

Man and Horse Sculpture at Isurumuniya Anuradhapura A New Interpretation

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Anuradhapura – a great city, a witness to the numerous stupas, monasteries and viharas, dagobas represents different epochs and social milieu. Anuradhapura, along with Polonnaruwa and Sigiriya is known as ‘ruined city’ of Sri Lanka. Isurumuniya temple is situated about a mile to the south of the ancient city of Anuradhapura. In the Mahavamsa, from the time of the arrival of Thera Mahinda in the third century BC, we find the reference to the *Issarasamana Vihara*. It can be considered that the ancient *Isuramenu* temple of the early inscriptions and the modern Isurumuniya are the same as the *Issarasamana Vihara*.

Isurumuniya temple was built around two massive boulders below the lake Tissaveva. It was part of the ancient monastery complex of Sri Lanka – *Issiramana*. Founded in the third century BC, the complex includes a Buddhist temple in the rock with the statue of the reclining Buddha, a pond and a rock-cut relief of elephants, preserved in its original form. The temple is widely known for the remarkable stone carvings. There are four carvings of special interest in this Vihara. They are the ‘Isurumuniya Lovers’, ‘Elephant Pond’, ‘the Royal Family’ and ‘the man and horse’.

The figure of a ‘seated man and the head of a horse behind him’ is very famous (*Fig. 1*). The work of art, we concentrate on is a sculpture, done on the front surface of the boulder, which functions as a wall to contain the pond below. The figures of elephants at water sports are carved on the rock-wall. As art experts observe, the sculpture, could date back to the early days of Anuradhapura Kingdom.



Fig. 1. The Man and horse's head sculpture, Isurumuniya, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.

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There are many analyses of this carving, which look rather faded. The sculpture of the seated figure we have taken for discussion, less than life-size, measuring about 2 feet 7½ inches from the waist to the top of the head, lies inside a shallow, vaulted, incomplete grotto, the chest being more or less a continuation of the vertical plane of the rock. The man is not muscular, instead having the hermaphrodite features referred to divine figures in art of the time. From the incomplete nature of the sculpture, one cannot identify any *asana* (seat/throne), on which the figure is seated. Thus, it may be assumed that the figure was seated on the flattened floor of the cavity. The left leg is placed on the ground and is folded, so that the left foot touches the right thigh. The left arm stretches vertically down like a support from the rounded shoulder and the hand is placed palm downwards on the base. The right leg bent at the knee, is raised, the outspread right arm resting on it. The chest is erect but flexible. The countenance of the face is that of a peaceful and abstracted but conscious dignity. It looks as if the upper part of the body were left unclothed, but there appears a faint trace of a “sacred thread” (*poona noola*) – a thread which was worn by ancient ascetic people, and one or more necklaces.

A thin cloth covers the lower half of the body. The folds of it are shown at the waist. The border of this clothing is indicated by a faded line below the knee of the raised right leg and at the ankle of the left leg placed on the ground. A bracelet (*angada*) is worn on the upper right arm. The headdress is incomplete. However, it looks like a helmet on the head, which if so, appears to be made out of metal. Prof. S. Paranavitana on the contrary advocates that the hair may be taken as being treated in the style called ‘*jatabhara*’ as per South Indian iconography. The hair or the entire headdress, like the entire sculpture, is left unfinished.

The back of a seat is seen above the left shoulder against which the figure is resting. On the right side, this mark, like the hands, is vanished in the background of the grotto (or remained unfinished). The head of the horse is seen emerging out of the rock behind the right arm of the seated figure. The snout of the animal has been broken.

Still, the sophistication of the sculptural work, pre-eminently justifies the epithet ‘exquisite’. Its stylistic refinements faithfully point to the flourishing of a sophisticated tradition.

The interesting question that has mystified us is who are these two – ‘Man’ and ‘Horse’? The histories of these figures are not precisely explored by the archaeologists. They have variable views about this wonderful sculpture and they have identified it as “Man and Horse”.

Prior to presenting our unraveling of the ‘mystery’, it is reasonable to look at some of the solutions advanced, over time, by a number of scholars.

Some years ago, a critic put forward the funny theory, that the sculpture depicts a ‘horse-trader’. We need not investigate deep into this suggestion, simply because, such an imposing personality can in no way be a mere ‘horse-trader.’

