

## Religious Use of Elephants in Ancient Sri Lanka

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**Abstract.** The religious use of elephants in Sri Lanka has its origins in the early period of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The oldest record of the use of elephants in Buddhist religious processions and festivals in Sri Lanka dates back to 3rd century BCE, when Buddhism was introduced to the Island. The oldest record of the use of elephants to draw a chariot with the Tooth Relic in a procession is from early 14th century CE, centuries prior to the commencement of the Kandy Esala Perahera in the 18th century. Elephants used for religious purposes during the early periods were mostly state elephants belonging to the king and in some cases the royal or Mangala elephant. However a number of elephants were used in religious festivals later and that perhaps required more elephants from other sources. The first recorded donation of an elephant to a temple took place in the early 1st century CE. This could be a continuation of a former tradition. Offering of elephants to temples are frequently mentioned in historical sources since 14th century CE.

### Introduction

The use of elephants in *peraheras*, the Buddhist religious processions is a common practice in present day Sri Lanka. The main objective of a perahera is to honour the Buddha. This traditional practice is central to Buddhist festivals and is associated with elephants (preferably tuskers) carrying the relics of the Buddha as well as other cultural activities such as performing dancers and drummers. The number of elephants and varieties of dancers are often used as a measure of the excellence and quality of the procession (Atkinson 2009).

The history of the use of elephants in Buddhist processions and religious festivals is not illustrated properly, even though it is mentioned by several authors (Jayewardene 1994; Wisumperuma 2004; Sukumar 2011). There is a popular belief that the use of elephants in processions commenced during the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, when the Dalada Perahera, conducted in honour of the Tooth Relic of the Buddha, was connected with Kandy Esala Perahera, the annual procession held in Kandy.

The objective of this paper is to survey the historical records related to the use of elephants

in Buddhist religious festivals in Sri Lanka. The major sources include the two Pali chronicles of Sri Lanka; Mahavamsa, written in 6<sup>th</sup> century CE and Culavamsa (a continuation of Mahavamsa); compiled by three authors between 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Being oriented to provide political and religious histories, there are limitations of these sources in providing in-depth information of events such as Perahera festivals.

### Elephant in cultural history and Buddhism

The Asian elephant has been considered an auspicious animal and to signify good fortune, amidst being used as one of the four-fold armies (chariots, elephants, cavalry and infantry), a beast of burden and a trade item throughout history. In addition to this, “elephants are an attribute of royalty” (Rhys Davids & Oldenberg 1882).

The association of elephants with Buddhism dates back to the beginning of Buddhism in 6<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Elephants are associated with stories of the life of Buddha such as the conception of prince Siddhartha (who became Buddha later) and featured in a number of Jataka tales (the stories related to previous births of the Buddha), in which the Buddha himself took the

form of an elephant a few times. Sukumar (2011) provides a descriptive account of a number of such examples and suggests that the sacredness of the elephant was firmly established by early Buddhist times.

The flesh of elephants was consumed at least occasionally during prehistoric times and even in civilizations like Harappa (Sukumar 2011). However with the development of civilization this practice may have become disreputable. The Buddha exhorted the monks, who were his followers, to abstain from consuming elephant flesh and stated that if one does, he commits an offence, as mentioned in the Mahavagga Pali, Vinaya Pitaka (Rhys Davids & Oldenberg 1882).

Elephants were often used to represent the Buddha and as a symbol of religion during King Ashoka's time (272-232 BCE) in India (Sukumar 2011). The association of elephants with Buddhism has been depicted in art and architecture since the ancient times such as in India and Sri Lanka. Some of which are directly related to the Buddha. Examples are a sculpture on the southern gateway of Sanchi depicting the scene where relic caskets were taken on elephants after the 'war of relics' at Kusinara, after the demise of Lord Buddha and the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE paintings found in Dimbulagala and Kotiyagala in Sri Lanka. The decorative use of elephants is varied and found on features of art and architecture including

paintings, moonstones (Fig. 1), guard stones, building entrances, ayakas, protective walls etc. in many ancient temples in Sri Lanka.

