

Communication

Mañjuśrībhāṣita—Vāstuvīdyāśāstra A preliminary note

This brief note is presented with a view to introducing to students of Sinhalese art and archaeology a unique ola-leaf manuscript being edited and translated by a group of scholars to be published in a subsequent issue of the Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities.

The manuscript written in Sanskrit verse using Sinhala characters is variously named in the colophons as *Mañjuśrībhāṣita-Vāstuvīdyāśāstra*, *Mañjuśrībhāṣita-Vāstuśāstra* and *Mañjuśrībhāṣita-Citrakarmāśāstra*. It is unique in that it is the only *śilpa* text so far discovered that deals with Buddhist architecture. The manuscript which originally belonged to a Buddhist temple, Cakkindārāma in Gampola, is now the property of the Historical Manuscript Commission and is kept in the National Archives, Colombo.

The manuscript contains 60 leaves written on both sides and has 6 to 8 lines to a page. The text is very corrupt, there being many obvious metrical and scribal errors. There are altogether 17 chapters dealing with architecture, sculpture and painting which are discussed in relation to Buddhist monuments. The text is evidently a Mahāyānist *śilpaśāstra* as is clear mainly from the section dealing with the Dhyāni-Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the Mahāyāna pantheon.

The text shares common architectural details with other known Hindu *śilpaśāstras* such as *Mūnasūra*, *Mayamata* and *Kāśyapaśilpa*. It deals with twelve Buddhist monastery plans not discussed in any other *śilpa* texts on architecture. The greatest divergence between our text and other known *śilpa* texts is in the planning component, while the working procedure and details of construction bear a similar approach.

It is noteworthy that the text draws close parallels to the existing monastic establishments in Anuradhapura and elsewhere, while at the same time it sheds new light and meaning to the voids of information not available from any other source. For instance, in a previous study of a monastery type following a strict discipline in the layout, we were baffled by the obvious disarray of the sacred buildings placed on the central terrace and we attributed this non-symmetrical arrangement to "functional, aesthetic, religious or superstitious points of view". (see Prematilleke and Silva, A monastery type of ancient Ceylon showing Mahayanist influence, in *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. XXX, pp. 61-94). Our text clearly shows that the disarray of buildings we noticed is due to architectural conventions evolving from deep-rooted religious beliefs. Again, the section dealing with the Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas has been useful to us in re-examining Mahāyānist figure sculptures like the one at Kuṣṭarajāgala (see Prematilleke, The image at Kuṣṭarajāgala—a re-examination, in Senarat Paranavitane Commemoration Volume, in print).

Judging from the script, the manuscript cannot be more than 200 years old. The subject matter, however, goes back to a much earlier period. The contents closely relate to Buddhist monuments datable to a period between the fifth and the twelfth centuries. Our text should closely follow the date of the *Kāśyapaśilpa*, i.e., 11th-12th century A.D., if not an earlier date.

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