

An Analytical Study of Korawakgala a Unique Stone Carving Associated with Gates of the Gampola Period Sri Lanka

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Abstract: *When studying the history of Sri Lankan art, the Gampola period (1341 – 1410 AD) represents a transformative phase in the elaboration of Sri Lankan art and architecture, arising after the decline that followed the Polonnaruwa period. Pronounced by political reorganization and artistic reanimation, this period saw a conscious reanimation and reinterpretation of traditional cultural rudiments. Among its notable architectural features is the Korawaggala (winged stone), a distinctive point deposited on either side of the way of religious and executive structures. While primarily serving as a structural support and defensive banister the Korawakgala evolved into a significant ornamental and emblematic element, reflecting refined artifice and stylistic invention. This study investigates the structural development, cultural features, and functional metamorphosis of the Korawakgala during the Gampola period. Employing a qualitative art- literal methodology, the exploration integrates visual analysis, on- point observation, and a review of erudite and archaeological sources. Particular attention is given to the representation of Gajasingha, a fabulous mongrel motif constantly sculpted on Korawakgals, and its socio-artistic symbolism. By assaying variations in form, scale, and sculpturing ways, the study situates the Korawakgala within the broader narrative of Sri Lankan architectural heritage, pressing the aesthetic imagination and artistic meanings bedded in Gampola-period design.*

Keywords: Gampola era, Korawakgala (wingstone), Stone carving, Archaeological Sources, Gajasingha, Sri Lankan History

1. Introduction

The period between the collapse of the Polonnaru Kingdom and the beginning of the Kandy era is special in studying the historical periods of Sri Lanka. The main reason for this is that the information of several kingdoms, which is limited to a very short period of time, is found during this period. The kingdoms were known by the names of the cities mentioned as Dambadeniya Kingdom, Yapahuwa Kingdom, Kurunegala Kingdom, Gampola Kingdom and Kotte Kingdom. Comparatively speaking, the revival seen in the advanced socio-economic, cultural, political aspects of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaru eras is not seen in this period, but an improvement in the socio-economic, cultural, and political aspects that could not be seen in the Dambadeniya, Yapahuwa, Kurunegala, etc. eras that came after the Polonnaru era is seen in the Gampola era.

With the shift of the center of the Sinhalese state from Kurunegala to Gampola located in the mountains, this period can be pointed out as a period when there was a considerable change in the political field of this country. A succession of kings have tried to develop this kingdom, which was started by the fourth king Bhuvaneka Bahu. Architecture, sculpture, carving, painting, music and drama are important among these.

During this period, which saw a renaissance in art, i.e. advanced arts and crafts, the artistic elements associated with portals were very beautiful artistic elements in architecture. Here, Korawakgala(wingstone), which is an artistic element related to portals, is studied. Accordingly, the study is carried out analytically on the evolution of Korawakgala during the period from the Anuradhapura period to the Gampola period. Also, what are the peculiarities that are seen, what are the characteristics represented by it, and what are the analytically

studied. For this, Korawakgals are studied in several temples belonging to the Gampola period. The korawakgala found in places like Lankatilaka Temple, Gadaladeniya Temple, Medewala Temple, Devi Nuwara Upulvan Temple, Alawathura Temple, Niggammana, etc. is unique among them.

2. Literature Survey

The study of Korawakgala (wingstone) as an architectural and sculptural element in Sri Lankan art has been addressed indirectly within broader discussions of temple architecture, door frames, and stone carvings. Foundational historical narratives such as those by H. W. Codrington and S. Paranavitana provide essential political and epigraphical contexts for understanding the transition from the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods to the Gampola era. These works establish the socio-political background necessary for interpreting architectural transformations.

Specific attention to architectural ornamentation appears in studies like *Sinhala Door Frames* by C. Godakumbure and *Ancient Building Doors of Sri Lanka* by C. Wickramage, where portal elements, including Korawakgala, are examined in stylistic and structural terms. However, these analyses primarily focus on formal classification rather than an in-depth analytical study of symbolic transformation.

