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F. Reitz

Stone Images of the Standing Buddha from Mahāgāma (Sri Lanka)*

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Mahāgāma – today known under the name Tissamahārāma and located in Hambantota district at the southern coast of Sri Lanka – was once the capital of the southern kingdom of Ruhuna (fig. 1).

The Archaeological Department of the Government of Sri Lanka excavated in 1987 near the Yaṭāla Dāgāba. Several stone images of the standing Buddha were discovered. They are now kept beside the *dāgāba* within the remains of the ancient image house or in the small Archaeological Site Museum of the Yaṭāla Dāgāba (fig. 2).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the close relationship of the Tissamahārāma sculptors to formal solutions which had been developed in Anurādhapura in the beginning of the 'Late Anurādhapura Period' (c. 300–1000 AD, cf. Schroeder 1990, 97–105) and which were exported to the southern kingdom, where they remained canonical for centuries.

TPOLOGY¹

Type A (figs. 21, 22)

The earliest contributions to the formal solutions for the lay-out of a standing Buddha in Sri Lanka, holding the end of the robe with the left hand, and greeting as well as securing with the right hand in *abhaya mudrā* came from southern India, from the Andhra region with Amarāvati as the artistic centre. We have clear evidence – through the existence of Buddha figures (fig. 21, Schroeder 1990, 104–111) made out of limestone, which is

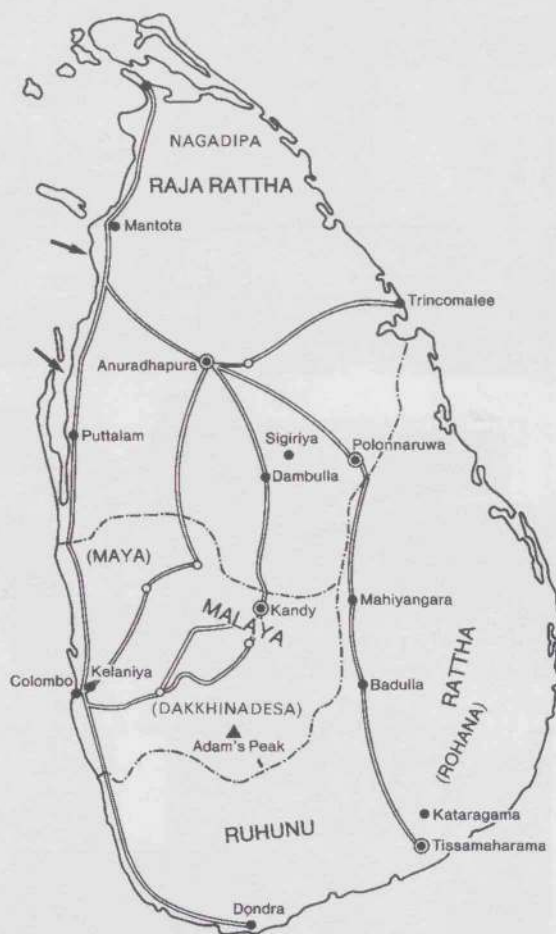


Fig. 1. The ancient kingdoms of Sri Lanka (after Sievers 1964).

* My sincere thanks to H.-J. Weishaar (DAI/KAVA Bonn) who invited me to Tissamahārāma and provided all support during the stay there in March 2003, to S. U. Deraniyagala and N. Pereira (Department of Archaeology Colombo) for the very valuable conversations. An extended version of this article, including also stone sculptures of Bodhisatvas etc., will be published in the forthcoming volume 3 of 'Ancient Ruhuna'. I also thank A. Thompson for checking the English.

¹ This typology gives approximate dates. Nevertheless, we are conscious of the difficulties reconstructing the historical circumstances, especially for this group of sculptures which intentionally have an "ancient" design to articulate the will to spiritual importance and in this way dominance and power with the help of sculptural conservatism. M. Willis (2001, 217) asks in this context: "Could it be that the 'disciplinary orders' put great historical processes in motion for their own special ends, harnessing kings to their schemes?"

