymbals, and flutes are utilized to create an atmosphere conducive to prayer and devotion. The text also addresses the reflection of Buddhist iconography and symbolism in Sri Lankan musical traditions, illustrating how music serves as a tool to reinforce Buddhist teachings. Laade's work provides essential insights into the interrelationship between Buddhist thought and Sinhalese music, shedding light on how these two elements have evolved together over the centuries and continue to be intertwined in Sri Lanka's cultural identity (Wolfgang Laade Source: *Asian Music*, 1993 - 1994, Vol. 25, pp. 51-68).

In **Anuradhapura Yugaye Sri Lankawe Sangeethaya** (Sri Lankan Music in anuradhapura Period), Chandana Ruwan Kumara (2020) delves into the evolution of music in Sri Lanka during the Anuradhapura period, emphasizing its integral role in religious and cultural practices. The study focuses on how music was an essential part of Buddhist rituals and daily life during the Anuradhapura era. Kumara explores the influence of Buddhist teachings on the development of musical forms, instruments, and practices, illustrating how music was utilized in various sacred contexts, including temple rituals, religious ceremonies, and festivals. The text also examines the role of musical iconography found in sculptures and artwork from the period, showcasing the significance of music in reinforcing Buddhist philosophy and enhancing the spiritual atmosphere of religious spaces. Kumara's work provides a comprehensive understanding of the interwoven nature of music, religion, and culture in ancient Sri Lanka, particularly within the context of historical and artistic heritage during the Anuradhapura period.

The intersection of music iconography and religious practices in Sri Lankan Buddhist Art, particularly during the Anuradhapura period, has not been sufficiently the subject of scholarly studies. Several studies have emphasized the influence of Buddhism on Sri Lankan music and its representation in religious art.

This study, titled "**Musical Iconography in Sri Lankan Buddhist Art: A Reflection of Religious and Cultural Identity in the Anuradhapura Period**," aims to fill this gap by providing a holistic analysis of the role of musical iconography in Anuradhapura-era Buddhist sculptures, focusing on how these depictions reflect and contribute to the religious and cultural identity of the time.

## Results and Discussion

### Depictions of Musical Instruments

#### Stringed Instruments

The history of the Anuradhapura period is vividly represented through notable depictions of the lute (Veena) in ancient literature. A remarkable example is the carving of a dwarf playing the Veena, discovered at the Lowamahaprasada site (also known as the Brazen Palace or Lohaprasadaya), which was built by King Dutugemunu in the 2nd century BC (Fig. 1).

The carvings of the Veena found at the Lohaprasada site reveal that the instrument has an oval shape with a straight body, resembling either a bow or a semi-curved form. The most famous Veena in Hindu literature and contemporary South India features a gourd, known as Thumba, and has a dragon-shaped head called Yali Mukham. The Veena discovered at Lohaprasada has some similarities with the shape of the Persian harp. It is important to note that the Dutugemunu era was not associated with Hindu beliefs; rather, it marked the golden age of Buddhism in Sri Lanka's history. Furthermore in the Buddhist Tripitaka, the "Sona Sutta," a story from the Anguttara Nikaya of the Sutta Pitaka, illustrates how the Buddha taught the middle path of life to the venerable Sona Thera, a former Veena player who later became a monk, using the analogy of tuning the strings of the Veena (Sona Sutta (trans.),AN 6.55).



**Fig.1**

The legendary veena player of the god Shakra, known as Panchasikha, once graced the Indasila cave where the Buddha dwelled, illustrating the profound cultural connections between music and spirituality in ancient times. The Belupandu veena, a central element in this narrative, is highlighted in the revered Sakkapanha Sutta, part of the Dighanikaya, underscoring the significance of music within Buddhist teachings (Dighanikaya (Sinhala) 1996, pp.308). The Pali text "Milindapanha," from the same era, also mentions the Veena, showcasing its cultural relevance (Milinda Question, Vol. I (trans.) 1993, pp. 74).

Moreover, stunning carvings of the Veena discovered in Buddhist caves across India—such as those in Pitalkora, Bharhut, Ajanta, and Matura—depict it in a bow-shaped form, emphasizing its historical and artistic importance. The Mahavamsa mentions King Dutugemunu portyed the Veena player of God Shakra (Panchasikha), in the inside of the Ruwanweli Seyā dagaba. It is said that during the grand festival of the Ruwanweli Seyā, the divine musician Panchasikha enchanted all with his melodies, weaving together the realms of the divine and the earthly (Mahavamsa, chapter 30, 75 Stanza;chapter 31,82 Stanza).

According to a study conducted by Indian researcher Dr. Swami Pragnananda (1981), Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka is also mentioned in the list of places where bow-shaped (semi-curved) veenas are found. It can be concluded that he has mentioned this by observing the Veena carvings found at the Lohaprasada site.

*'The veenas featured in the sculptures of Gandhara (1<sup>st</sup> -2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), Barabudur (8<sup>th</sup> century AD), Kamboja (6<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century AD), Ajanta (2<sup>nd</sup>- 7<sup>th</sup> AD), Nagarjunakonda (2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), Satana (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), Mahavallipuram (7<sup>th</sup> century AD), Paharpur (8<sup>th</sup> century AD), Anuradhapuram, Ceylon (2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), and other places resemble the bow - shape'*(Prajnananda, Swami, 1965, pp. 112).

Historian Ratilal's records (1939) also mention a type of harp-shaped veena that existed in the pre-Buddhist period.

