



# An Archaeological Study on the *Naga* Symbol Associated with Tanks in the Historical Period of Sri Lanka

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## ABSTRACT

The hydraulic civilization of ancient Sri Lanka is built upon a unique foundation blending advanced engineering technology and spiritual beliefs. Among the various symbols associated with the irrigation industry, the 'Naga' figure holds a special position. This research explores the archaeological as well as the socio-cultural value of Naga symbols found in association with ancient tanks, sluice gates, and water gardens. The primary objective here is to understand the reasons for employing the Naga as the main guardian of water sources and how the usage of this symbol evolved from animistic beliefs to the creation of Buddhist art. Data for this has been gathered through the study of primary historical chronicles and archaeological reports, as well as field observations of key sites belonging to the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa eras. Research findings indicate that the Naga symbol fulfilled two purposes: namely, acting as a spiritual protector believed to control rain and water, and serving as a semiotic marker highlighting the importance of water management. Symbolizing prosperity and protection, the transformation of the Naga from an animal form to a human-like 'Naga Raja' figure is clearly evident through the evolution of guard stone designs.

**Keywords:** Ancient Sri Lanka, Cultural Heritage, Guard stone, Hydraulic Civilization, Naga Symbolism, Water Management,

## INTRODUCTION

The ancient civilization of Sri Lanka was primarily built upon water and the irrigation industry. The concept of "Tank and Dagoba" (*Wewai Dagabai*) implies that physical development and spiritual progress were intertwined. Within this hydraulic civilization, the ancient Sri Lankan took care to blend artistic and belief systems alongside engineering technology when constructing tanks, dams, and canals. Among the artistic creations found near tank bunds, sluice gates, and spills, the 'Naga Symbol' holds a prominent place. In Asian culture, the Naga is accepted as a god or force that protects water and the earth. Specifically, when studying the evolution of Guardstones (*Muragala*) in Sri Lanka, one can observe how the Naga image gradually evolved. The application of the Naga image near ancient tanks was not merely for decoration; it was used as a symbol conveying a deep meaning regarding water management and fertility (Paranavitana, 1959). This article examines the purpose of using the Naga symbol near tanks in the historical period and its archaeological background.

### Research Problem

Although various carvings are found associated with the ancient irrigation systems of Sri Lanka, why is the *Naga* symbol found abundantly and in primary locations (especially near sluices)? The fundamental problem of this research is to determine whether this *Naga* image is merely a symbol of security or if it represents another meaning tied to hydrology and agricultural fertility. It investigates how the belief regarding the *Naga* as the guardian of water merged with the engineering constructions of the irrigation industry.

### Objectives

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the locations and the manner in which the *Naga* symbol was used in tanks and water-related sites in the historical period.
2. To analyze the artistic and symbolic features of guardstones and carvings containing the *Naga* image.
3. To analyze the interrelationship between water, the *Naga*, and fertility using archaeological evidence.
4. To study the social and psychological impact provided by the *Naga* symbol for the security of the irrigation industry.

## METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted using a qualitative research methodology. Primary historical sources such as the *Mahavamsa* and *Dipavamsa*, along with reports from the Department of Archaeology of Sri Lanka, were used for initial data collection. Research works by scholars such as Senarath Paranavitana, R.L. Brohier, and H. Parker were referenced as secondary data. Additionally, data was verified by analyzing photographs and plans of *Naga* images associated with tanks belonging to the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa eras.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The facts revealed in this study can be discussed under several main themes. The *Naga* is the Guardian of Water. According to ancient Indian and Sri Lankan beliefs, the Naga is considered the being who rules the underworld and water. It was believed that the Naga possessed the power to control rain clouds and water springs. As H. Parker (1909) points out, it can be surmised that *Naga* tribes

contributed to the construction of ancient tank bunds in Sri Lanka, and that the *Naga*, their object of worship, was used as the guardian of the tanks. Among the artistic creations found within the hydraulic civilization of Sri Lanka, the *Naga* symbol holds a unique place. According to South Asian regional beliefs and legends, the *Naga* is not merely a reptile, but a semi-divine being who holds dominion over water and rain and rules the underworld. Several factors can be identified that influenced the abundant use of the *Naga* image in technical creations based on water, such as the irrigation industry.