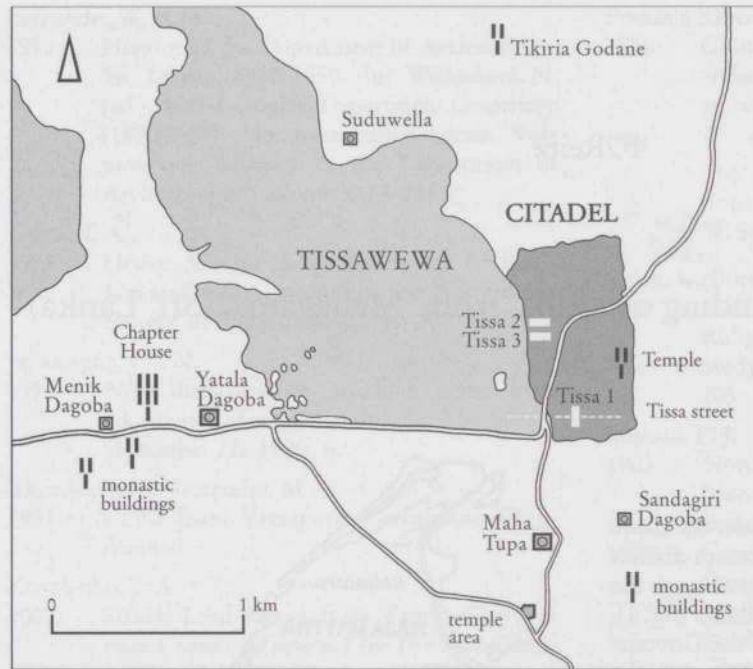


Fig. 2. The ruins of ancient Tissamahārāma along with the excavation sites of the "Ancient Ruhuna Project": Tissa 1-3 (after Weisshaar/Schenk/Wijeyapala 2001, 10, fig. 4).

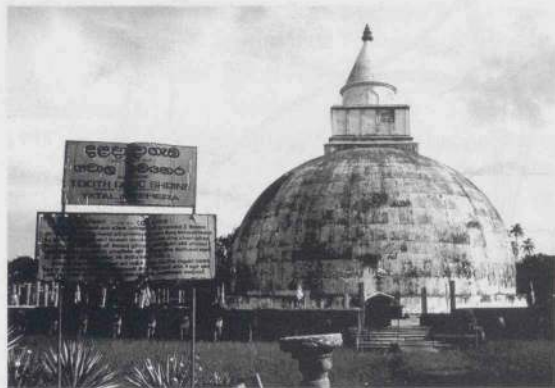


Fig. 3. Tissamahārāma, Yaṭāla Dāgāba, view from southwest. Photo F. Reitz.



Fig. 4. Tissamahārāma, Yaṭāla Dāgāba with image house at the northern side. Photo F. Reitz.

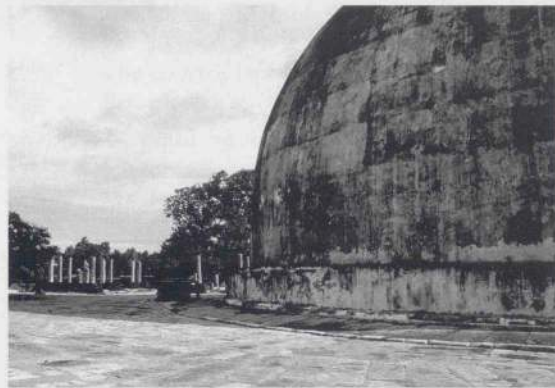


Fig. 5. Tissamahārāma, Archaeological Site Museum (west of the Dāgāba), view from south-east. Photo F. Reitz.



Fig. 6. Tissamahārāma, Archaeological Site Museum, interior with Buddha sculpture no. 3 (centre). Photo F. Reitz.

Fig. 7. Tissamahārāma, remains of the image-house, with Buddha sculptures nos. 1 and 2 (view from south). Photo H. Wittersheim.



Fig. 8. Tissamahārāma, Buddha sculptures nos. 1 and 2 from south east. Photo A. Fekete.

