

Terracotta Elephant Figures Used in Sri Lanka for Rituals and Beliefs

Menaka Nishanthi¹

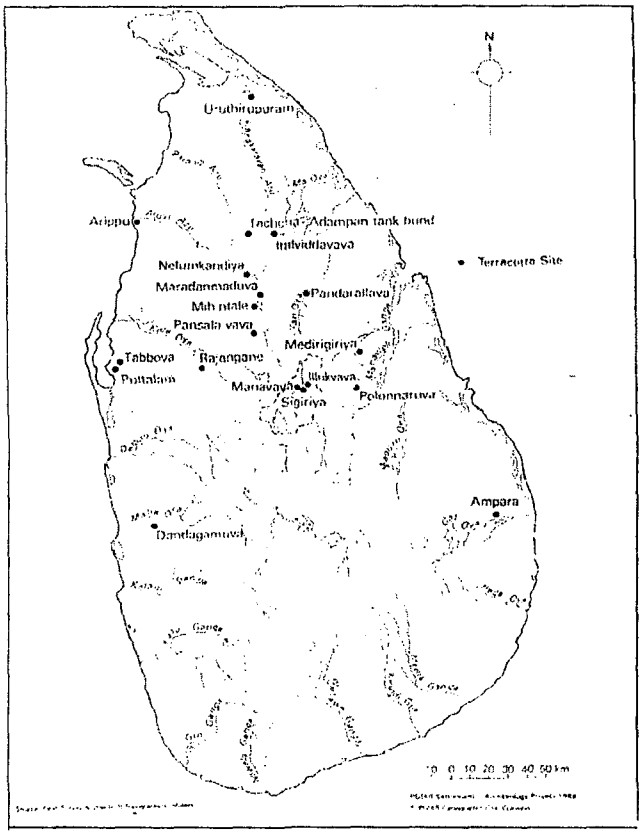
The passion of humans for various creations aimed at their needs goes to the beginning of the civilization. Such produces and creations have been used in their various sacraments and ritualistic beliefs. There is evidence of humans following, since ancient periods, various religious sacraments and ritualistic beliefs (Nandadeva, 1986: 192). It is established with written proof that these rituals have been originated from the same source in the pre-historic or middle stone ages and in every civilization there have been various religious sacraments and ritualistic beliefs aimed at numerous purposes. (Deraniyagala, 1961: 262-263).

In Sri Lanka, as has been in the various civilizations in the world, it is established with written sources that there have been various religious sacraments and ritualistic beliefs aimed at prosperity since early times. Robert Knox had recorded that various clay figures had been used in Sri Lankan sacraments (Knox, 2000: 231-232). Mr Nandadeva Wijesekara also notes that clay figures have been formed for sacraments and been kept in a mud hut (Wijesekara, 1986: 198). There are proofs that some rituals have been in existence since past incessantly. One example is the 'Gammadu Sacrament' in Sabaragamuwa Province in Sri Lanka (Deraniyagala, 1957: 19).

Clay figures have been used in religious sacraments and ritualistic beliefs in various eras of the human civilization. Terra cotta figures so far have found attest that they have been prominent in ritualistic beliefs amongst various creations. To form these figures a brownish plaster mixed with sand and mud. As these figures have been burnt in a temperature less than 800^oC, they are called Terra Cotta.

Terra cotta figures that have amply been found around the dry zone of Sri Lanka presumed to be used in religious rituals and beliefs. There are conflicting opinions about the periods of these terra cotta figures and there is no definite idea about the time frame. Among the terra cotta figures found there are figures of elephant as well as parts of the same. Among the areas where terra cotta figures have been found Mamaduwa, Ilukvewa, Manavewa, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, Thalgasvewa, Rajanganaya, Padaviya, Panduwasnuwara and Ampara (Digavapie) are prominent. In addition to above mentioned areas terra cotta figures have been found in areas such as North Central Province, North Western Province and some parts of the Eastern Province. It is clear with the areas that have found terra cotta figures most of them are from rural tanks or cultivation areas and paddy fields. The terra cotta artistry is developed, according to these facts it is apparent, around the Dry Zone (Map 01).

¹ University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.



Map 1 (Source: settlement Archaeology of Sigiri -Dambulla Region)

It was Mr. Horkart that discovered first about terra cotta figures in Sri Lanka in 1921 (Horkart, 1922: 23: J2). This first collection of terra cotta figures have been discovered at Thalgasvewa along Puttlam Anuradhapura road. From Thabbova of North Western Province found two sizes of terra cotta elephant figures have been found (Deraniyagala, 1953: 133-134). Mr Deraniyagala has produced a sketch of elephant figures and the way they positioned at Thabbova.