## **The main ancient tanks that the *Naga* figures found**



### *Naga carving at Urusita Wewa*

([https://amazinglanka.com/wp/urusita-wewa-tank/#google\\_vignette](https://amazinglanka.com/wp/urusita-wewa-tank/#google_vignette))

The Role of the *Naga* in Indian and Local Thought. As mentioned in the Indian *Rig Veda* and ancient literature, *Nagas* are described as the main guardians and servants of the *God Varuna*, the deity of water. While God *Varuna* represents the power of water, *Nagas* act as guardians protecting that water in the physical world. After this concept arrived in Sri Lanka, it merged with the country's unique agricultural and hydraulic civilization. Water was the essential factor for dry zone agriculture. Water comes from rain. Although *Nagas* coming to the surface of the earth during clouds and lightning is a natural phenomenon, ancient society viewed it as the *Naga* being a divine messenger bringing rain. Therefore, villagers firmly believed that there was an inseparable relationship between the filling of the tank waters and the *Naga*.

## The Naga as the Guardian of Water Cosmology and Symbol of Fertility

In ancient Indian and Sri Lankan Cosmology, water is not merely a physical resource used for agriculture, but a highly sacred medium connecting the underworld (*Patala*) and the human world. As Ananda Coomaraswamy (1993) points out in his study on 'Yakshas', the Naga is fundamentally a water deity (*Jala-devatha*) directly connected with the life-giving energy of the earth. The belief that the Naga possessed the power to control rain and the responsibility to protect underground water sources was practically applied when designing Sri Lanka's irrigation systems.

The 'Naga stones' found at the bottom of reservoirs and in water channels such as the Jetavanaramaya ponds and Kuttam Pokuna suggest that ancient engineers intended to "charge" that water with the Naga's blessing and fertility before it flowed to the fields or for bathing (Paranavitana, 1959). This aligns well with the concept of Sri Lanka's "Water Heritage," where water management was considered not merely a technical process but a divine duty (Disanayaka, 1992). Placing the Naga image near water sources also targeted the fear and respect within the people to refrain from polluting the water (*Psychological deterrent*).

## H. Parker's 'Naga Tribe' Hypothesis and Hydraulic Technical Contribution

To understand the ancient irrigation history and socio-engineering background of Sri Lanka, the hypothesis presented by Henry Parker (H. Parker), a British irrigation engineer, still remains a main foundation. Through his work *Ancient Ceylon* (1909), he argues that

among the Yaksha and Naga tribes indigenous to the island before the arrival of Vijaya (6th Century BCE), the Naga tribes were the earliest pioneers of the irrigation industry. According to Parker, these Naga tribes possessed proficient knowledge regarding the art of building dams by blocking water and water management technology.

The object of worship and clan symbol (*Totem*) of these tribes was the cobra with a raised hood. Therefore, Parker surmises that they likely placed their tribal mark, the 'Naga image,' on these creations to protect the tanks, dams, and canals they constructed with great effort and to proclaim to the world that these were their creations. This acted as a form of "Totemic signature." Recent prehistoric studies also indirectly support this view. Shiran Deraniyagala (1992) points out that advanced Mesolithic settlements could have later transitioned into such proto-historic clans. Therefore, the abundant appearance of the Naga symbol on sluices and tank bunds is not merely a decoration, but a marking of the identity of these early local engineers.

#### Evolution from Tribal Symbol to State Irrigation Symbol

This Naga image, which was used only as a mark of the Naga tribes in the early era, was later absorbed into the Buddhist artistic tradition with the arrival of Buddhism. This is evident by its evolution from existing merely as an animal figure (*Theriomorphic*) to a Naga Raja figure taking a human form (*Anthropomorphic*). As Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne (1989) points out, ancient tribal beliefs were incorporated into the new political and religious structure during the process of state formation.