*'Old Veena was a harp without the Post. It has a hollowed belly - (Doni) covered with a board or stretched leather (Camma Pokkara). The hollowed belly was broader towards the back..... and tapered towards the front, where it was continued into an upstanding arm (danda) Which terminated in a little like the head of a violin...'*(Meheta, Ratilal, N, 1939, pp. 313).

The Panchasikha Veena and the Lohaprasada Veena made by King Dutugemunu in the Dagoba may be similar in shape. That is, it can be concluded that the Veena used was of the Harp shape, which was in use with the Buddhist concepts of that period. The carvings of the Veena players are also found among the carvings of the Isurumuniya, a site constructed by the renowned King Devanampiyatissa during 307-276 BC (Fig.2) and the Sinha Pokuna (Lion Pond) at Mihintale during the Anuradhapura period (Fig.3).



Fig.2



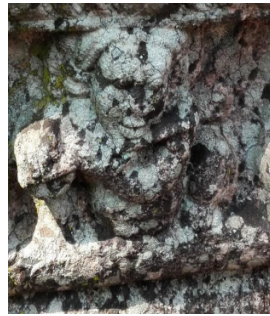
Fig.3

## Wind Instruments

Paintings and carvings found at the Jetavana temple site, built by King Mahasen, have been identified as belonging to the Mahasen (277 to 304 CE) period and provide significant evidence of Sri Lankan arts and crafts. The sculpture of Flute players (Fig.4) housed in the Jetavana Museum is one of the most substantial evidence of wind Instruments of music from the particular period. Furthermore, the rock carving of a male flute player (Fig.5) and a female flute player (Fig.6) kept in the Anuradhapura Archaeological Museum are also the Iconography evidence that presented wind instruments of the Anuradhapura period.



**Fig.4**



**Fig.5**



**Fig.6**

Among the stone pillar carvings found during archaeological excavations at the site of the Lowamahaprasada built by King Dutugemunu, carvings depicting a flute player (Fig.7) and a conch shell player (Fig.8) are also presented as Iconographic evidence for wind instruments. The carvings at Sinha Pokuna in Mihintale provide valuable insights into the artistic context of the era. Among these carvings, representations of dancing actresses and Veena players offer compelling evidence regarding the music of the time. Particularly noteworthy is a musician positioned to the right of an actress, who is depicted playing a flute (Fig.9).



**Fig.7**



Fig.8

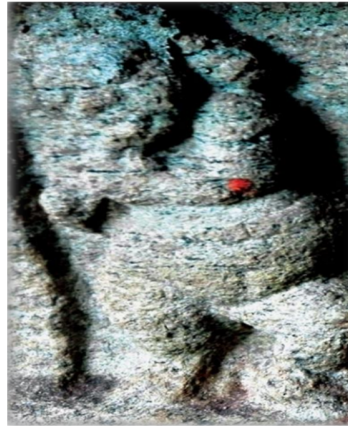


Fig.9

### Percussion and Solid Instruments

Among the stone pillar carvings found during archaeological excavations at the site of the Lowamahapaya built by King Dutugemunu, there are carvings of dwarfs playing musical instruments such as the double-faced Drum-Harasbera (Fig.10), the Udakkiya (Fig.11), the single-faced drum-Kumbhabera or Bummediya (Fig.12), the Ghana instrument like the Kaitalama (Fig.13). An ancient Kaitalama dating back to the second century BC has been found during excavations at Anuradhapura (Fig14). These are also currently kept in the Anuradhapura Archaeological Museum. Several instruments belonging to the Ghana (solid) category (belonging to the list of instruments of King Dutugemunu) are mentioned in the Thupavamsa. Among them, names such as dalaham, loham, kinnar, kaitalam, samutthalam and gee-talam are mentioned (Sinhala Thupavamsa (ed.), 1986. Ranjith Wanaratne, pp.168). Almost all the instruments mentioned here as 'Talam' can be said to produce sound by striking to maintain the rhythm. It seems that the solid metal instrument that produces the sound of being struck, known as 'Talamkota' in modern usage, was known as 'Kaitalam' at that time.



Fig.10



Fig.11



Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.14



### Conclusion

This study underscores the significance of musical iconography as a vital lens through which to understand the religious, cultural, and musical landscape of Sri Lanka during the Anuradhapura period by analyzing visual representations of music within Buddhist art. In this study, various depictions of musical instruments and musicians were analyzed from sculptures, frescoes, and other forms of Buddhist art from the Anuradhapura period (377 BCE – 1017 CE). Music iconography within Buddhist art from the Anuradhapura period provides insights into the development of Sri Lankan music, indigenous characteristics, and external influences. Through a three-tiered approach—Description, Analysis, and Interpretation—the study examines the visual representations of music, exploring their symbolic meanings, conventional elements, and the

impact of Buddhist ideology. By focusing on the intersection of music and Buddhist art, this research not only highlights the role of music in the cultural life of the time but also sheds light on the foreign and indigenous influences that shaped the evolution of Sri Lankan music.

The findings highlight the dynamic interplay between art, music, and belief systems, revealing how music functioned as a cultural expression and reflected evolving societal values in bridging the scholarly gap in Sri Lankan Music. By analyzing visual representations of music in Buddhist art, it becomes clear that Sri Lankan music was shaped not only by its indigenous traditions but also by external influences and religious ideologies. This study ultimately contributes to a broader understanding of Sri Lankan music History while enhancing the global discourse on music iconography in Buddhist art.

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