Research on the Gampola period by Nandadeva Mudiyanse and Atabage Piyananda Thero highlights the artistic renaissance of the 14th century, noting developments in sculpture and carving traditions. Archaeological reports by H. C. P. Bell and subsequent Department of Archaeology publications document structural examples from sites such as Lankatilaka Temple and Gadaladeniya Temple, yet they do

not comparatively analyze the evolution of Gajasingha imagery within Korawakgala design.

While prior scholarship acknowledges structural continuity from Anuradhapura to Gampola, there remains a gap in focused analytical research on the morphological, iconographic, and functional transformation of Korawakgala during the Gampola period. Therefore, the present study situates itself within existing architectural historiography while addressing the insufficiently explored symbolic and structural innovations of Gampola-era wingstones.

3. Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and analytical art-historical methodology to examine the evolution and distinctive characteristics of Korawakgala (wingstone) during the Gampola period. The study is structured within a comparative historical framework, tracing the development of this architectural element from the Anuradhapura period and the Polonnaruwa period to the Gampola era in order to identify stylistic continuities, structural modifications, and iconographic innovations. By employing a diachronic analytical approach, the research evaluates changes in form, carving techniques, compositional structure, and functional transformation, thereby situating Gampola Korawakgala within the broader trajectory of Sri Lankan architectural history.

Primary data were collected through systematic field observation, direct visual examination, measurement, and photographic documentation at selected temple sites associated with the Gampola period, including Lankatilaka Temple, Gadaladeniya Temple, Medawala Temple, Devinuwara Upulvan Temple, Alawathura Temple, and Niggammana. A detailed formative and stylistic analysis was conducted to examine structural configuration, relief carving depth, internal and external decorative components, and the iconographic prominence of the Gajasingha motif. These observations were systematically organized under three analytical themes: structural changes, variations in engraving, and changes in usability.

Secondary data were gathered from archaeological reports, epigraphical records, literary sources, and scholarly studies on Sri Lankan art and architecture to provide historical and theoretical context. The interpretative framework integrates formal visual analysis with contextual cultural understanding, carefully correlating field findings with documented historical evidence. While the absence of definitive epigraphical references limits absolute conclusions regarding symbolic meaning, the combined use of comparative analysis, field documentation, and interdisciplinary source consultation ensures methodological rigor and academic reliability in assessing the artistic and functional transformation of Korawakgala during the Gampola period.

4. Historical Background of Korawakgala

When studying about Korawakgala, the researcher can recognize that Korawakgala was evolved on several occasions by studying historical sources. The oldest archeological factor in Sri Lanka is found in relation to a gate-related design known

as Korawakgala. Instead of the stone panel of the Somavathiya temple in Dambulla, two brick walls with mud have been created on both sides of the steps. There is no fixed conclusion about the nature of Korawakgala, which was first used in Sri Lanka, but many archaeologists point out that the that design is the oldest. But later Korawakgala of various natures have been used as a basic element in the design of gates.

In the early stages, bricks were used for the construction of buildings and related architectural elements, so Koravakgala was also completed using bricks. Later, cel panels were used to form the Korawakgal over time, and geometric lines were added to it. The next occasion was the addition of the dragon image, which is depicted in this case as a dragon swallowing a "scroll". Sometimes this dragon is said to be a naked figure with an elephant's trunk coming out of its mouth, and sometimes it is said to be a crocodile's mouth. Anuradhapura era Ruwanweli Maha Stupa, the korawakgal in the steps around the Salapathala courtyard can be pointed out as examples.



Figure 1: Anuradhapura era, Ruwanweli Maha Stupa Korawakga
(<https://www.imagesofceylon.com>)

The Koravakgals built in the Polonnaru period are largely similar to the works of Anuradhapura, but there are differences in some aspects. The korawakgals built in that era were often slender, elongated, and tall. It also seems that Korawakgal was brought from Anuradhapura for some buildings belonging to the Polonnaru period. In Polonnaruwa Lankathilaka Vihara, Thivanka Statue and Raja Vaishya Bhunga Mandapa etc. can be presented as examples of Korawakgal flanking the elevator class (Ilangasinghe, History of Sri Lanka 2 : p.233). In many other places built during the Polonnaru era, you can see Korawakgals belonging to that era. Among them are the Polonnaru Baddha Sima Prasada, Lankatilaka Pohoyage, Watadage and Thivanka Statue House.

