

AN UNPUBLISHED ANTIQUE SILVER BUDDHA IMAGE FROM ANURADHAPURA DISTRICT

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In 1963 or thereabouts, when I was attached to the Colombo National Museum and in search for antiquarian and rare books on Sri Lanka for my collection and personal use, I had the happy occasion of meeting the late John M. Seneviratna, historian and scholar, with whom I became greatly acquainted. Some time later I accompanied him to meet Mr. Upali Batuvantudava, a lawyer in Havelock Town, Colombo. He was himself a connoisseur, an all-round collector of Sri Lankan antiquities, such as ancient coins, porcelain ware, maps and prints, furniture, statues, rare books, stamps and palm-leaf manuscripts. With my introduction to him by Mr. Seneviratna, I became one of his associates, as in general we had common interests.

On that first meeting and during the pleasant chat that ensued, in the course of which we delighted in seeing the choice items of his valuable collection, he took out three Buddha images from a cupboard and showed them to us with no little pride.

One of these was a large ivory standing image of the Buddha from the old Alapata Walauva in Ratnapura, to which Mr. Batuvantudava had provided an additional ebony pedestal; the second was a heavy Bronze Buddha, also standing, with the verdigris still uncleaned, which he claimed he had obtained from Mr. W.H. Biddell, a long-standing and reputed collector of Anuradhapura, who was more recognized as a numismatist. It is the third of these a rare standing silver Buddha image that was the most remarkable piece, being the largest I have ever seen, and the subject of my presentation here.

On one of my frequent visits to Mr. Batuvantudava, I suggested to him that, since these three items were all unique in their own way, he should give them publicity before the Royal Asiatic Society, so that they would be documented before any untoward circumstances should cause their loss in the future. Although he had an unsurpassed practical knowledge of the classic material with which he kept himself more occupied and for which his expert guidance was sought both by scholars and laymen alike, he showed no inclination whatever for writing. On the contrary, he countered with the suggestion that I myself should do it, being a Museum officer dealing with artifacts and the like of this nature.

The objective of this very short paper, despite the long lapse of time, is therefore to place before those interested an account of this unique silver Buddha image. It is with

pleasure and gratitude that I mention here that Mr. Batuvantudava provided me with all required technical and other details, including the photographs published herewith. This paper is drafted based on these details, the study of the photographs and also from personal memory of my examining of the object of art.

While going through my accumulation of papers in search of a draft article I had prepared some time ago on the Lion Flag, I casually came across these notes, which I had jotted down about 30 years or so ago. Having now revived my interest on this long forgotten matter and resolved to set about the subject, intending to supplement it with any more details, I rang up Mr. Batuvantudava forthwith after the lapse of several years in my association with him as a result of having taken up permanent residence in Kandy on being appointed to the Kandy National Museum. Upon inquiry, Mr. Batuvantudava informed me that, due to fast failing eye-sight and ill-health, and more particularly due to there being no one his family to maintain and continue his collection, he was constrained to dispose of his entire collection down to the last item some time previously. I was naturally sorry to hear it, and even more of his deteriorating health therefore, and also since he came to the telephone to answer my call from the sick bed. I was completed to refrain from bothering him for extra details, even the name of the temple of it provenance, which was of prime need for the article.

Mr. Batuvantudava, who confined himself only to collect genuine and classy items, in the course of a discussion with me on this statue, explained to me that the chief attractions of this icon were that

- (a) it is the largest known silver Buddha image found in the Island, and
- (b) the only known hand-moulded specimen of such large size among ancient statuary of any kind in the Island.

After the many years of service I have seen in the National Museums Department and the knowledge I have gathered from elsewhere as well, I must state that there had arisen no need to revise the conclusions of this veteran collector as regards this image, at least as far as my knowledge goes.

Mr. Batuvantudava had purchased this when it had been brought to him by an aged Buddhist monk who was said have been from an old temple in Kalaweva area in the Anuradhapura District, explaining that he required some money urgently for a temple land case, and had said that he inherited it as pupil from the chief priest of his temple after his demise. What the temple is of course there was no way of ascertaining now¹, but thinking of the Kalaweva area, we are naturally reminded of the rock-cut 5th

¹ Mr. Batuvantudava passed away recently. All my attempts to obtain any supplementary information from any family members were a total failure.

