

Maheyong Stupa at Ayutthaya: The Direct Influence from Mahiyangana Stupa in Sri Lanka

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Mahiyangana Stupa in Sri Lanka

Mahiyangana, a small town located some 70 kilometers east of Kandy in Sri Lanka, is a most important place for Buddhist pilgrimage. The site is mentioned in *Mahāvamsa* as the first place where the Master visited Ceylon after his enlightenment to convert several Yakshas and indigenous people.¹ Therefore, Mahiyangana became one of the sixteen sacred Buddhist places in Ceylon, hence a significant destination for pilgrims.

Nowadays, there exists the Stupa of Mahiyangana at the sacred spot. The stupa is circular in plan, and the size of the stupa is not as large as those in Anurādhapura. The molding system is comprised of triple torus moldings at the base supporting the squat hemispheric anda, continued by the square harmikā and the conical spire (Fig. 1). The square harmikā and the conical spire are recently renovated.

This is possibly the most ancient stupa to be constructed since the Anuradhapura period as mentioned in *Mahavamsa*. However, as an important pilgrimage site, the stupa has been continuously enlarged.

¹ Wilhelm Geiger, **Mahavamsa: The Great Chronicle of Ceylon** (Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 2007), pp.3-5.

Evidence from several Kandy murals testifies to the stupa's enlargement from time to time (Fig.2).

Despite being continuously restored, the present stupa seems to be datable to the post-Polonnaruwa period because the base of the stupa is supported by the triple torus moldings (Fig.3). Triple torus moldings



Fig.1 Mahiyangana Stupa in Sri Lanka, Post-Polonnaruwa period



Fig.2 Kandy mural at Lankatilaka testifies Mahiyangana Stupa's enlargement from time to time



Fig.3 Triple torus moldings of Mahiyangana Stupa, the typical character of Post-Polonnaruwa period



Fig.4 a Triple platforms, the moldings supporting Anda in Anuradhapura period

are one of the typical characteristics of a stupa of the post-Polonnaruwa period, differing from the triple platforms of Anuradhapura art (Fig.4 a) and the triple vedibandha of Polonnaruwa art (Fig.4 b). The present style of the stupa is comparable to other post-Polonnaruwa stupas, such as the stupa at Lankatilaka, Kandy (Fig.5).

Supporting the stupa is the circumambulatory platform, square in plan and decorated by a row of elephants (Fig.6). This type of the elephant-decorated circumambulatory platform is called *Hathī-Prākāra* (Elephant-wall),² being typical to Sri Lankan art. It is also noticeable



Fig.4 b Triple Vedibandha, the moldings supporting Anda in Polonnaruwa period

² Paranavitana mentions that the elephant-wall of the Ruvanveli is mentioned in Mahavamsa as belonging to the reign of Saddhatissa. (Wilhelm Geiger, **Mahavamsa**, Chapter XXXIII, p.228.) Moreover, there were the elephant-walls for Abhayagiri and Jetavana Stupa also built by King Mahanaga (the 7th century A.D.) (Please see Paranavitana, S., **The Stupa of Ceylon** (Colombo: Colombo museum, 1988), p.18). Therefore, the elephant-wall of Mahiyangana seems to belong to a very ancient date.

that, in Sri Lankan art, the platform is always wider than the stupa, providing ample space for circumambulating.

The style of the Hatthī-Prākāra at Mahiyangana is comparable to that of Ruvanveli Stupa in Anurādhapura (Fig.7). However, the size of the main stupa of Mahiyangana is relatively small compared to that of Ruvanveli in Anurādhapura.



Fig.5 Post-Polonnaruwa period Stupa at Lankatilaka



Fig.6 Hatthī-Prākāra of Mahiyangana Stupa



Fig.7 Ruvanveli Stupa in Anurādhapura supported by Hatthī-Prākāra

Maheyong Stupa at Ayutthaya

Located in the eastern direction outside the moat, Wat Maheyong is one of the most significant temples in Ayutthaya. The temple is mentioned in the Ayutthayan Chronicle that King Baromarājādhirāj II (Chao Sām Phrayā) constructed this temple in 1438.³

The main Stupa of Wat Maheyong (Fig.8) is surprisingly similar to that of Mahiyangana Stupa in Sri Lanka. The architectural similarities can be described as such:

(1) Maheyong Stupa is supported by the elephant-decorated circumambulatory platform, Hatthī Pākāra (Fig.9). The platform is wider than the stupa providing ample space for circumambulating (Fig.10).



Fig.8 General View of Maheyong Stupa, Ayutthaya

³ The Ayutthayan Chronicle of Luang Prasert Aksorn Niti, in Thai (Bangkok: Klang Vidya, 1972), p.447.



Fig.9 Haththi-Prakara of Maheyong Stupa, Ayutthaya



Fig.10 The wide space of the circumambulatory platform, Maheyong Stupa, Ayutthaya

(2) The stupa is circular in plan and the size of the stupa is not as large as the platform.

(3) The molding system of the stupa composes of triple torus moldings (Fig.11) supporting the squat hemispheric anda, continued by the square harmikā and the conical spire.

Of special interest, the style of the main stupa at Wat Maheyong is surprisingly similar to that of Mahiyangana Stupa in Sri Lanka. Even the name of “Wat Maheyong” is actually the Thai pronunciation of “Mahiyangana.” This important connection will therefore be examined in this article.

The Maheyong Stupa at Ayutthaya: Influenced by Sukhothai or by Sri Lankan Art?

