

## Elephants in stone

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In Asia elephants have been associated with man for several centuries. Ever since elephants were captured and used by man, they have been loved, hated and even worshiped. Kings and nobles kept large numbers of them in captivity. They were used in temple ceremonies. It is therefore quite natural that the elephant has come to play a role in history, culture, art, religion, folklore and folk tales of most of the Asian countries.

In Sri Lanka too elephants have been tamed and used in captivity for over two thousand years. They were used in war, and our ancient kings had special establishments for their welfare and training. Our capital has shifted from place to place and wherever there had been a capital, we see historical remains even today. It is in these ruins of ancient places that we see the elephants in stone.

In Anuradhapura we come across several examples of elephants beautifully carved in granite. One of the most beautiful is the herd of elephants coming to water, carved on a rock by the rock pool. These elephants are carved showing a herd coming to water with one young tusker sporting in the water. The artist has captured the mood of the elephants and the expression of the one in water is classic (Fig. 1) This is attributed to the period circa 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The elephant has been utilized as a decorative motif either singly or in groups with tremendous effect at the entrances to temples, basements of the dagobas, and on pillars. The Anuradhapura kingdom remained stable from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC to 993 AD when the capital shifted to Polonnaruwa.

One of the most beautiful carvings of elephants are



Fig. 1. Stone carving of a young tusker at Isurumuniya, Sri Lanka. c. 4<sup>th</sup> century BC

found in the moonstones. Though carved steps are found in India the Moonstone is peculiar to Sri Lanka. The elephants are found carved in rows or in rows with other animals, usually the bull, horse and the lion (Fig.2). It is interesting to note that the bull is absent from the moonstones in Polonnaruwa. This is owing to the Chola influence where the bull is a sacred animal not fit to be tread upon. There are several beautifully carved moonstones in the ancient city of Anuradhapura that can be seen today - an artist's expression that had withstood that test of time. It is interesting to note that in a moonstone discovered at Lahugala Magul Maha Vihare some of the elephants carved are dressed and a few of them have riders on them. To my knowledge this is the only moonstone yet discovered to have riders on some of the elephants. Elephants are seen carved in stone at Mihintale too. Here there is a basement depicting lions and elephants.

The carvings of elephants during the Polonnaruwa period are even more fascinating. They are in a better state of preservation. Here again they are found on

beautifully carved moonstones. The Chola influence is clearly seen as the bull is absent from moonstones and we come across, for the first time, a very good carving of "Gaja Lakshmi", on the side of the famous Gal Potha (Rock Book) of King Nissanka Malla, (Fig 3) Goddess Lakshmi is depicted holding flower while two elephants, one on either side, are seen pouring water. The Polonnaruwa period was from 1017 to 1275 AD. There is a row of elephants carved at the site of King Parakrama Bahu's council chamber. It is astonishing to note the accuracy of the anatomical details shown on these carvings.

The elephant has become a part of our lives here in Sri Lanka and it is certainly not surprising to see the elephant used in the most exquisite manner. Where ever we go to any ancient place, we are sure to find carvings of elephants in stone. Where any of our kings created a place of worship, the elephant became a symbol to be seen at the entrance. During a much



Fig. 2. Moonstone, Anuradhapura period. c. 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

later time when stone work gave way to wood work, as in the Kandyan Period, we come across another work of art depicting an elephant. Two beautifully carved elephants in stone, were seen at the entrance to the Temple of the Tooth (Fig. 4). These sculptures were not originally found here. They were found among the remains of the palace of King Narendra Singha at Kundasale (18<sup>th</sup> century). The date when they were brought to Kandy is not certain. The carving of the elephants is exquisite. Unfortunately these two superb specimens were blown up when the Temple

of the Tooth was attacked by terrorists from the north in January 1998.

Wherever you go in Asia to see the cities of the past, you will come across elephants in stone. Some of the finest sculptures of elephants in the world are found in India. Many are found in Burma and Thailand. The association between man and elephant has come down the centuries. Today the Asian Elephant is endangered species. We can only hope that the conservation efforts that are now being made will succeed.



Fig.3. Gaja Lakshmi, Polonnaruwa period. 1017 - 1275 BC.

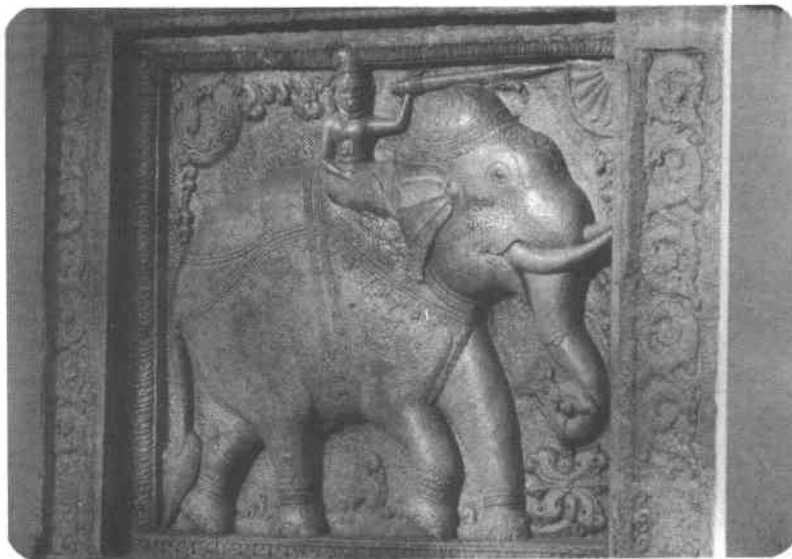


Fig. 4. Stone carving of a tusker and its mahout, at the entrance to the sacred Temple of the Tooth, Kandy. 18<sup>th</sup> century AD. From King Narandrasinghe's palace, Kundasala.