There is not enough evidence to go into such a deep investigation regarding the Korawakgals built in the Dambadeniya period, but the Korawakgals on both sides of the elevator class used to enter the thupaghar of the Dambadeniya Rajamaha Vihara are considered to be contemporary creations. The fact that instead of dragon images, carvings of a gajasingha have been used, can be considered as the study trends that happened in the Dambadeniya era in connection with the local Koravakgal design. After that, there is a chance to see the very long steps built in the Yapahuva period to go to the top of Suba Pabbata (Yapahuva Rock) made of several parts. The continuous evolution of Koravakgal formation can be presented in this way. You can clearly see the image of Gajasingha in the

korawakgala in Yapahu. But in some places it is stated that this is not the Gajasingha but a dragon (Yapahuva: p.56). Although the basic form of Korawakgala remained almost the same during the Gampola period, it appears that there have been several unique changes in the carvings. In particular, the dragon and the elephant, which were the most common carvings in Korawakgala up to that time, were added to it, and the image of the mythical hybrid "Gajasingha" was created hypothetically.

5. Korawakgala in the Gampola Period

The architectural design called Korawakgala, which is designed as a handrail on both sides of the stairs of buildings or to prevent the stairs from being pushed, was an art element that was created with special attention by artisans in the building design of the Gampola period. However, the design of that time underwent a major change during the Gampola era. The removal of "Muragala" which was the symbol of security in front of Korawakgala until then is an extremely important point that is revealed in the study of elements related to gates of the Gampola era. But what factors influenced this? Is uncertain. It is also particularly significant that the architects of the Gampala period were not anxious to follow the mission symbolized by the 'muragal'.

Accordingly, the research on Koravakgal during the Gampola period is carried out under several main divisions.

- 1) Changes in structure
- 2) Variations in engraving
- 3) Changes in usability

5.1 Changes in structure

There are no marked differences in shape between the Korawakgals of the Gampola period and the Korawakgals used in earlier times. In the early days, there was a trunk extending from the mouth of the dragon at the upper limit of Korawakgala. During the Gampola period, instead, there was a proboscis extending from the mouth of Gajasingha.



Figure 2: Earlier times period Korawakgala, polonnaruwa



Figure 3: Gampola period ,Gajasingha Korawakgala, at Main Entrance to Lankathilaka Temple Building

A character in which the mouth of the dragon is curved in the middle is not found in any early Koravakgala. But in all the Koravakgala belonging to the Gampola period, the mouth of Gajasingha has been created by bending it in two or three places. Due to these factors, the Korawakgals of the Gampola period have taken on a more colorful character than the Korawakgals of the earlier periods. Also, in the early days, the upper limit of Korawakgal was parallel to the ground. The image of dragons and their trunk also preserved that parallelism. Therefore, it was inevitable that they were attributed some kind of quadratic character. In this regard, all the Korawakgala stone structures built during the Anuradhapura period and the Polonnaru period provide evidence. But in the Gampola period, with the mouth of the Gajasingha, their upper limit was created with an inclination towards the earth. Accordingly, the Korawakgals built in the Gampola era show a triangular nature compared to the Korawakgals of other eras.

In the Gampola era Korawakgal design, the artist worked to create a new change only with its carvings without seriously changing the old traditional form. Those Korawak stone carvings are very different compared to the previous eras, but they are educated and artistic. Structurally, Gajasingha pattern was commonly used for Korawak stones during the Gampala period. Standing on three legs, Gajasingha can be seen with one leg raised parallel to the ground in front. This can be identified as a common identity found in all contemporary Korawakgals. And Gajasingha is always moving forward. It is also possible to see the posture of moving fast only in some places. In particular, the Gajasingha figures on the Niggammana Korawakgala reflect a fast movement.