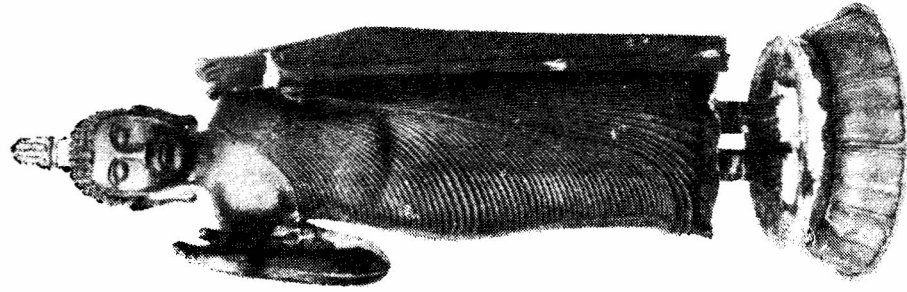


PLATE I

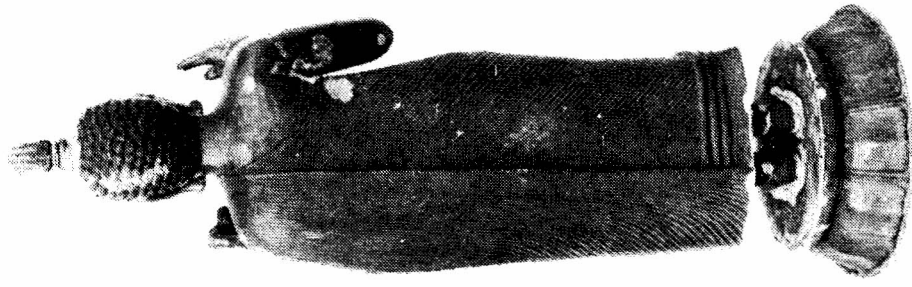


PLATE II

century gigantic Avukana Buddha image, which the silver specimen under discussion pretentiously inclines to portray in miniature, to which there will be need to allude in the discussion following.

The statue is 50 cm. high from the tip of the 'siraspota' or the nimbus, to the base of the lotus pedestal, and had been shown by test to have been wrought of 100% pure or fine silver, which the Kandyan silversmith, call *polong ridi* or '*nul ridi*'. This metal is softer than sterling silver and is preferentially taken for finer works involving laborious tooling. Its total weight is recorded to be 3 kilograms and 200 grams (or c.273.60 tolas), and is entirely hollow inside - which could be easily ascertained from the ringing sound emanating when knocked upon.

A conspicuous feature of this unique image is that it lacks, exactly as in the case of the Avukana Colossus, the 'ushnisha'² or conventional protuberance, which too should

² For an enlarged illustration, see D.T.Devendra, *Classical Sinhalese Sculpture*, London (1958) Plate 76. Certain archaeologists, like Devendra and Godakumbura, are of the opinion that the 'siraspota' of the Avukana Image is a new addition. Their reasons for this are not given, but probably it may be because it is crudely fixed and also not illustrated in what appears to be its oldest sketch of the Avukana Image, that prepared by the artist A.Nicholl for Sir James Emerson Tennent's celebrated *Ceylon; an Account of the Island, Physical Historical and Topographical*; see vol. II London (1859) on page 604. But the old villages of this area still preserve an anecdote of the 'siraspota' in connection with the railway bridge on the line running past the Avukana Buddha had washed away repeatedly and presented a great problem to the authorities. Thereupon, the villagers informed them that they should first replace the 'siraspota' of the Avukana Buddha that lay fallen on the platform of the image, in which condition it had been left for decades. They had asserted that until and unless this be given priority, their attempts would be futile. Eventually the 'siraspota' was fixed, and hurriedly, by the railway labourers, and the reconstruction of the bridge carried out. This may account for the crude masonry, if there is any truth in this story. Prof.P.E.E.Fernando of the Peradeniya University, who discussed this subject with me over an article on the 'Siraspota' in Buddha Images' that he was preparing for publication, expressed his view that the object illustrated in the print in Tennent, mentioned above, as lying on the platform of the Avukana Buddha, is the none other than the 'siraspota' of the image, lying fallen in such a way that it neither presents a good view of the front nor profile. Irrespective of the credibility of the story of the railway bridge, we have the identical 'siraspota' of the Avukana Buddha in miniature form in our silver Buddha Image, which serves as sufficient evidence

consist of the spiral hair knobs just as on the rest of the head. However, in its place is substituted a tyre-shaped plain bump soldered to the top of the head and copying that of the main statue.