Accordingly, the Naga Guardstone placed near the sluice gate, the most important technical location of a tank, became an object symbolizing agricultural prosperity. The *Punkalasa* held by the Naga figure represents fertility filled with water, while the branch of the *Kalpa Vruksha* represents agricultural harvest. Thus, blending Parker's Naga tribe hypothesis and the Buddhist artistic tradition, the Naga became the invincible guardian of the Sri Lankan hydraulic civilization.



Naga carving at Nacchaduwa wewa

([https://amazinglanka.com/wp/urusita-wewa-tank/#google\\_vignette](https://amazinglanka.com/wp/urusita-wewa-tank/#google_vignette))

#### Water Management and the Location of the Naga Image

When observing archaeological evidence, it appears that the Naga image (especially the Naga guardstone) is not placed randomly in a tank or reservoir. It is most often found near the '*Biso Kotuwa*' (Sluice gate structure) or water exit gates. It can be surmised that two main reasons influenced this:



Naga image with bisokotuwa

**Security:** The most sensitive and technical part of a tank is the sluice. If the sluice is damaged, the entire tank is destroyed. By placing a powerful, fear-inducing image like the *Naga* nearby, people were prevented from entering or damaging that location unnecessarily. This is a form of psychological deterrent.

**Purity:** The image of the *Naga* was used to prevent the pollution of water. Due to fear and respect for the *Naga*, the public was afraid to dump waste into water sources.

Symbol of Fertility Naga images associated with tanks are often found with seven hoods or five hoods. A Naga with seven hoods represents greater power and royalty than a single Naga. Furthermore, these Naga images are often depicted in an anthropomorphic form holding a '*Punkalasa*' (Pot of Plenty) in one hand and a 'branch of the *Kalpa Vruksha*' in the other. The *Punkalasa* symbolizes

overflowing water or prosperity, while the *Kalpa Vruksha* branch represents agricultural harvest and fertility. Therefore, it is clear that the public accepted the Naga on the tank bund not just as a guard, but as a god blessing the entire agricultural economy (God of prosperity).

Guardstones and *Naga* Symbolism.



The evolution of guardstones found in front of tank sluices and sacred buildings is extremely important for understanding the Naga symbol. The guardstone, which initially had only a *Punkalasa*, later evolved into a *Bahirawa* figure, and finally into an anthropomorphic *Naga Raja* figure with seven or five hoods. Often, Naga images associated with tanks are found with 5 or 7 hoods. This represents the power and purity of the Naga. The *Naga Raja* holds a '*Punkalasa*' in one hand and a 'branch of the *Kalpa Vruksha*' in the other. The *Punkalasa* symbolizes overflowing water (prosperity), while the branch represents agricultural fertility (Bandaranayake, 1974)

Guardstones and *Naga* Symbolism.



(<https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/antique-stone-king-of-snakes-nagaraja-sri-lanka-polonnaruwa>)

Sluice Gates and the *Naga*

The most technical and important place in a tank is the sluice gate. This location, which releases water, is a place that must be protected. According to historical evidence, *Naga* images are carved at the water inlet and outlet points in places like *Kuttam Pokuna*. The aims of this were:

1. To prevent water pollution (People are reluctant to pollute water due to fear of where the *Naga* is present).
2. To provide spiritual protection to safeguard irrigation technical creations.

*Naga* and Hydraulic Technology

According to the opinion of some archaeologists, the *Naga* is a creature that moves in curves. When constructing irrigation canals and dams, meandering canals were used to control the speed of the water. The shape of the *Naga* may have symbolized this hydraulic technical method (Gunawardana, 1971). The drainage systems in the water gardens of Sigiriya, designed in a serpentine nature, can be cited as an example.

