

## CONCEPTUAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL VALUE OF STŪPA RELIC CHAMBER

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### Introduction

*Chetiya* or *chaitya* is a very specific architectural creation which demonstrates the tangible & intangible Buddhist heritage. According to Paranavitane, Stūpas were used to lay up the dead bodies of kings & noble at the time of pre Buddhist era. Stūpa is a kind of valuable result of strategically trial of conflating pre Buddhist beliefs & rituals into Buddhism. According to pāli chronicles, Stūpa build only for lord Buddha, pancheri Buddha, arahat & universal monarch. So, Stūpa which contains relics of above honourable persons are not lifeless burials but kind of live heritage tradition which continuing through worshipping until today. It has been mentioned as the worshipping of real person the imagined figure in mind.

Relics is the most important & centred thing in a Stūpa which lay up in chamber. People worship not to the Stūpa but to relics inside of it. Without relics it is just a lifeless monument. So, the main aim of this study is to investigate the conceptual & archaeological value of Stūpa relic chamber.

### Conceptual background

The main conceptual expectation of constructing a Stūpa is to lay up the relics of Lord Buddha, pancheri Buddha, arahat or universal monarch. Relics are placed in relic chamber. It is not only a burial type but also a tradition which base on memorizing & worshipping. In Asian tradition, Stūpa would get the influence from megalithic culture. It clearly proves through megalithic burials which associate with early Buddhist Stūpa in India. Also there is a conceptual relationship with pyramids also. But basic of pyramids is the eternal concept. After decline of the civilization, pyramids

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become isolated monuments. Though Stūpa influenced from pyramids, it became a live heritage through continuous tradition of worshipping. Main concept, centre feature relic chamber & paintings also influence from pyramid tradition. So, it seems that Stūpa got the basic concept from pyramids in Bronze Age. It is a long term tradition of architectural transmission. But later Stūpa created its own specific inherent not only with conceptually but also with architecturally. Conceptually relic chamber directly influenced from megalithic burials. Literary descriptions & real relic chambers are seemed to have been similar with megalithic burial type called as cists.

### **Main architectural form**

Literary sources also archaeological evidences reveal about the basic form of a relic chamber in a Stūpa. According to the Ruwanwali Stūpa description in *mahawamsa*, one stone was placed in the middle, four stones used to make a stone box & final stone was used as a capstone to cover that box. This description of constructing the relic chamber also proved from archaeological evidences by excavating some Stūpa chambers in Sri Lanka. As an example mahiyangana Stūpa relic chamber can be mentioned. These evidences clearly remember the megalithic burial system which is called a cist burial. There is sub variety of that called as cist burial with capstone. It a structure of placing four stones in four directions as a square (sometimes there is one or two stones in the middle of it to divide parts). After depositing the pots with bones, ash & other materials cist was covered with a large capstone. These kinds of cists have been revealed from pinnewagalsohonkanatta early Iron Age burial site.

### **Internal features**

At the bottom of relic chamber there are various materials like chunks, shells, other marine materials & *nāga* figures which symbolize ocean. Main concept of this is to symbolizing the world of *nāga* which located under the ocean. On that there is a creation called as '*yantragala*'. It

consists of nine holes which conceptually symbolizes the determination. Then there are three peaks which bearing a stone pillar. These three peaks are called as '*trikutas*' & stone pillar is called as mount *meru*. Mount *meru* is a mythical mountain. Buddhist *meru* has mentioned in *sattasuriyutgamanasutta* in *anguttara* sect. It visions only for persons who ameliorated their minds. Mount *meru* is considered as the centre point of whole universal. The shape of mount *meru* in Stūpa is square, cylinder or octagon shape. There are seven rings to symbolize seven other mountains around the mount *meru*. According to Horcart, mount *meru* has used in Stūpa for the purpose of presenting Stūpa as a symbol of universe. But Parānavitane mentioned that it was only an illustration of incidents of life of Lord Buddha by using the description mentions in *lalātadhātuwamsa*. But these features cannot be identified from early Buddhist Stūpa. According to Fahien, abhayagiri Stūpa was built on the symbol of sacred foot print. Later, except for mount *meru*, copper plates with Mahayana sutra has been placed with the influence of Mahayana.

There is a casket with relics are placed on the top of mount *meru*. Normally bones & ash are in these caskets with offerings like beads & ornaments. But some Stūpa said to have been built with other kinds of objects. As an example mirisaveti Stūpa was built on the royal palm of King Dutugemunu. Sometimes not only the relics of transcendental but also great mundane could have been laid up. If the story of mirisaweti Stūpa was true, there is high possibility of constructing Stūpa with the relics or objects of great mundane like great kings.

### Offerings

Various offerings have been laid up in the relic chamber. According to the description of Ruwanwali Stūpa relic chamber sacred Bodhi tree made of precious stones, beads, eight auspicious objects, sawn figure series, pots & etc. were laid up as offerings. In reality objects like lamps, figures of main four gods, Buddha statues, caskets, beads, ornaments like rings, anklets, coins, pots, precious & semi-precious stones found in relic



chambers. Not only those religious offerings but also very specific objects like four statues of horse riders have been revealed from mahiyangana Stūpa. It is kind of very doubtful thing. There is no any religious value of them. *Mahawamsa* mentions that hair relics of Lord Buddha have been deposited in mahiyangana Stūpa. Whatever mention, can't it be a relic chamber of a great mundane with his symbolize guardians?

### **Conclusion**

As we considered relic chamber is the most important feature in a Buddhist Stūpa. It conceptually & architecturally influenced from pyramids & megalithic burials. But later it created own conceptual live tradition of worshipping with changeable inherent features with the influence of various religions & beliefs in recent society like *nāga* & gods worshipping also Mahayana concept. So, the way of continuing the long term live tradition, relic chamber can be recognized as a specific feature multicultural harmony.