### Origins of the religious use and donation of elephants in Sri Lanka

Elephants were associated with Sri Lankan culture since the beginning of written history in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Capture and taming of elephants were conducted or introduced during the time of King Vijaya, the first King of the country, as the Pandu king of India sent elephants and other valuables along with his daughter who was to be married to Vijaya (Geiger 1950, Chapter 7).

The origin of the use of elephants in Buddhist processions and festivals in Sri Lanka dates back to the period of the introduction of Buddhism to the country by the Buddhist monk Arhat Mahinda, during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa, in 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.

According to Mahavamsa, the first recorded instance of elephant use in a religious procession took place when King Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BCE) wanted the relics of the Buddha to be placed in the stupa he built, the Thuparama in Anuradhapura. When the king asked samanera Sumana, a fellow monk who came with Arhat Mahinda, from where to get the relics, the monk replied "O Ruler of men, having had the city and



**Figure 1.** Moonstone from Magul Maha Vihara, Lahugala depicting a row of tamed elephants with a rope across their belly. Two human figures found on the back of two of these elephants (3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> from left) could be the mahouts (11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century CE). Photo: Bushana Kalhara.

the road decorated, observe uposatha along with the retinue, mount the state elephant and, bearing the white parasol and attended by musicians, go to the Mahanaga-park in the evening. You will get, O king, the relics of him [Buddha]" (Geiger 1950; Guruge 1989, Chapter 17). The king acted accordingly and obtained the relic casket, which was placed on his head and then "placed it on the back of the elephant. Overjoyed the elephant trumpeted." (Geiger 1950; Guruge 1989, Chapter 17). A similar description of this event is given in Thupavamsa, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Pali chronicle of the stupa, but mentions that the king placed the casket of relics on the elephant's frontal globe, i.e. top of the forehead (Jayawickrama 1971).

Then the procession commenced and is described as follows: "Then the elephant, accompanied by the theras, the troops and chariots, turned back and entered the fair city by the eastern gate. Then leaving it again by the southern gate, he went to the compound of the Great Sacrifice, established behind the site for the Thuparama chetiya [stupa]" (Guruge 1989). It is further mentioned that the elephant disliked taking down the relics from his back until a spot as high as his own back was made of dry clay brought from Abhaya Tank and the relic was placed there. The elephant is mentioned as having guarded the relics until the stupa was built and carried the relic during the daytime, while the construction work was carried out (Geiger 1950; Guruge 1989, Chapter 17). This is an example of a religious procession, and the first occasion where an elephant was used in a procession to carry a relic. This same event seems to be repeated in chapter 20 of Mahavamsa. (Geiger 1950; Guruge 1989)

Elephants were also used for the festival of enshrining of the relics in the relic chamber of Mahathupa (Ruvanveliseya) of Anuradhapura during the reign of King Dutugemunu (167-137 BCE). This is described as a procession in Mahavamsa where it mentions that in the afternoon there were "a great host of troops and elephants, cavalry and vehicles." Surrounded by soldiers bearing arms, dancers, flag bearers etc, the king mounted a beautiful vehicle drawn by four beautiful Sindhu-horses. He "stood there holding a golden casket [to receive the relics]

under the white parasol. In front of him was the bedecked noble elephant Kandula". The procession then proceeded to Mahameghawana (Geiger 1950; Guruge 1989, Chapter 31). This incident is also mentioned in the Thupavamsa (Jayawickrama 1971). Misinterpreting this incident as 'Kandula holding the golden casket', Sukumar (2011) points that, this event seems to be the forerunner of the annual Kandy Perahera. However the procession related to Thuparama where the elephant held the casket with relics mentioned above was held about a century prior to this event.

According to available records, King Mahadathika Mahanaga (7-19 CE) was the first king to donate an elephant to a temple. It is said that he "even though dissuaded by the Sangha [monks], gave away to the Sangha himself, the queen, the two sons and the state elephant and horse" (Geiger 1950; Guruge 1989, Chapter 34). The king is said to have "carried out without neglecting any, all the meritorious action decreed by previous kings and likewise by his brother" (Geiger 1950; Guruge 1989, Chapter 34), thus possibly indicating that the donation of the royal elephant followed an established tradition. Such donations represented a system where the king devoted himself, close relatives and his valuables to the monks and subsequently redeemed by offering the monks suitable materials of a similar or higher value.