Several Thai scholars, such as Professor Santi Leksukhum, opine that Maheyong’s elephant-decorated circumambulatory platform was influenced by Sukhothai art as there are several examples of the same kind of platform at Sukhothai and Sri Satchanalai (Fig.12).⁴ As King Baromarājādhīrāj II’s mother was also a Sukhothai princess and there were several campaigns against Sukhothai launched during this reign, most scholars believe that Maheyong Stupa is the result of these connections.

As already examined above, however, the style and the name of Maheyong Stupa at Ayutthaya are surprisingly similar to those of Mahiyangana Stupa in Sri Lanka. Therefore, as the result issued in this study, the connection between Sukhothai and Ayutthayan art will be examined.

(1) The name of Maheyong Stupa at Ayutthaya is explicitly a copy of Mahiyangana Stupa in Sri Lanka. It is, therefore, more connectible to Sri Lanka than to Sukhothai.

⁴Santi Leksukhum, **Ayutthayan Art**, (in Thai). (Bangkok: Muang Boran Press, 1999), pp.71-72.

(2) The entitlement of Wat Maheyong at Ayutthaya indicates that King Baromarājādhirāj II wanted to establish Ayutthaya as the sacred city where the Master had visited, being comparable to Mahiyangana in Sri Lanka.



Fig.11 Triple torus moldings, Anda and the spire, Maheyong Stupa, Ayutthaya

(3) The Hatthī-Prākāra of Maheyong Stupa at Ayutthaya (Fig.8-10), in my opinion, is not connectible to Sukhothai art as the Hatthī-Prākāra of Sukhothai art always provides only a “narrow” space for circumambulation (Fig.12). However, the Hatthī-Prākāra of Sri Lankan art always provides the “wide” space for circumambulation (Fig.6). It is, therefore, observable that The Hatthī-Prākāra of Maheyong Stupa at Ayutthaya is more similar to that of Sri Lankan art than that of Sukhothai art.

(4) The set of triple torus moldings supporting the hemispheric and a of Maheyong Stupa at Ayutthaya is extremely similar to the order of the post-Polonnaruwa Sri Lankan Stupas (Fig.13).⁵



Fig.12 Stupa support by Hatthī-Prākāra, Sukhothai Art

⁵There are three orders for the molding of post-Polonnaruwa Sri Lankan stupas. The first order is the triple basal moldings, the second is the triple torus-moldings, and the third the triple pointed-torus-moldings



Fig.13 Comparison between Sri Lankan and Thai Stupas molding (13a)
Sri Lankan = triple torus molding, (13b) Ayutthayan = triple torus
molding, (13c) Sukhothai = triple inverted cyma molding

Differently in Sukhothai art, the stupas are always supported by the three inverted cyma moldings. Therefore, Maheyong Stupa at Ayutthaya is more similar to the Ceylonese order than that of Sukhothai (Fig.13).

This stylistic comparison between Wat Maheyong at Ayutthaya, Mahiyangana Stupa in Sri Lanka and the elephant-based stupa in Sukhothai art yields the conclusion that Wat Maheyong at Ayutthaya is more connectible to Sri Lanka than Sukhothai.

Patriarch *Ñānagambhīra* : the Evidence of the Relation between Ayutthaya and Sri Lanka during the Reign of King Baromarājādhirāj II

There are several items of evidence indicating the direct religious relation between Sri Lanka and Ayutthaya during the reign of King Baromarājādhirāj II. One of these is “*Mūlasāsanā Ñānagambhīra*,”⁶ the documentary evidence composed in Chiang Mai, which narrates the story of *Ñānagambhīra* a, the patriarch of a new Sinhalese sect at Chiang Mai who traveled to Sri Lanka in 1423. After studying Sinhalese Buddhism for five years, he traveled back to Ayutthaya in 1428 during the reign of King Baromarājādhirāj II.

The document states that *Ñānagambhīra* stayed in Ayutthaya for one year under royal patronage. During his stay, King Baromarājādhirāj II appointed him as the patriarch of Simhala Paksha (i.e. Ceylonese sect). Hence, more than 70 monasteries belonging to this sect belonged to him.

Although there is no mention of Wat Maheyong in the text, the stupa which is the possible copy of Mahiyangana in Ceylon testifies itself that Wat Maheyong is possibly one of the seventy monasteries belonging to the Ceylonese sect. *Ñānagambhīra* himself is also the evidence of the

⁶ Bampen Rawin (editor), ***Mūlasāsanā Ñānagambhīra***, (in Thai) (Chiang Mai: Institute of Social Research, 1996), p.17.

direct religious connection between Ayutthaya and Sri Lanka during the reign of King Baromarājādhirāj II.

Another evidence of this connection is the mural in the crypt of the main stupa at Wat Ratchaburana, which has been studied and dated to the same reign.⁷ The style and the iconography of the painting clearly testify the Ceylonese connection, such as the treatment of the halo and the red background (Fig. 14).



Fig.14 Similarities of Sri Lankan and Thai murals during the reign of Baromarājādhirāj II

⁷ Santi Leksukhum, Ayutthayan Art, p.172.

Therefore, the construction of Wat Maheyong Stupa seems to be possibly associated with Patriarch *Ñānagambhīra* who traveled back from Sri Lanka and set up the Sinhalese sect in Ayutthaya.

The evidence reviewed here emphasizes the possibility of the direct religious connection between Ayutthaya and Sri Lanka during the reign of King Baromarājādhirāj II. The Stupa of Wat Maheyong, moreover, seems to be associated with Patriarch *Ñānagambhīra*. Possibly, King Baromarājādhirāj II constructed the Stupa of Wat Maheyong in order to ensure the stability of the Sinhalese sect in his capital. Furthermore, the Stupa of Wat Maheyong seems to be the evidence of the king's desire for establishing Ayutthaya to be as sacred as Sri Lanka where the Master had visited, hence under the protection of the Master forever.

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