Ananda Coomaraswamy considered the sculpture to be the illustration of *Kapila muni* of Indian epic, on the reason that its physical features resemble with those well-known sculptural remains at the early Pallava capital Mamallapuram in South India, where on a similar rock boulder the descent of the Ganges is depicted.¹

The powerful military and forceful countenance of the ‘Man’ cannot pretty be a sign of the subdued, spiritual appearance of the Great Sage. Therefore, the ‘Sage Kapila’ form has been dismissed

by some scholars. The earliest effort to study the Isurumuniya sculptures of the 'man and horse head' on a more careful erudite manner was made by Professor Senarath Paranavitana. He had inferred that the 'Man' was '*Parjanya*' or '*Varuna*' – the Rain-God, and the horse was '*Agni*' (fire). To quote Paranavitana, "the manner in which the horse has been shown in the sculpture is quite in keeping with the relation of *Agni* to *Parjanya*, as we gather from Indian religious literature. *Parjanya* being rain-cloud represents water, and in the Vedic and Epic literature, it is in the water that *Agni* (fire), particularly that form of *Agni* representing lightning was believed to originate. *Agni Vaisvanara* conceived as a horse, was regarded as the vehicle not only of *Parjanya* but also of *Indra*. *Agni* being the embryo of the waters (*Garbham apam*), the horse symbolizing *Agni* must be in the interior of the cloud-rock and not visible. The artist therefore has shown, the horse as coming out from the bowels of the rock, the head alone having emerged"².

Parjanya is the Hindu God who gives rain thereby leading to plentiful food and other crops for people to consume. *Parjanya* is the spirit of thunderstorms and monsoons. There are some hymns in the *Rig Veda* that celebrates the character of *Parjanya*. *Parjanya* is recognized with *Indra*, the "Bull" of the *Rig Veda*. He is also associated with Lord *Varuna* as a deity of clouds and as punishing sinners. In the *Atharva Veda*, it is mentioned that prayers are dedicated to *Parjanya*, to invoke the blessings of rains. He is also responsible for vegetation and is related with cattle.

Agni is one of the most important Vedic gods. He is the god of fire, the representative of the gods, and the acceptor of sacrifice. *Agni* is in everyone's heart; he is the essential spark of life, and so a part of him is in all living things; he is the fire, which consumes food in peoples' stomachs, as well as the fire, which consumes the offerings to the gods. He is the fire of the sun, in the lightning thunderstorm, and in the smoke column, which holds up the heavens. The stars are sparks from his flame. He was so important to the ancient Indians that 200 hymns in the *Rig Veda* are addressed to him, and eight of its ten books begin with praises dedicated to him.

Paranavitana has been awed by the nobility and the dignity of the individual depicted in the sculpture.

However, this view has nowadays been generally established but this interpretation appeared fanciful since iconographic details do not correspond to divinity. One could see some uncertain points in Paranavitana's view. It is our objective to bring to light these doubtful points of argument. Simultaneously, it is intended to prove that the figures in the sculpture could not be accepted as of *Agni* and *Parjanya* but of some other personalities.

One point of importance in Paranavitana's study is that he has totally overlooked the other sculptural remains at the site, apart from the elephant reliefs. According to Paranavitana, some of these are purely secular theme³.

If it is so, this could be possibly the only site in the world where Buddhist religious and secular themes were created along with non-Buddhist (Vedic) religious themes, maybe of the same period. In history, there are innumerable instances of religious bias whenever a differing minority is emerging amidst the more powerful majority. The *Mahavihara* (at Anuradhapura) in no way accepted its sister institutions *Abhayagiriya* and *Jetavana Viharas* for meeting unorthodox *Mahayana* beliefs.

There were some incidents on which the *Mahaviharins* or the *Theravadins* (in Sri Lanka), took the strict actions to crust the unorthodox *Mahayana* by wiping out all that was precious to the antagonists. If we accept the view of Paronavitana, then, here at Isurumuniya, we may find traces of Vedic cult worship along with depiction of purely secular themes, as found in royal courts. It is not applicable here to dwell eventually on the other sculptural representations at Isurumuniya. All the sculptures were meant to serve a purpose and that they are not irregular deposits by later renovators.

Paronavitana has relied on the citation of a tenth-century inscription of King Kassapa V (ca. AD 908-918), excavated at *Abhayagiriya* at the north of Anuradhapura. If the sculpture under review is that of *Parjanya* and *Agni*, those could have easily been inscribed, not at a distance (at *Abhayagiriya*) from Isurumuniya, but on the very rock boulder on which they were visible or were just emerging⁴.