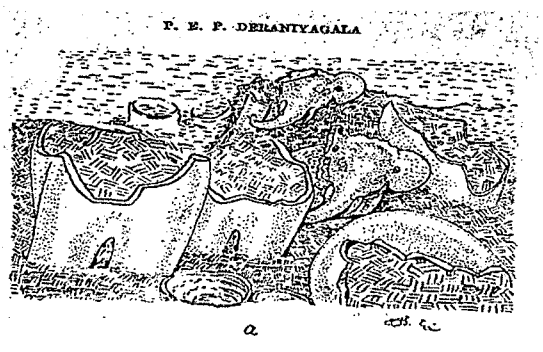


fig. 1 (Source: Spoliya Zeylanica, vol.27, Part I)

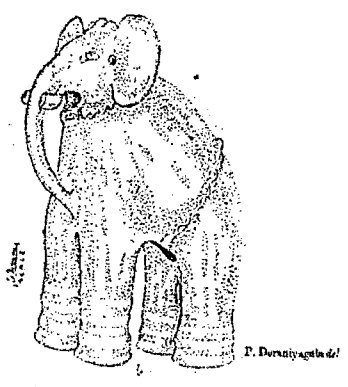


Fig. 1.—Terracotta elephants discovered by P. Deraniyagala at Ruda Vava, Thabbova, in 1940 (Courtesy P. A. S.)

In addition, a large number of human and animal figures of different shapes have been discovered from Wilpattu sanctuary (Deraniyagala, 1953: 134-135). Also, a large number has been discovered from Pansalveli in Mamaduva, Vavuniya. This place is a large paddy field bestowed to a

Buddhist temple in ancient times. A large number of terra cotta figures have been discovered from there and those are now placed at the Colombo National Museum (SR, 1921: 25-35). In this collection there are no elephant figures but mainly parts of various sizes of figures. That is, broken parts of ears, tusks, trunk, body and the head. In some parts of the figures there is a cavity on the head.

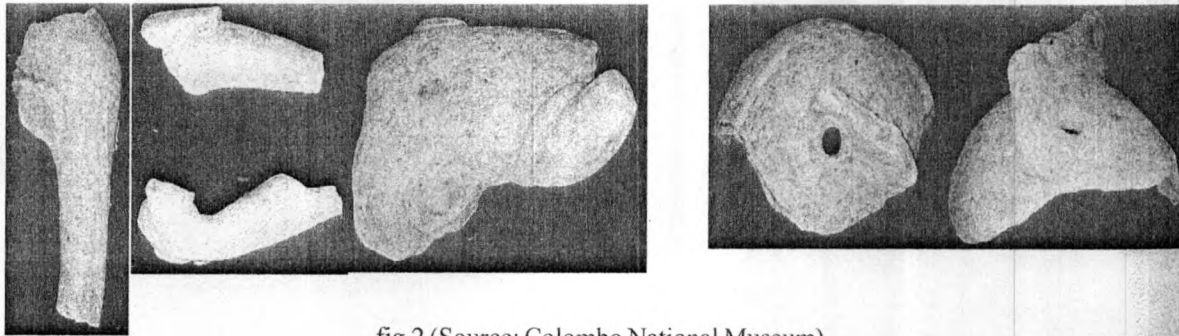


fig.2 (Source: Colombo National Museum)

Daraniyagala presumes that these cavities are meant to insert lighted wicks as done in the present day rituals (Deraniyagala, 1961: 28). The terra cotta collection with the National Museum in Colombo consists of pieces of fairly big elephants.

In the terra cotta figure collection at the Anuradhapura Archaeological Museum, there is an elephant figure that has been found from a place called Dethiyamulla.

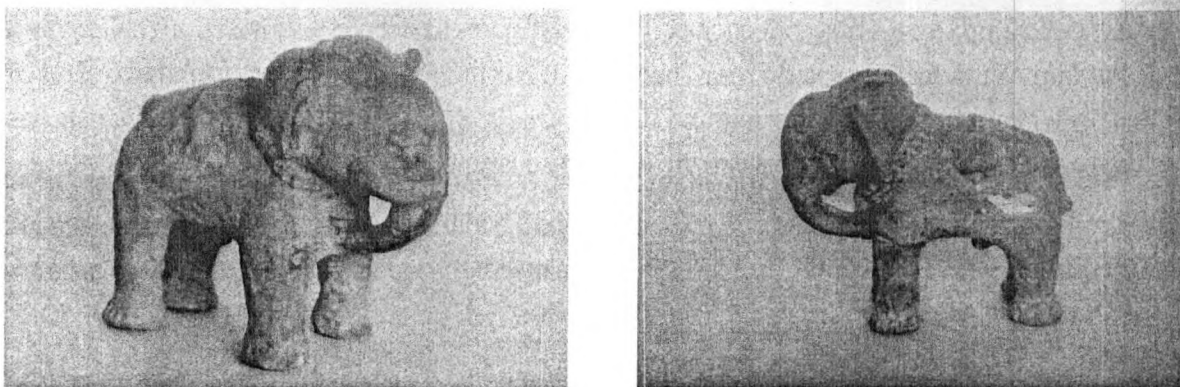


fig.3 (Source: Anuradhapura Archaeological Museum)

One leg of the figure is broken and has been repaired, and the trunk is attached to the front legs. Around the neck is a belt and a small bell. Most figures that have been found are not decorated but on this figure can see a small decoration around the body.