*Bahirawa* Pujas and *Naga* Worship

Legendary evidence exists that sacrifices were offered to *Nagas* in ancient times to prevent tank bund breaches

and to protect against drought. In regional deity beliefs such as *Minneriya Deiyo*, the *Naga* holds a special place. Placing the *Naga* image at the head of the tank provided the farmer with psychological assurance that the water required for his cultivation was secure.

*Bahirawa* Pujas, *Naga* Worship, and Spiritual Protection in Hydraulic Culture. The ancient hydraulic civilization of Sri Lanka was not merely a physical structure built on brick and earth; it was a complex socio-cultural process based on a system of beliefs and faith (Gunawardana, 1971). Seeking the help of invisible forces in addition to technical methods, especially to protect the tank bund, survive drought, and ensure a bountiful harvest, has been a key feature since ancient times.



## 1. *Bahirawa Puja* and Folklore of Sacrifice

The ancient villagers believed that powerful spirits or *Bahirawas* were occupying the earth and water. As Henry Parker points out, there was a great fear that the *Bahirawa* ruling the land would be angered when clearing a large forest, cutting the earth, and blocking water to build a massive tank (Parker, 1909). Legendary evidence exists that "sacrifices" (*Billa*) were offered to appease that anger and prevent the tank bund from breaching.

- *The Sluice and the Sacrifice*: According to some legends, it is said that a "noble virgin" or an animal was sacrificed before releasing water from a newly built sluice or to stabilize a tank bund that frequently breached. Legends exist in the *Uva* province that such a sacrifice occurred during the construction of *Sorabora Wewa* (Brohier, 1934).

After these beliefs were later mixed with Buddhism, peaceful rituals such as "overflowing milk," "*Muruthan Puja*," and "*lighting lamps*" were substituted for animal sacrifices. However, Parker (1909) confirms that the basic concept was to please the *Naga* or *Bahirawa* forces ruling the water.

## 2. *Minneriya Deiyo* and Deified Kings.

In the irrigation industry, *Naga* worship and the worship of gods are intertwined. Treating kings who created massive irrigation works as deities after their death is a unique feature of this country.

- *Minneriya Deiyo (King Mahasen)*: It is confirmed by the *Mahavamsa* description and the study of regional worship methods that King *Mahasen*, who built the *Minneriya* tank, became a deity named "*Minneriya Deiyo*" after his death (Paranavitana, 1959). Even today, farmers in that area believe that *Minneriya Deiyo* wanders on the tank bund protecting the tank. In ancient sculptures and beliefs, these deities are often depicted with the *Naga* emblem or *Naga* ornaments. This built the opinion that the tank was not merely a place to collect water, but a sacred place where their ruler or god resided.

*Naga Image and Psychological Assurance* The psychological impact received by the farmer and the general public by placing *Naga* images (*Naga* Guardstones) at the tank head, near the sluice, and near the spill was immense (Bandaranayake, 1974).

*Social Control*: Due to fear and respect for the *Naga*, no one dared to damage the tank bund or pollute the water. The thought that "the *Naga* is watching" influenced the human mind more powerfully than the enforcement of a law. Archaeologically, this is termed a 'Tool of social control'.

*Confidence regarding Harvest*: Man cannot control natural disasters like drought and floods. However, through the belief that the *Naga* ruling the water protects the tank, the farmer was able to remove uncertain fears regarding his cultivation (Anxiety reduction). Scholars point out that upon seeing the *Naga Raja* holding the *Punkalasa* near the sluice, the farmer built a positive attitude that he would receive sufficient water to complete both *Yala* and *Maha* seasons (Gunawardana, 1971).

## Comparative analysis of *Naga* figurings

*Common Concept of Naga and Water* In South Asian culture, the *Naga* is a deity-like creature worshipped as the lord of water, protector of water, and provider of fertility. In both India and Sri Lanka, the *Naga* is considered the "Guardian of Waters."

*India*: *Naga* figures and *Naga* maidens (*Naga Kanyas*) are used to personify rivers like the *Ganga* and *Yamuna*.