#### **Tooth relic and processions (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century)**

The tooth relic of the Buddha was brought to Sri Lanka during the ninth year of the reign of King Kitsirimevan (301-328 CE), i.e. around 309 CE, and was accepted with great veneration. The king ordered to convey the relic to Abhayagiri Temple and to hold the same celebration in honour of it annually (Geiger 1953, Chapter 37). This indicates the origin of the perahera tradition for the Tooth Relic.

Fa-hein, the Chinese monk who visited Sri Lanka in 5<sup>th</sup> century CE described the procession of the Tooth Relic. According to him, a man who can speak distinctly was mounted on a grandly caparisoned large elephant and sent to make

a proclamation of the procession related to the festival of the 'Tooth of the Buddha' which is to be held after ten days time. There is no mention of the use of elephants in the procession, which is described very briefly (Legge 1991).

The Tooth Relic became the palladium of Sinhalese kings and was guarded and highly venerated by subsequent Sinhalese kings who conducted various festivals as recorded in chronicles. A history of these festivals, offerings and other work to the tooth relic is presented by Vajira (2008) and he suggests that perahera tradition has been continuous since the arrival of the relic. For instance, the festivals conducted by kings Sena II, Vijayabahu I, Parakramabahu I, Parakramabahu II, Vijayabahu IV are mentioned in the chronicles (Geiger 1953, Chapters 51, 60, 74, 82, 85 and 89).

Elephants were associated with the art and architecture of the temple of the Tooth Relic since the early periods. For instance, the somewhat miraculous story related to King Mittasena (428-29 CE) reveals that there was a figure of an elephant made of stucco at the Temple of the Tooth Relic (Geiger 1950, Chapter 38).

### **Polonnaruwa to Kotte Periods (12<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century)**

The Tooth and the Bowl Relics of the Buddha were returned to Polonnaruwa from the southern region of the country during the reign of Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) and the King mounted on "his favourite beautiful elephant", went forward to accept those relics. Other elephants as well as horses were also part of this event (Geiger 1953, Chapter 74). Meanwhile, after the restoration of Mahatupa (Ruvanveliseya in Anuradhapura the former capital) the king organised a procession to celebrate the festival for the placement of the crowning ornament. The order of the procession is given in Culavamsa as; "In front of him [the king] went the ladies of the court many hundreds in number, ... , and there followed him numbers of distinguished officers." This procession included elephants illuminated with lamps – "With the mass of the elephants and horses gleaming with their golden harness [sic],

doing reverence to the cetiya [stupa] with a gift of lamps distributed over their bodies" and Geiger (1953, Chapter 76) comments that the lamps were probably fastened to the bodies of the animals. The description hints that the king practised an old custom as it says "on the day of the full moon performed in right manner all the old customs, ..." suggesting that such processions had a historical tradition. The practice of illuminating perahera elephants with lights is conducted today with the use of small electrical bulbs.

A procession with elephants was held during the reign of Parakramabahu II (1236-1270), who reigned in Dambadeniya. According to Culavamsa, the king held a seven day festival for the Tooth Relic, for which he used "divers [sic] elephants and steeds" (Geiger 1953, Chapter 85). This is one of the festivals he held for the relic.

The 13<sup>th</sup> century Sinhala book on the history of Buddhist religious offerings titled Pujavaliya was taken in procession on the back of the royal elephant as veneration by order of the King who was attracted by the contents of the book (Gnanawimala 1986). King Vijayabahu IV (1270-1272), who reigned in Dambadeniya organised a procession to transfer the Tooth and Bowl relics of the Buddha from Dambadeniya to Polonnaruwa. The relics were taken on a chariot while "the festival was surrounded by rows of elephants excellent by reason of the elephant ornaments by which they were overspread ..." (Geiger 1953, Chapter 89).