Parts of elephant figures are found among the Terra cotta figures collection at Dighavapi Archaeological Museum at Ampara.

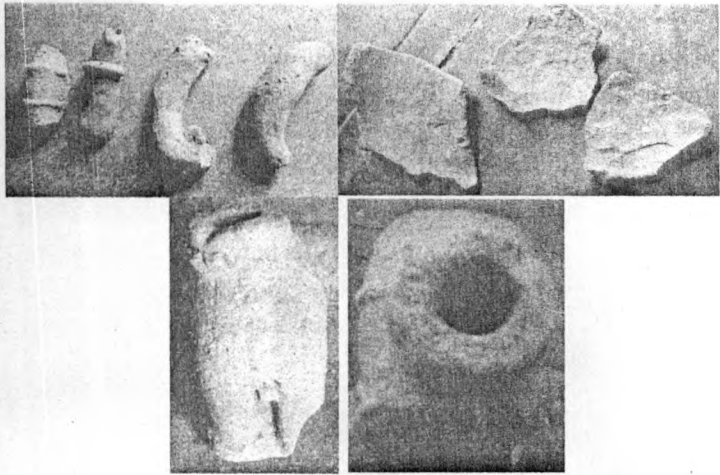


fig.4 (Source: Dighavapi Archaeological Museum)

There are broken parts of trunks, tusks and body. There also is a small figure only with back legs and body without front legs and head. There is a circular cavity on the upper part of the body.

It can be presumed, as Mr Daraniyagala noted, that it is for the purpose inserting wicks. In addition, this museum collection has bodies of two big elephant figures.

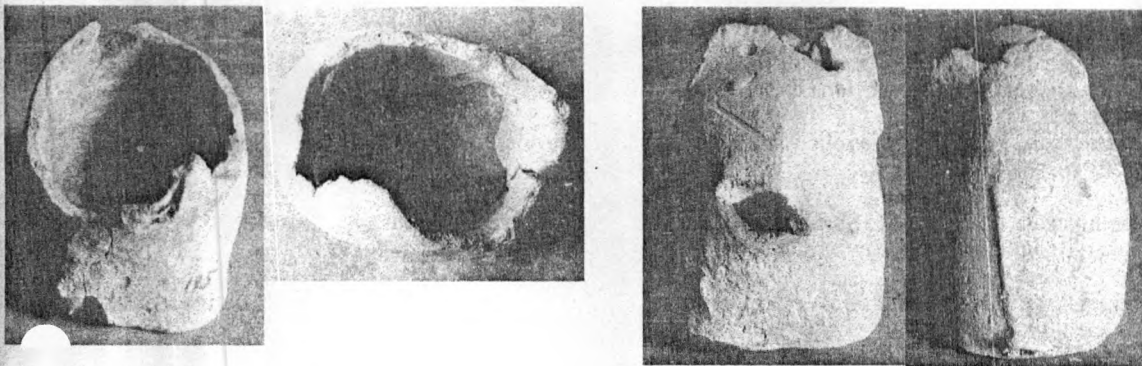


fig.5 (Source: Dighavapi Archaeological Museum)

What is apparent when studying these elephant figures is that not only small figures but various sizes of elephant figures have been created. All the figures that have been examined are made with a cavity and some figures are with a cavity on the head and on the body. When observing features of these creations it is obvious that they have been used for some religious activities.

The extent of areas, territories where they are discovered, the way they spread on and the nature of the earth regarding so far discovered figures with a historic and archaeological value demonstrate that this creativity belongs to a particular geographical zone.

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Sri Lanka as an agri-based country ritualistic beliefs relevant to agricultural lives have influenced by artistry. People had realised that Sunlight, rain and water provide life line for every animal and plant. As depicting rain or water with a carving is difficult they have used elephant figures.

Written sources say it is the elephant symbolizes monsoon wind that brings water for nectar flagon of Goddess Lakshmi (Amila, 1999: 53). Further, at a side of the pond near the entrance to the Isurumuniya Temple is a carving depicting elephants in water sports (Wickramagamage, 2004: 23). And also, there are carvings of elephants in water sports near the bathing tanks of Ranmasu Uyana.

It is clear with all the above mentioned facts that elephant figures have been connected with water since ancient times. As these figures have been used at the ceremonies of prosperity and as these ceremonies are taking place around tanks and paddy fields, it is apparent that these figures have been used for sacraments devoted for prosperity. These terra cotta figures must have been used at ritualistic sacraments such as 'Gammadu' that perform to get water for the field, to protect harvest from wild animals as well for the prosperity. However, as these figures are found in large volumes at places and as they are in a broken state, it can be presumed that these terra cotta elephant figures have been used at sacramental and ritualistic practices.

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