*Sri Lanka*: This concept takes on a more technical form, where the *Naga* is positioned as the protector of irrigation structures such as tanks (reservoirs), sluice gates, and *bisokotuwa* (cistern sluices).

*Architectural and Artistic Influence* The basic forms of *Naga* guardstones and *Naga* figures in Sri Lanka show the influence of the *Amaravati* and *Sanchi* art traditions of India.

*Polycephalous Naga*: Five or seven-headed *Naga* figures seen in India's *Ajanta* caves and *Sanchi* gateways (*Toranas*) have provided direct inspiration for Sri Lankan *Naga* stones.



**Naga figure at *Ajantha* cave**



**Shree Maheshwari devi temple, Shankarapuram**



(<https://www.worldhistory.org/image/4061/nagaraja-ajanta/>)

**Naga Raja Sculptures:** While Naga figures in India often exist independently as purely devotional objects, in Sri Lanka, they have become structural elements of a building or irrigation system (e.g., guardstones).

**Specificity of Spatial Placement:** This is a unique characteristic inherent to Sri Lanka.

**India:** Naga figures are often seen at temple entrances or at the foot of sacred trees.

**Sri Lanka:** In historical tanks, Naga figures are placed inside the *Bisokotuwa* (Cistern Sluice) or near the sluice gate. Here, the Naga not only protects the water but also symbolizes respect and fear regarding technical aspects such as water pressure.

**Evolution of Symbolism** Although it began with Indian influence, the Naga symbol associated with Sri Lankan tanks has acquired a new meaning within the local irrigation culture.

**Fertility:** Since the Naga was considered the "*Naga King*" (Na-Raju) presiding over the tank, he was entrusted with ensuring the tank remained full, and the agriculture stayed fertile.

**Technical Symbol:** Placing a seven-headed Naga figure near a tank's sluice gate signified that it was the most sensitive and dangerous point of the system. This was a psychological measure taken to protect against external enemies as well as disasters caused by water.

### **Critical Analysis of Naga figures**

**Perspective on Cultural Diffusion (Symbolic Diffusion)** Many scholars believe that the Naga symbol is a legacy received by Sri Lanka based on Indian influence. The cultural flow that arrived with Buddhism, in particular, has strongly affected this.

**Artistic Influence:** The multi-headed (five or seven-headed) Naga figures found on Naga guardstones of the Anuradhapura era are remarkably similar to the Naga figures found in the Sanchi and Amaravati art traditions of India. Senarath Paranavithana (1954) points out that the influence of the Amaravati style was predominant in the creation of Sri Lankan Naga figures.

**Conceptual Diffusion:** The concept of the Naga as a creature that presides over water and protects treasures is one that arrived in Sri Lanka through early Hindu and Buddhist literature. Paranavithana (1954) argues that considering the Naga as the "Guardian of the Waters" is a result of this cultural synthesis.

**Indigenous Identity and Independent Development** The alternative interpretation presented here is that the Naga symbol was created through local irrigation technology and belief systems themselves.

**Technical Evolution:** The positioning of the Naga in association with the *Bisokotuwa* (cistern sluice) and the sluice gate of tanks is a characteristic unique to Sri Lanka. Roland Silva (1988) points out that while Indian Naga figures were often limited to religious sites, in Sri Lanka, it became a structural part of "Irrigation Engineering."

**Ethno-Historical Roots:** There is an opinion that the worship practices of the Naga tribes who lived in Sri Lanka before the Sinhalese civilization were later integrated into the irrigation civilization. Seneviratna (1994) mentions that placing the Naga near water sources was a psychological and technical connection formed between ancient local beliefs and water management requirements.

**Synthesis and Critical Conclusion** A scholarly balance can be seen between these two perspectives. Although the "Form" and "Artistic Tradition" of the Naga figure are results of external diffusion, its "Function" and "Spatial Context" are indigenous innovations.