Dalada siritā, the early 14<sup>th</sup> century Sinhala prose compiled during the time of King Parakramabahu IV (1302-1326), contains a manual of the traditions and festivals of the Tooth Relic. Among the rules is a description of the procedure to be followed at a procession held during public displays of the Tooth Relic. The relic was enshrined in a casket and taken out and placed on a decorated chariot, pulled by a tusked elephant with auspicious marks yoked to it (Soratha 1950). This is of importance as it provides strong evidence of the use of elephant to draw the Tooth Relic in processions. Also, this record mentions the use of elephants to draw a chariot that contained the Tooth Relic, which is different from the present



**Figure 2.** The stone panel depicting a procession, 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century (Colombo Museum). Photo: Bushana Kalhara.

method. It has been pointed that these rules may have been in existence even before and included in *Dalada siritha* (Vajira 2008).

The offering of elephants to the Tooth and Bowl Relics is recorded during the reign of Parakramabahu IV, as “With villages and fields, women slaves and men slaves, with elephant, cattle, buffaloes and other gifts he celebrated a sacrificial festival for the relics” (Geiger 1953, Chapter 90). King Viravikkama of Kandy (mid 16<sup>th</sup> century CE), who was famous for his donations to the temples, “offered sixty and two elephants and horses and four hundred and fifty heads of cattle and buffaloes” to temples (Geiger 1953, Chapter 92).

A stone panel unearthed in Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte (the capital of Sri Lanka from 1415 to 1565) and now exhibited in the Colombo Museum, has a set of figures identified as a depiction of a procession (Fig. 2). There are dancers, a musician, an umbrella bearer, a horse, an elephant and two swordsmen among the

figures. Something is being carried on the back of the elephant, but it is difficult to conclude whether it is a rider or a canopy or something similar, which may have been placed to hold a relic or a statue (Fig. 3). Hence it is difficult to decide the purpose of the procession, whether it was religious or royal. Men riding on elephants are depicted in a number of artistic works of this period such as a number of ivory caskets (de Silva 1975) and on a guard stone belonging to this period from Kotte (Deraniyagala 1938).

#### **The Kandy Period (18<sup>th</sup> century)**

Kandy was the capital of Sri Lanka from 1593 to 1815, when the coastal regions were under colonial rule. Elephants were used for religious purposes including donations to temples and the *Esala Perahera* of Kandy commenced in this period.

According to *Culavamsa*, elephants were among the offerings to temples by King Vijaya Rajasingha (1739-1747) at least twice and once offered an



**Figure 3.** A close up of the elephant on the stone panel. Photo: Bushana Kalhara.

elephant and a horse during a sacrificial festival to the Tooth Relic (Geiger 1953, Chapter 98). King Kirti Sri Rajasingha (1747-1782) venerated the Bodhi tree and the stupas of Anuradhapura by offering elephants, horses, gold, silver etc. and offered elephants and many other items to the Tooth Relic (Geiger 1953, Chapters 99 and 100).

King Kirti Sri Rajasingha ordered that a procession of the Tooth Relic (Dalada Perahera) be held ahead of other items of the ongoing annual Esala Maha Perahera festival to honour the Buddha. The use of elephants is mentioned in the vivid description of the procession in Culavamsa; the king “had a canopy fastened on the back of the royal elephant beautifully ornamented with gold embroidery.” Then he had the elephant whose tusk was as the bright moon, decorated with ornaments and and then surrounded by (other) elephants whose riders held their hand silver umbrellas and fly-whisks. The king “placed the splendid sparkling casket of gold in which the bodily relic of the Buddha was contained carefully under the canopy ...” (Geiger 1953, Chapter 99). Although some believe this as the origin of Dalada Perahera, historical evidence support to assume that it is a continuation of a long tradition (Vajira 2008).

A painting of a caparisoned elephant with a mahout on an old plaster layer of the temple of the Tooth Relic probably belonging to the period of King Narendrasingha (1707-1739), who built the present shrine, was discovered recently (Prematilleke & Colombage 2000). It may portray a scene of a Dalada Perahera, and if so, could be taken as archaeological evidence to support the use of elephants in the procession of the Tooth Relic prior to Kirti Sri Rajasingha’s time.

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