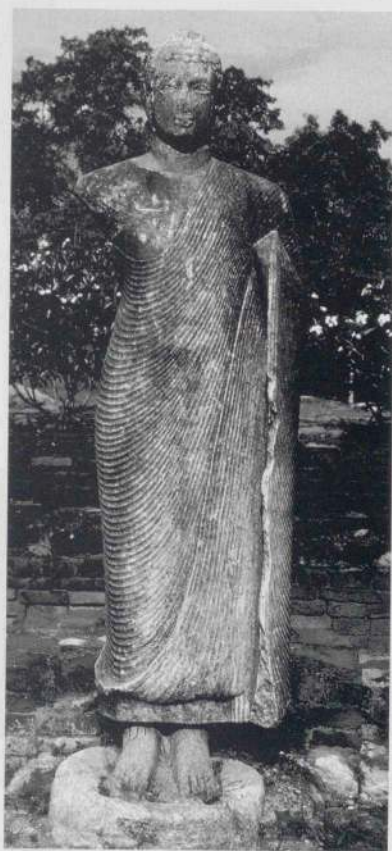


Fig. 9. Tissamahārāma, Buddha sculpture no. 1. Photo F. Reitz.



Fig. 10. Tissamahārāma, Buddha sculpture no. 1. Photo A. Fekete.

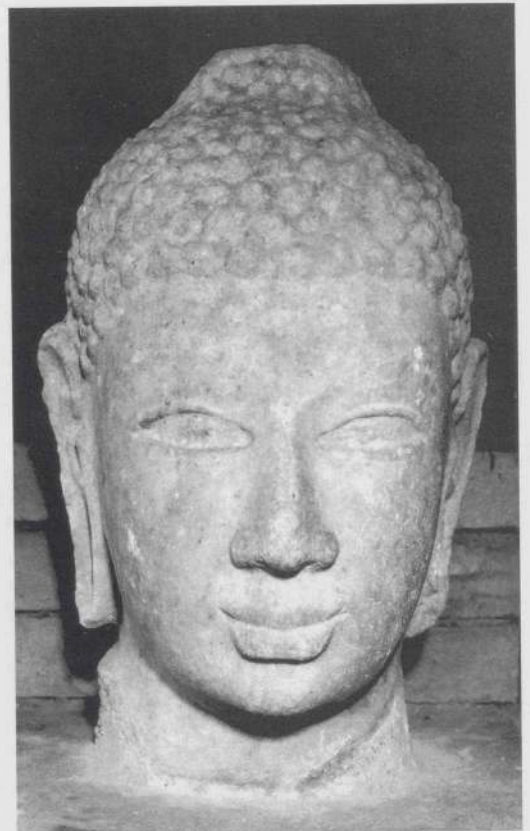


Fig. 13. Tissamahārāma, Archaeological Site Museum, Buddha head. Photo A. Fekete.

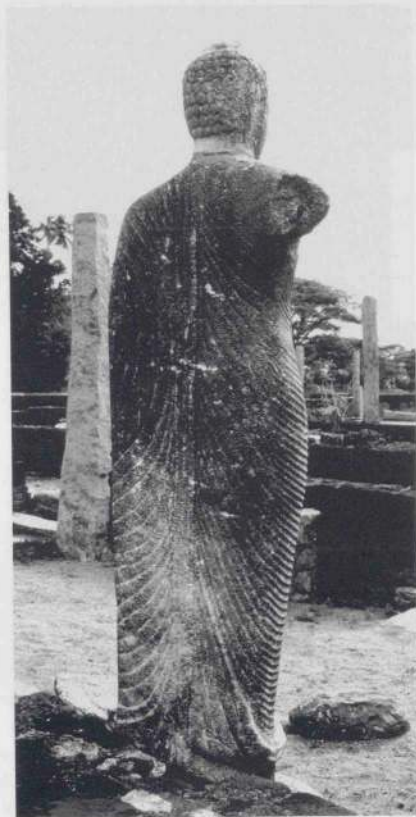


Fig. 12. Tissamahārāma, Buddha sculpture no. 2. Photo F. Reitz.