Figure 4: Gajasingha is moving forward, Gajasingha Korawakgala, Gadaladeniya Temple

Also, the images of Gajasingha in Lankatilaka reflect a sitting congregation. It seems to be a unique thing that the Gajasingha is standing towards the temple house, turning its neck and looking back



Figure 5: Gajasingha Korawakgala, at Main Entrance to Lankathilaka Temple Building

In many places, a separate position has been artificially created to form the tip of the Gajasingha tail. It can be assumed that the pekada with false pillars used to form the legs of the dragon seen in Korawakgala during the Anuradhapura and Polonnaru periods has become a petika. But the false towers of early Korawakgala were in the last part of Korawakgala. During the Gampola period, the artist was anxious to set Gajasingha's trunk on the front of Koravakgala by using a fake pitika instead of fake pillars. But in some places, even without this position, the mouth of Gajasingha is established. Examples can be seen in the Alawathura temple and Niggammana temples. It is possible to identify places with a rough base in Korawakgal of this age. In Devinuwara Temple and Vihara, and in Madewala Vihara, there are Korawakgals that provide examples of this.



Figure 6: Gajasingha Korawakgala , Devinuwara Temple

Another unique feature found in the Gampola period Korawakgal is that the trunk of the Gajasingha is circular on a false band, and a lotus bud has emerged at the top of that place. In some places, it is said that this reflects the symbolic meaning expected from the ancient watchstones, but there is no archaeological or other form of evidence to confirm this. However, it is not possible to identify a lamellar made in prehistoric times like this lotus flower with several petals from the stone. You can see lame stones with these elements in places like Madewala Vihara, Deundara Temple, Nigamana. The way the lotus comes out of the trunk reflects the way, it is being carried by the trunk.



Figure 7: Gajasingha Korawakgala, Madewala Temple

5.2 Variations in engraving

It is possible to recognize how different the carvings of Korawakgal in the Gampola period compared to the earlier periods can be identified with all the specimens we have presented. In general, the carvings in Korawakgala can be classified as follows according to the place where they are cut.

- Inside carving
- External carving

It can be seen that in the Gampola era Korawakgal, the inner carvings and the outer pairs of blades were designed to be two sides of a lion's body.

The most attractive part of this Korawakgal is the outer side. The carving of the Gajasingha is a mandatory carving in all Korawakgals, and only in Alavathura, instead of the Gajasingha, one can see a carving that shows the nature of a lion or a leopard. The trunk of the Gajasingha images found in all Korawakgala has been revealed to be bent in two or three places. This condition has also affected the overall shape of Korawakgala. Also, in many places, the mouth of Gajasingha is designed with a smooth and curved surface, and the mouth of Gajasingha is designed with carvings in the lower and middle places. Devinuwara Upulvan Temple and Devinuwara Vihara in Korawakgal specially Gajasingha's Kumbthala is an important historical expression. Such ornaments have been used for the Gajasinghas in the Korawakgals of Gadaladeniya, but they are not as artistic as the Koravakgals of Devinuwara. Apart from the Gajasingha images corresponding to the Gajasingha images on the outside, it is not possible to see any other beautiful carvings in Korawakgal during the Anuradhapura and Polonnaru eras as well as during this period. But "cuts" to create steps can be seen in some cobblestones. Korawakgals of Madewala Vihara are examples of such creations. The carvings of soil scrolls, including those in the Korawakgal of Madewala Vihara, are a unique trend among contemporary Korawakgals. This is the only pair of Korawak stones belonging to the Gampola period with such a script or engravings outside of Gajasingha. The nature of the script is similar to the Gadaladeniya cell carvings and the Lata Karmas found in the Niamgam Paya Vihara Cell Muwa Uluvassa.

The creative method of the Gadaladeniya Korawakgal pair should be specially appreciated here. Elsewhere, the image of a lion raised by means of two semi-elevated figures on either side of Korawakgala, has been finished as an elevated one by the craftsman of Gadaladeniya. As we said before, this is transcendence of the traditional convention.



Figure 8: Gajasingha Korawakgala, Gadaladeniya Temple

5.3 Changes in usability

It should be asked what was expected from the Korawakgala used for buildings in the Gampola period. Scholars believe that Korawakgal was created as a handrail for the convenience of those entering the temple through the steps. But it is difficult to say that this usage remained the same in the fourteenth century. It seems that Korawakgal was created for the noble mansions as well as the temple house during the Gampola period as well as the Polonnaru period. But it is a difficult task to say that it existed as a handhold or for the healing of the climber. Especially, the height of Korawakgals in Gadaladeniya is about 2 feet 10 inches. The height of all the

Korawak stones in Devi Kandy temple and temple is about 2 feet 7 inches. Also, the height of the pair of Korawak stones in Nath Temple in Kandy is about 1 foot. This high level is not enough to fulfill the basic directions of Korawakgal design. It is absolutely impossible to climb the stairs with the help of these. For that, their height levels are not sufficient at all. But it is not clear what is the expectation of using low height Korawakgal.