The 'siraspota', or ornamental head-flame, is likewise remarkably designed in imitation of the Avukana model, and is made by soldering two identical halves together as an independent detachable element.³ It is 28 mm. high when exposed. A small cylinder, fixed to the base of a disc over which the 'siraspota' rests, helps it to be pressed to fit tightly into a cavity in the head and thus stand firm. This cavity in the head, which too is cylindrical itself, is unusual for a metal statue and has been purposely designed to function as a receptacle, for in it there is a miniature golden stupa. This stupa itself is detachable into two parts as lid and base and has a total height of 21 mm. perfectly made to bear all the requisite architectural elements of a stupa, with the singular exception of the 'devata kotuva'. It is doubtless that this is a reliquary that enshrined a sacred relic originally, but which was missing at the time the statuette reached Mr. Batuvantudava hands. When he had questioned the monk who brought it to him, he had been told that to his knowledge it had been empty of a relic throughout.

As previously stated, the most distinguished feature of this very beautiful specimen is that it had been hand-moulded in its entirety by hammering separate silver sheets to appropriate size and shape and assembling them. The hair is delineated by a series of curly bumps of spirals to the identical pattern of the Avukana Image, with intense care and patience. The portion of the silver sheet meant for the head ought to have been retained to be comparatively thick gauged when hammering the two large halves of the body, as otherwise the spiral hair knobs, eyes and nose could not have been beaten up to such high relief.

Beginning right from the head (excluding the nimbus) down to the end of the inner robe, the body consisted of two major halves, front and back, which had been carefully positioned and soldered together firmly. The projecting right hand, which is in 'Abhaya Mudra' (?) attitude of bestowing protection, and slanting slightly more inwards than in the Avukana Image, is itself in two halves upwards from the elbow, dividing the entire hand into two, right up to finger tips. The left hand also is fashioned in similar manner, but only from the wrist upwards. It is an independent component soldered to the hand at the wrist. The thick edge of the outer robe, hanging down from

that at least during the Kandyan period the Avukana Image was graced with a 'siraspota'. We are therefore inclined to agree with Prof. Fernando's conclusion that originally the Avukana Image indeed had this 'siraspota'.

³ See plate IV

SILVER BUDDHA IMAGE FROM ANURADHAPURA DISTRICT

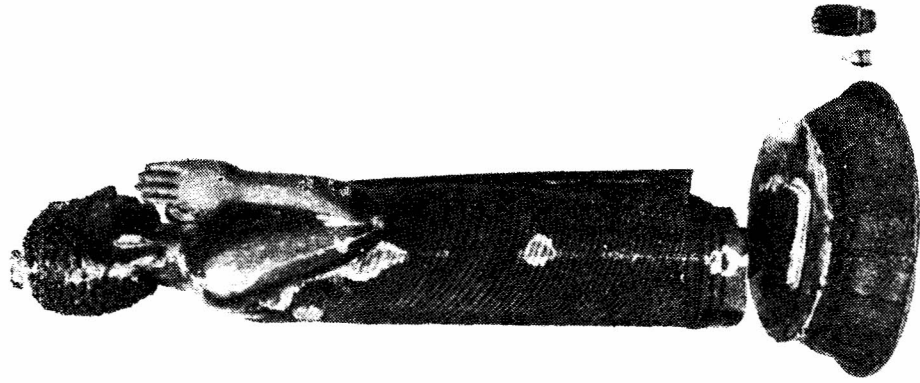


PLATE III

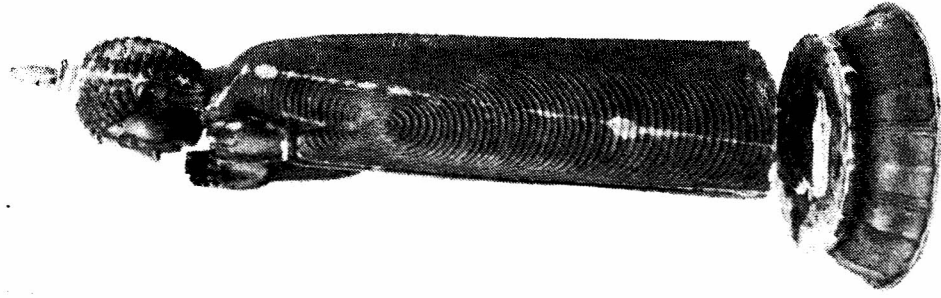


PLATE IV

the left wrist, is a separate plain strip and soldered to form its hem, from which the comparatively deep series of hanging folds emanate to run orderly on to the back of the body, displaying one end of the draping down robe on that side.