Some scholars identified the well-built man wearing a helmet. Ornaments adorn his body and his ears. He is seated in highly dignified contentment, in the iconographic posture of royal style and appearance (*Maharajalilasana*). The garment decks his lower body as well as covers his thighs. The garments suggest high military attire. He stares steadily and with evident pride and confidence, right ahead at the capital city – Anuradhapura. His whole dress well befits a Commander-in-Chief or a ruler. Dr. Wilhelm Geiger, in his Appendix C to the English translation of *Mahavira*, traces, in admiration, the progress of Pandukabhaya's campaign. He concluded that the sculpture, 'Man and Horse', depicts conqueror King *Pandukabhaya* looks at his capital with immense pride, with mare *Cetiya* who was faithful to him throughout his troubled years, by his side.

Dr. Chandra Wickrema Gamage, in his 'Research Essay' titled 'Art of Isurumuniya', approached to the identification of the Man and the Horse following Geiger. According to him, the 'man' is a crowned dignitary, in the attire of a Commander-in-Chief. The crowning touch is presented by the horse's head. This dignified man, has the horse's rein tied to his upper arm-as is clearly depicted in the sculpture.

However, he did not take the logical leap to arrive at the right conclusion. Let us take a very close view of the steps that lead to the conclusion. We opine that it may not be impossible to think that the sculpture identified previously as 'Parjanya' or *Varuna*, or Sage *Kapila*, or Commander-in-Chief, or King *Pandukabhaya* is a depiction of *Bodhisattva Vajrapani*.

In favour of our view, we may refer to the iconography of *Bodhisattva Vajrapani*. His outstretched right hand brandishes a *vajra*, "symbolizing analytical knowledge (*jñanavajra*) that disintegrates the grasping of consciousness⁵. Although he wears a skull crown in a few depictions, in most depictions he wears a five-pointed *Bodhisattva* crown to depict the power of the five *Dhyani Buddhas* (the fully awakened state of the *Buddha*)⁶.

In early Buddhist legends, *Vajrapâni* is called a minor deity who accompanied *Gautama Buddha*. In some texts, he is known to have been the king of *TrâyastriCæa* of *devas* in the heaven of Buddhist and Hindu cosmology. He is also identified as *Æakra* or *Indra*, the Hindu god of rain as depicted in the idols of the *Gandharva*. As *Æakra*, it is stated, that he was present during the birth of *Tathagata*. As *Vajrapâni* he was the person who helped *Tathagata* to escape from the palace.

The sculpture is either unfinished or rather eroded due to ravage of time. However, if closely observed, it can be noticed that the man holds a *vajra* in his right hand. He wears *valaya* and *angada* on hand, *kundala* on ear, neck ornament, anklets, fine drapery, and a headgear may be a *jatamukuta*. The headgear depicts faint traces of five arches, which may be five *Dhyani Bhuddhas*. His head is carved in one-third profile. His eyes are almond-shaped with penciled eyebrows, lower lip is pouting. The horse-head on the stella on his right upper side is visible, indicating the symbolic representation of the *Gautama Buddha's* great departure.

To support this view, we may cite here several statues of *Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*, just the resemblance of the Isurumuniya carving, which are available from other Mahayana countries. Two images of Kuan-yin, the Chinese representation of *Avalokitesvara* could be cited here (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3). The serene look, the upright torso, the bare chest but for the necklace ornaments, the left hand kept straight on the seat, the right hand on the slightly bent-up right knee, the *maharajalilasana* attitude, the decorated high headgear (reminiscent of the *Jatamukuta* of most *Avalokitesvara* figures) are the common features that could be compared.



Fig. 2. Kuan-yin. Wood, polychrome, China, Sung period (courtesy: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)



Fig. 3. Kuan-yin. Wood, polychrome, China, Sung period. (courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

An early representation of *Simhanada Avalokitesvara* from South India, now in the Tamil Nadu State Museum belonging to probably the eighth-ninth century AD. This figure is from Amaravati, one could see several conspicuous features having very close similarity to those of the Isurumuniya sculpture (Fig. 4). Apart from the *maharajalilasana* pose, the head-dress with no doubt *Dhyani Buddha*, the lack of heavy ornamentation, the knot of the waist-band, the faint trace of an armband on the right only, it shares some other characteristics with the sculpture under review. The emblem of a supposed weapon (*Vajra*?) is has taken the place of the horse's head of the Isurumuniya sculpture. The horse's head has a very strange resemblance to the supposed *vajra* emblem of the South Indian figure. On the left side of the *Simhanada* figure, are two lotus buds with a full-blown lotus flower. One may even see the traces of some features in the shape of lotus buds which probably testify to an attempt to depict the *padma* (lotus) above the right shoulder of the Isurumuniya figure⁷.



