

Vessagiriya: Epigraphy and Palaeography

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Introduction

This is a very important archaeological site known as Vessagiri located in the southern section of the ancient City of Anuradhapura. Inscriptions and monuments from the pre-Christian era till about the 10th century AC are found at this site. However, before the present study, this site has not been explored properly and completely. The archaeological explorations and excavations began here in 2006, under the supervision of Prof S.D.S. Seneviratne and with financial support from the Central Cultural Fund (CCF). This exploration was launched as a joint project of the CCF and the Government's Department of Archaeology. This paper is based on the epigraphic material found during the course of the investigations of the above project.

Aims and objectives

(a) Critically examining the published epigraphic records found at the site being investigated. (b) Recoding inscriptions which have not yet been published. (c) Establishing the historical significance attributable to the site. (d) Making use of the available epigraphic records on site for training university students specializing in archaeology.

Methodology

A literature survey was conducted preliminarily before the ground work. The site was initially divided into 10 x 10 square grids to facilitate the investigation. Estampages were prepared for all symbols and inscriptions. At the same time, they were photographed using digital cameras. Hand written copies were also made. Finally, an interpretation was attempted on the

basis of the material found in all of the collected data.

Results

It was possible to discover and record quite a number of new symbols and inscriptions found at the site. Symbols were mainly non-Brahmi in character. The number of new inscriptions was ten. Out of them, three were early Brahmi cave-inscriptions, while two belonged to 2nd century AC (After Clenit). There were also four inscriptions attributable to the 5th and 6th centuries AC. Finally there was one inscription belonging to 7th century AC.

Discussion and conclusions

On the eastern side of one (rock A) of the three rocks at Vessagiriya, there appeared several non Brahmi symbols. Some of them may represent close connections with pre Buddhist rituals and they may be attributed to the Proto-historic period. The majority of inscriptions that have been found were at the rock (B), which was fully associated with architectural remains. Out of them, one inscription specially mentioned the families which arrived in Sri Lanka with the Sri Maha Bodhi.

This study enabled the investigator to edit and reinterpret the inscriptions formerly published. The estampages of all the symbols and inscriptions were made for the purpose of preserving them for future studies. There is a view that this place called Vessagiriya was no other than a part of the site known as Isurumuniya. The present investigations made under this project proved the above view which was presented by Senarat Paranavitana to be acceptable on fairly reasonable grounds.