The entire outer robe had been ingeniously beaten to shape with meticulous care and patience in neat smoothly-running heavy folds to simultaneously display conspicuously the anatomical contour of the human body, particularly in the front. It is indeed singularly surprising how this gifted craftsman of our image carried each of the many such wavy folds in one half of the torso to precisely meet the correct gauge and continuation point in the other half in two separate operations. Thus, when the two halves are vertically aligned together, the joints embrace so perfectly that no trace has been allowed for the slightest flaw. Another aspect of the craftsmanship that calls for emphasised observation at close range is that every single fold of the outer robe that is destined to run from front to back, despite the fluctuating gauge at the commencement, is carried right up to the point of destination in a perfectly regular course without overlapping, so that each groove or ridge of the fold could be counted separately in spite of the fact that the folds gradually get closer at the left shoulder, where they congest and squeeze to flow yet smoothly down the back and reach the lower hem of the inner robe close to the ankles.

The feet are soldered to the torso above the ankles. Between this solder-joint and the ankle, the required height had been achieved by introducing a separate cylindrical piece to match, while again, each foot itself had been soldered twice in two stages, the upper portion being fixed to a separately moulded full scale sole. The technical activities of the body had been completed by soldering the feet to the disc of the lotus plinth.

As noticed, each foot, despite being a small item, constitutes of four distinct parts which had taxed the artist the labour of soldering four times. This can be deduced as proof that the quantity of silver at the workman's disposal was much limited, and having this challenge uppermost in his mind, it appears that he smelted every single off-cut over and over again, hammered it to a sheet, however small it was, to cut just the required size for moulding, and laboured intensely to carry out his masterpiece to a flawless finish with maximum economy of silver.

The pedestal on which the figure stands too had been achieved in precise imitation of that of the main Avukana model.⁴ It is 6 cm. high and has a circumference of 52.4 cm. at the base. Both the upper and the lower series of the petals of the lotus flower, comprising two units, have been moulded to limit one joint in each rim. Subsequently, they have been soldered together to form the pedestal. The plate fixed to

⁴ For a photograph see H.C.P. Bell Archaeological Survey of Ceylon: Annual Report for 1895 Plate XXVI A.

the top of the lotus is a plain disc.

A somewhat mysterious element that will not fail to arouse curiosity is a multipetalled lotus flower in silver 6.2 cm. in diameter, which is soldered to the reverse side of the plate of the lotus pedestal, immediately beneath the feet. It is beautifully crafted and is highly embossed in convex shape and soldered face down. Its actual need or function is inconceivable, as when once the statue is kept in erect position, this ornamental lotus flowers is not expected to be visible.

Now, beneath the feet of the Avukana Buddha the Archaeological Survey discovered in 1955 certain bronze images of deities, the identification and significance of whom Dr. Senarath Paranavitana discusses in detail in his Annual Report for that year⁵. Whether any such in miniatures are enclosed in this little lotus is of course not possible to say, but hardly probable, and the slightest indication to that effect is not there either. But, as was the tradition in the ancient past to enshrine sacred relics below the feet of the Buddha image of specially large size, the high possibility that a tiny relic may be securely locked up in this small space may not be altogether precluded. Up to the brim of the lotus the pedestal is empty inside.

The *Urna Roma*, although almost invisible in a photographs, is the only instance where the artist had used throughout his work the engraving tool to depict it. This important feature is represented in Buddha images in diverse forms. But, as has been evident throughout, the artist had still tenaciously clung to the Avukana model to copy it in the shape of an upright conch shell on the forehead between the eye-brows in order to complete the essential iconographic details and thus bring his grand product to completion.

We have, in the course of the discussion above, intermittently noted that, including the robe itself, nearly all the characteristic features of the Avukana colossus have been consciously transferred on to this silver image, and as far as one can judge, apparently in ratio and proportion too. The craftsman has undoubtedly triumphed in his difficult venture, even up to the last minute detail. But the most conspicuous lapse on his part is that he had failed to imitate its facial appearance with the required degree of precision, resulting in a drastic imbalance in the affinities of their faces.

The traces of hammer marks, although they have for the most part been filed off and smoothed, can yet be observed on close scrutiny, scattered throughout the figure.

⁵ S. Paranavitana *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon: Annual Report for 1955*; pp. G 23, 24, Plate IV. V.