**In India, Naga figures often represented the beauty or the sanctity of a water source.** However, the Sri Lankan irrigation engineer used that symbol to mark the *Bisokotuwa*, which was the most sensitive and hazardous location controlling the water pressure of a tank. The development of this, not merely as a symbol but as a "Technical Indicator," demonstrates indigenous identity.

### **Chronological Evolution of the Naga Symbol**

**Early Anuradhapura Period (3rd Century BCE - 1st Century CE)** During this stage, the Naga symbol was primarily represented as a natural animal figure. Simple Naga figures with a single head (Single-headed Naga) were used in representations associated with tanks and irrigation systems. Paranavithana (1954) points out that during this era, the Naga was considered merely as a power presiding over water or as a sacred object presiding over the land.

**Middle Anuradhapura Period (2nd - 6th Centuries CE)** With the advancement of irrigation technology, the Naga symbol took on a more artistic and technical appearance. During this time, multi-headed Nagas (Polycephalous Naga), or Naga figures with five or seven heads, were created. The creation of guardstones (Guardstones) began, featuring a hood (hooded canopy) above the Naga's head. Here, the Naga was no longer just a devotional object but became a symbol marking important locations such as the "Sluice" (*Sorowwa*) or the "Cistern Sluice" (*Bisokotuwa*) of the tank. As Silva (1988) mentions, during this era, the Naga figure became established as a structural component of the irrigation framework.

**Late Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa Period (7th - 12th Centuries CE)** During this timeframe, the Naga symbol evolved into "Anthropomorphic Naga King" sculptures. The Naga was depicted in human form, holding a "Vessel of Abundance" (*Pun-kalasa*) and symbols of fertility in its hand. Instead of the simplicity found in the Naga figures of Anuradhapura, more decorative and vivid carvings can be seen during the Polonnaruwa era. Seneviratna (1994) states that this became a "Royal Symbol" representing royal power and prosperity, moving beyond being a mere irrigation symbol.



Modern and Kandyan Period By the Kandyan period, although the use of large Naga guardstones near tanks decreased, the concept of the "Naga King presiding over the tank" was further strengthened within folk beliefs. At present, these ancient Naga symbols are considered both archaeological monuments and signs of cultural identity.

### Contemporary Relevance and Living Ritual Practices

The Naga symbolism associated with ancient irrigation systems is not merely confined to the past; it remains alive within today's Cultural Landscapes. Even today, the farming communities in the dry zone of Sri Lanka perform rituals linked to the ancient Naga concept during the new harvest festivals and when releasing water from the tanks. Seneviratna (1994) points out that rituals such as '*Kiri Ithiraweeda*' (boiling of milk) near tanks and the tradition of not harming cobras living in tank reserves are modern extensions of the ancient 'Naga-Water' relationship. In modern archaeological conservation, Naga guardstones and *Bisokotuwa* (cistern sluices) are not viewed merely as monuments; focus is placed on protecting their contextual integrity their relationship with the surrounding ecosystem. As Silva (1988) mentions, protecting these structures means carrying forward the knowledge of ancient irrigation engineering through generations. The belief in the 'Polycephalous Naga King' (*Bahupana Na-Raju*) as the presiding deity of the tank still exists within contemporary rural society. Even when tanks dry up during droughts, the performance of offerings near sluice gates featuring Naga figures demonstrates that ancient belief systems remain active within the modern social structure. Psychologically, this serves to strengthen the bond between the farming community and natural resources.

## CONCLUSION

The Naga symbol created in association with tanks in the historical period of Sri Lanka is not merely an artistic creation. It is a major socio-cultural tool that confirms the existence of the hydraulic civilization. Ancient society, which considered water as life, substituted the Naga as the guardian protecting that water. The anthropomorphic Naga Raja holding the *Punkalasa* and flower branch embodies the agricultural prosperity received due to irrigation water. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Naga symbol is a powerful medium that linked ancient Sri Lankan engineering technology and spiritual beliefs together.

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