Fig. 4. Simhanada Avalokitesvara, Amaravati. 8th-9th century AD.
Tamil Nadu Government Museum, Chennai.

Bhattacharya says the *Simhanada* form of *Avalokitesvara* has no ornaments but in the *rajalilasana* attitude⁸.

A very important clue to our study is provided by Hocart. According to his observation, “the style of an unfinished figure in a cave at ÂGdiyâgala thirty miles south-west of Anuradhapura can only be identified by the high Pallava crown as the figure is only blocked out. It represents a man in the same attitude as the man and horse at Isurumuniya”⁹.

The high Pallava crown named by Hocart is actually the *jatamukuta*, the attitude is *maharajalilasana*. The ÂGdiyâgala sculpture provides the link between Isurumuniya and other sites like Buduruvagala, Kustharajagala, etc. (as well as the early bronze images of *Avalokitesvara* from Sri Lanka). All these sites are rock hewn and meant for Mahayana cult images. The ÂGdiyâgala shrine is too unfinished, probably owing to the same fate that had fallen most Mahayana monuments in Sri Lanka but not a sculptural device to symbolize a Vedic concept¹⁰.

We can imagine that the position enjoyed by the horse in Mahayana as *Avalokitesvara*’s constant companion could possibly have resulted in the rendering of the horse in the sculptures of Mahayanists. This is the famous *Hayagriva*, the horse-headed divinity that always keeps in close proximity to the Bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara*.

R.H. van Gulik says: “*Hayagriva* seems to have been invoked for numerous purposes, such as causing rain, vanquishing enemies, driving away devils, kindling love between two people, curing diseases and so on. *Hayagriva*, the horse in Northern Buddhism plays a great part on account of its connection with *Avalokitesvara*”¹¹.

It is not impossible to believe that the cult of *Hayagriva* too had prevailed among the early *Mahayanists* of Sri Lanka alongside with the cult of *Avalokitesvara*. The sculptor at Isurumuniya could not have hesitated to symbolize this great diving companion of *Avalokitesvara* in his very natural form, that with a horse’s head. *Hayagriva* may generally mean ‘a horse’s neck’. But no one can

distinguish a neck of a horse in sculpture unless the entire head is shown. Thus, *Hayagriva* came to be depicted as the divinity with the head of a horse in *Mahayana* sculpture¹².

We may conclude our identification of the Isurumuniya man and horse as an attempt to depict the great *Mahayana Boddhisattva Vajrapani Avalokitesvara* and his associate *Hayagriva*.

Footnote

- ¹ Rowland. B. (1953). *The Art and Architecture of India*, London. pp 181 f., pls. 114, 115.
- ² *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. XVI, *cit.*, pp. 185 f.
- ³ Paranavitana, S. 'A Bas-Relief at "IsurumuGi" Anuradhapura', *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. XIX, 1956, pp. 335-41.
- ⁴ *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. XVI, *cit.*, p. 187.
- ⁵ Kalupahana, David (1992). *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities*. University of Hawaii Press. ISBN 978-0-8248-1402-1. P. 219
- ⁶ Leviton, Richard (August 2012). *My Pal, Blaise: Notes on a 60-Billion-Year Friendship*. iUniverse. ISBN 78-1-4759-4809-7. P.232.
- ⁷ J.E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, in her thesis discussed at the SICSA, has tried to identify these faint traces with those of feather-tipped arrows.
- ⁸ Bhattacharyya, B. (1958). *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*. Calcutta. pp.127 f.
- ⁹ *CJS*, II 2, 1930. Pp. 77 ff. Pl. XLVII b.
- ¹⁰ Among early forms of Avalokitesvara, prominence was given to a special form from Ceylon, known as *Sinhaladvipe Arogyasala-Lokanatha*. (Foucher, A. *L'iconographie bouddhique de l'Inde*, Paris 1900-1905, Catalogue I, 20). Probably this form of Avalokitesvara has been taken as an ideal by the Mahayanis of other countries.
- ¹¹ Gulik, R.H. van. (1935). *Hayagriva*. Leiden. Pp. 23f.
- ¹² Lohuizen-de Leeuw, J.E. van. (1964). *Indian sculptures in the von der Heydt Collection*. Zurich. P.54.