In earlier eras, many temples were built at a height above the ground level. The steps leading to the Sri Maha Bodhi courtyard in Anuradhapura, Nisshanka Malla Rajasabha Mandapam in Polonnaruwa, Watadage and Yapahuwa were used as handrails depending on the height of the places, but in the 14th century no temple buildings and other buildings of such height were created. Because of this, it is possible to believe that instead of the protection of the stair climber, which was the primary purpose of Koravakgal, Korawakgal may have been created at that time, considering both sides of the steps as a decorative feature. And there is no space to discuss the Hindu inspiration that influenced Korawakgal. Korawakgala is a local identity but there is a possibility that the addition of the Gajasingha image is a reflection of such an origin. In this way, the Korawakgal tradition of education, which began in the Gampola period, gradually evolved and reached its peak during the Kandy period. Accordingly, anyone has to accept that the system identified as Korawakgal during the Kandy period was originated during the Gampola period.

6. Conclusion

When studying the history of Sri Lankan art, there was a renaissance of art in the Gampala period after many eras from the Anuradhapura period. That is, during the Gampala period, crafts such as architecture, carving, and sculpture were important. A careful study of the arts during that period can clearly identify the extent to which there has been a change in the arts. The basic study of this research is done on the artistic element called Korawakgala, which is a unique art element found among the artworks found in the history of Sri Lanka. Here, by studying the Korawakgala of many eras, the research was conducted to find out what the differences were in the Korawak stone during the Gampala period, and for what purpose the Korawakgala was created during the Gampola period.

Accordingly, when studying the facts related to the proposition, structural changes in Korawakgala can be identified during the Gampola period. In other words, a trunk extending from the mouth of the dragon is seen in the early Korawakgala, but in the Gampola period, a trunk is seen extending from the mouth of the Gajasingha. And here, when studying the differences in carvings, compared to other eras, a beautiful Gajasingha image has been used for Korawakgala during the Gampola period. That is, during the Gampola period, the Gajasingha was used as a full-height carving. All these are analyzed with examples in the research. Also, when studying the differences in usage, it can be identified for what purpose the craftsman of the Gampola era created the korawakgala compared to other eras. In other words, although the Korawakgals were created very high in the previous eras, by the Gampola period, these Korawakgals have been created

in a small and beautiful way. This has been analytically presented with examples in the research.

The aim of the research was to find out for what purpose Korawakgal was created in the Gampola period. Accordingly, the early craftsman created Korawakgala for the safety of those climbing the steps. But the Gampola craftsman took the primary purpose of Korawakgala design instead of the protection of the person who climbs the steps and also this artistic element is simply the decoration of the entry point to a place or a building, and because the steps have been used as an integral part since ancient times, Korawakgala has also been used as an artistic element. It can be concluded from the analysis. Accordingly, the artist of the Gampola era transcended the traditional convention and fostered art in a new way.

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Author Profile

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Mahesh Chathuranaga has received several national and international awards for sculpture and painting. His works have been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions across Sri Lanka and abroad. His artistic language often explores themes of identity, cultural memory, spirituality, and socio-political transformation, reflecting a deep engagement with both Sri Lankan and Indian visual traditions. In addition to his studio practice, he serves as a lecturer at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts and a visiting lecturer at Janakala Kendraya, Colombo. As a scholar, he has published research papers and books in the field of art history and contemporary sculpture. He has also coordinated and participated in international workshops and exhibitions, contributing actively to academic and artistic dialogues. Through his dual role as artist and researcher, E.M. Mahesh Chathuranaga Ekanayaka continues to expand the discourse of contemporary South Asian art, integrating traditional visual vocabularies with experimental sculptural methodologies.