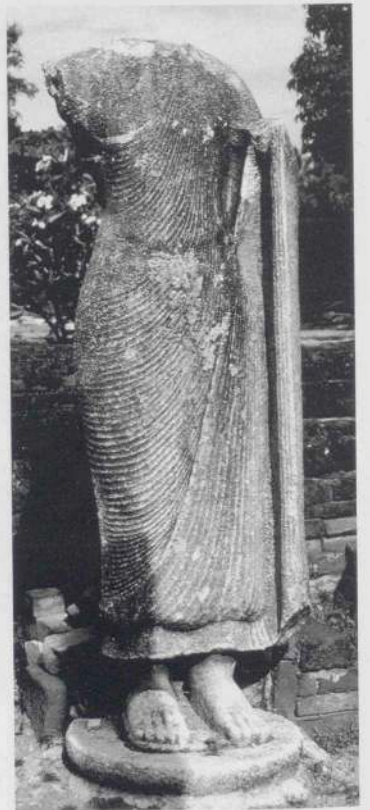


Fig. 11. Tissamahārāma, Buddha sculpture no. 1. Photo F. Reitz.



Fig. 14. Tissamahārāma, Archaeological Site Museum, Buddha sculpture no. 3. Photo A. Fekete.



Fig. 15. Tissamahārāma, Archaeological Site Museum, Buddha sculpture no. 3. Photo A. Fekete.



Fig. 16. Tissamahārāma, Archaeological Site Museum, Buddha sculpture no. 3. Photo F. Reitz.



Fig. 17. Tissamahārāma, Archaeological Site Museum, Buddha sculpture no. 3. Photo F. Reitz.

not available in Sri Lanka but in Andhra Pradesh – that around the 5th century a dynamic exchange took place between these two regions – between southern India and northern Sri Lanka. The second step – after the import of limestone “models” from Andhra – was the creation of “copies” at Anurādhapura and surroundings. For this purpose the local available stone – mainly granite and gneiss – was used. The first indigenous standing Buddhas from Sri Lanka (fig. 22; cf. Schroeder 1990, 148f., 31E, 31F) have doublelines engraved to mark the folds where the Andhra Buddhas had cascades of pleats like steps (Schroeder 1990, 31E) or have modified cascades with engraved lines (fig. 21).

Type B (fig. 23)

Type B of the standing stone Buddha reflects the intention to create the impression of a breathing/moving body under the robe. Since we have two standing Buddhas from the same find spot (Kāḍigala, figs. 23, 24) from different time periods we can study the direction of development very well. In Kāḍigala these two solutions are consecutive. Alongside the body movement under the robe we can still see the “old-fashioned” engraved folds at the older one (fig. 23). In the younger Buddha (fig. 24) instead we see the folds as “edges” (type C), which remains the pattern for a long period.



Fig. 18. National Museum, Colombo, Buddha sculpture no. 4 from Tissamahārāma. Photo F. Reitz.



Fig. 19. National Museum, Colombo, Buddha sculpture no. 4 from Tissamahārāma. Photo F. Reitz.



Fig. 20. National Museum, Colombo, Buddha sculpture no. 4 from Tissamahārāma. Photo F. Reitz.



Fig. 21. Limestone Buddha from Andhra Pradesh – Type A (after Schroeder 1990, 107, 18D).



Fig. 22. Buddha from Kalāvāva (Anurādhapura district) – Type A. Photo T. Fuchs.



Fig. 23. Buddha from Kādīgala (Kurunāgala district) – Type B (cf. Schroeder 1990, 311). Photo T. Fuchs.



Fig. 24. Buddha from Kādīgala (Kurunāgala district) – Type C. Photo T. Fuchs.



Fig. 25. Buddha from Ayitigēvāva (Anurādhapura district) – Type C (after Schroeder 1990, 34E)

Type C

The three standing Buddha sculptures from the Yaṭāla Dāgāba in Tissamahārāma belong to type C (figs. 7–12, 14–17). The carving of the robes is very refined. In a subtle way the body of the Buddha is shining through the folds of the robe,

which are created through c. 5–10 mms raised “edges” which stand out from the main surface of the robe. Another image of this type from Mahāgāma is kept in the National Museum, Colombo (figs. 18–20).



Fig. 26. Gilt bronze sculpture of the standing Buddha in the National Museum, Colombo. Photo F. Reitz.



Fig. 27. Ivory sculptures of the standing Buddha in the National Museum, Colombo. Photo F. Reitz.

