

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 a 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 guardstone designs.

Keywords: Hydraulic Civilization, Naga Symbolism, Water Management, Guardstone, Ancient Sri Lanka, Cultural Heritage.

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.



Naga carving at Urusita Wewa

(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)

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).

Contemporary Survivals Rituals such as the "*Aluth Sahal Mangallaya*" (New Rice Festival) and "*Mutti Namime Mangallaya*" (overflowing milk on the tank bund and lowering pots), which are still held in the North Central Province today, are remnants of this historic *Naga* and *Bahirawa* worship. The fact that a *Bahirawa Puja* is still conducted before renovating a tank today shows how this concept has been rooted in the Sri Lankan public consciousness for thousands of years (Brohier, 1934).

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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