When I saw this silver statue originally, the entire figure had an intense blackish patina, which easily betrayed to its viewer the identity of its material. Only its joints were relieved of this patina, which sustained white patches and green corrosion. Every solder-joint of the figure is visible even in a photograph, including that of the golden reliquary⁶. When I made inquiries from the craftsmen in Kandy about this feature, the explanation offered by them was that it occurs when the texture of the soldering material is different to that of the main object, and when such places are subject to long years of unfavourable environmental impact. However, despite its antiquity, the statue was fortunately in an excellent state of preservation, with no damage visible at that time.

The hollow nature of the silver Buddha calls for somewhat serious remarks, for it is a peculiar deviation from the normal practice that such images were not made with hollow inside. If not solid cast, they were at least clay cored, without leaving an empty cavity. As stated above, unless the Badulla Seated Bronze Buddha is classified as hollow-cast originally, our silver image may be the sole example of its type, which identifies itself as a cavities hand-moulded specimen among the ancient icons in the Island. It appears that the self-willed craftsman, who is the architect of this comparatively large image, opted to relieve himself from the bondage of an old tradition in order to release a novel product, prompted by the fact that he was producing a unique item for which a precious and rare metal in such bulk was scarcely used. Among archaeological objects dating from the Anuradhapura period itself, there are numerous instances where craftsmen have been inconsistent in following old tradition. After all, we must well remember that these artists themselves are the creators, preservers and also destroyers of these traditions in every sphere that is art. This is a fact which most of us tend easily to forget.

Silver was a luxury in the Island before the advent of the Europeans in 1505 A.C. The irony of the situation was such that we had more gold than silver, as is amply proved by occasional yet numerous discoveries of archaeological objects of considerable antiquity, most of which are actually Buddha image and reliquaries. Among these artifacts silver is almost absent as a rule. When considering this situation against the weight of the silver statue, certainly no ordinary person could have possibly afforded such a bulk in those days for a single article which at the same time we not for personal use. Therefore, there is no doubt that this image would have been made at the instance of a royal command with sufficient silver released from the Royal Treasury. The work had been entrusted to a master-craftsman thoroughly proficient in statuary, after the completion of which, it may have been offered to some presently unknown temple in the Kalaweva area by the King as a votive offering.

⁶ See Plates I, II, III, and IV.

Now, who this royal benefactor is, no one can say with absolute certainty. Of all the late rulers who sat on the Kandyan throne, the name of King Kirtisri Rajasingha(1747 - 1782) certainly outshines those of the rest, and under his sustained patronage Buddhism revived and flourished to a great extent. Many neglected temples received lavish endowments throughout the country. This King was also actively engaged in getting his royal craftsmen busy in constructing a large number of Buddha images, the most stupendous of which is the gigantic rock-hewn and gilded Buddha image at the Kandy Gangarama Rajamaha Vihara, which has been done in imitation of the Avukana colossus. When considering these munificent activities, we may not be far wrong if we conclude that it was none other than King Kirtisri Rajasingha who was the donor of our magnificent and valuable silver Buddha image, the only known such specimen in the whole country.

Sri Lanka is famous for gigantic rock-hewn Buddha statues of considerable antiquity. Also, we have a wealth of ancient bronze Buddha images dating from the dawn of the Christian era, which are of the hollow-cast type and core filled with clay paste. To add to this, there are not only numerous solid-cast medium-size ancient bronzes, but also we appear to have had massive solid-cast bronze Buddha images, as is exemplified by the heavy fragments recently excavated from the Kandy Natha Devale premises, for the hauling up of which an elephant had to be engaged⁷. In my opinion this is the largest of such examples ever brought to light anywhere in India or Sri Lanka. If we include the 5th century seated bronze Buddha image from Badulla now on display in the Colombo National Museum, as totally hollow-cast originally, as presently seen⁸, the silver Buddha would rank as belonging to the novel category of a hand-mould type. Thus in Sri Lanka we have on list presently

- (1) Hewn, chiselled or carved type;
- (2) Hollow-cast or *cire-perdue* processed type - later core filled;
- (3) Solid-cast type;
- (4) Brick/stone and mortar or stucco type;

and with this remarkable piece for example

- (5) Metallic hand-moulded type.

⁷ For illustrations, see P.L.Prematilaka, *Third Archaeological Excavation Report - Kandy, 1987*, unnumbered 5th,6th,8th and 9th illustrations, and also pp. 8,9.

⁸ For an enlarged illustration, see Nandadeva Wijesekera, *Heritage of Sri Lanka* (1984) Colombo. Plate 93.