CATALOGUE OF STONE IMAGES OF THE STANDING BUDDHA FROM TISSAMAHĀRĀMA

Buddha no. 1 (figs. 9–11):

present location: Yaṭāla Dāgāba, in the remains of the image house

provenance: Mahāgāma
date: c. 7th–8th cent. AD

material: gneiss
excavated: 1987
size: height – 223 cms (without socle)
width – 60 cms
depth – 38 cms

condition: fragmentary, right arm is missing from shoulder, left hand is lost (holes for the attaching of the right arm and the left hand can still be seen), head has been re-attached with concrete, feet partially restored

type: C
reference: Schroeder 1990, 156f. (35G-H)

Buddha no. 2 (fig. 12):

present location: Yaṭāla Dāgāba, in the remains of the image house

provenance: Mahāgāma
date: c. 7th–8th cent. AD

material: gneiss
excavated: 1987
size: height – 154 cms (without socle)
width – 53 cms
depth – 34 cms

condition: fragmentary (torso with feet), right arm is missing from shoulder, left hand is lost (holes for the attaching of the right arm and the left hand can still be seen), the Buddha head in the site museum (fig. 13, height: 48 cms) does not belong to this torso, back side and feet partially restored

type: C
reference: Schroeder 1990, 156f. (35G)

Buddha no. 3 (figs. 14–17):
 present location: Yaṭāla Dāgāba, Archaeological Site Museum
 provenance: Mahāgāma
 date: c. 7th–8th cent. AD
 material: gneiss
 excavated: 1987
 size: height – 169 cms (without socle)
 width – 59 cms
 depth – 24 cms
 condition: restored by A. Neubauer (Munich), restoration was sponsored by the German Cultural Fund (Kulturhilfe des Auswärtigen Amtes), feet remain partially damaged
 type: C
 reference: Schroeder 1990, 166f. (40G)

Buddha no. 4 (figs. 18–20):
 present location: National Museum, Colombo
 provenance: Mahāgāma
 date: c. 7th–8th cent. AD
 material: gneiss
 registered: 1924 (acc. no. 24.57.15.4)
 size: height – 109 cms (without socle)
 condition: fragmentary (torso), right and left arm are missing from shoulder, head and feet are also lost
 type: C
 reference: Schroeder 1990, 166f. (40H)

CANONS OF PROPORTIONS (ICONOMETRY) IN SRI LANKA

Various canons of proportions existed in ancient Sri Lanka. Most of them follow the south Indian Āgama tradition (cf. Schroeder 1990, 34f.). The Śāriputra is the best known and still today used by sculptors². With the help of it we can conclude whether the 48 cms high Buddha head in the Archaeological Site Museum at the Yaṭāla Dāgāba could theoretically belong to Buddha no. 2. If we look at fig. 2 (standing Buddha with *tāla*-measurements) of Relius and compare it with the text (p. 123, verses 22–24) we can get the basic information that “from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head are nine face lengths and one part” (Schroeder 1990, 35)³. The Buddha head (fig. 13) in the Archaeological Site Museum has the total height of 48 cms. His face length is c. 29 cms. 9 and ½ times of this face *modulus* should bring us to the total length of the equivalent Buddha figure: c. 270 cms. Thus the torso of Buddha no. 2 cannot belong to this Buddha head.

CONCLUSIONS

The southern Sri Lankan standing Buddha images more or less follow the type C of the “Anurādhapura Buddhas” which were created in the northern art centres in around the 7th century AD. Since this stylistic and iconometric canon had been conservatively used for centuries, it is rather difficult to provide any proper date for a standing Buddha sculpture⁴. The tentative dating of a type C Buddha can therefore only provide the information: created after the 7th–8th century AD (*terminus post quem*).

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- ² Cf. Ruelius 1974.
³ The face itself is divided into three parts (the face *modulus* has three *bhāgas*, each *bhāga* has four *aṅgulas*, and one *aṅgula* has the width of the middle finger). The neck has c. the length of one third of the face length. And again c. one third of the face length has to be calculated for the width of the hair at the top.
⁴ As figs. 26 and 27 show, type C had been also common for the design of bronze or ivory sculptures after the 7th–8th century.