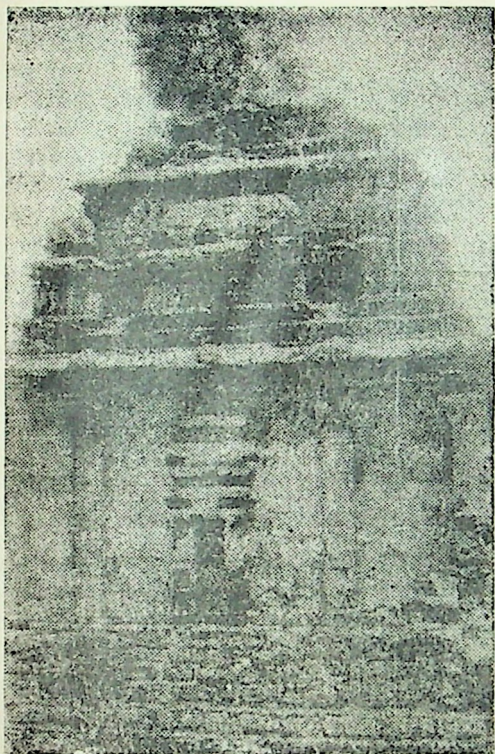


A NOTE ON THE STATUE DISCOVERED AT NAGAPADUVAN AT POONAKARY IN NORTHERN SRI LANKA

— P. PUSPARATNAM

Poonakary region in Northern Sri Lanka is situated in the main land which is adjacent to the Jaffna Peninsula. Moreover, it is also closer to South India especially Tamil Nadu. However, with its strategic position, it has not yet received sufficient attention of the historians and the archaeologists.¹ But as a result of the archaeological survey carried out after 1989, it is now evident that it rivals Kantarodai in Northern Sri Lanka. A good number of the archaeological finds were collected by the writer at this place during the last few years.² These include, besides other finds, artefacts belonging to the Mesolithic and Megalithic cultures. These were discovered at Mannithalai, Paramankirai and Veddukadu in the Poonakary area. These bear witness to the cultural and commercial relations that existed between Poonakary and South India especially Tamil Nadu on the one hand and the Roman Empire, Egypt, Arabia and China on the other.³ With the rise of Cola Empire in South India during the 10th century A. D., the relations between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka were maintained via Kayts, Matota etc., on a larger scale than before.⁴ As a result, the political, cultural and commercial dominance of the Colas played a major role in Poonakary also. No less than eighteen names of places of Cola origin and a Cola Temple at Mannithalai (fig. 1) bear witness to this. It is against the above background only, one has to assess the significance of the discovery of a bronze statue at Nagapaduvan in Poonakary area by the writer in 1990.

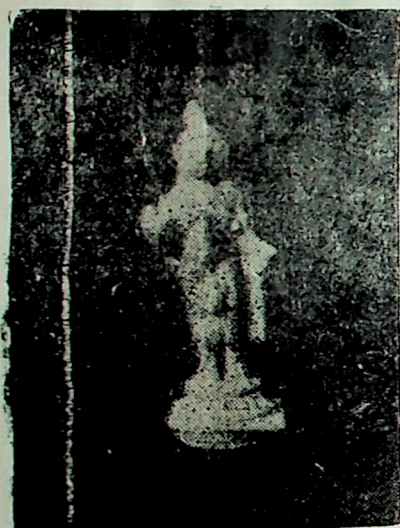
This statue was found in a forest land owned by Mr. K. Tharmalingam while clearing the jungle for cultivation. Besides bricks, potsheds, and Cola coins, a stone statue of Visnu in the Cola style (fig. 2) was also found by the author in 1989.⁵ The bronze statue which is the subject of this note is six inches in height and weighs about half a kilogram. The figure is seated on a lotus pedestal. The right hand is in the varada (which gives boons) pose is pointed downward while the left hand which is in the abhaya (which gives protection) pose is pointed upward. The statue has a thin hip, and is adorned with rich ornaments around the neck. It has lobbed ears which are resting on the shoulders. The portion below the hip and between the legs is broken. The backside has a protrusion which touches the pedestal. It is thin and corrugated and it might be the head of the vahana of the deity (fig. 3).



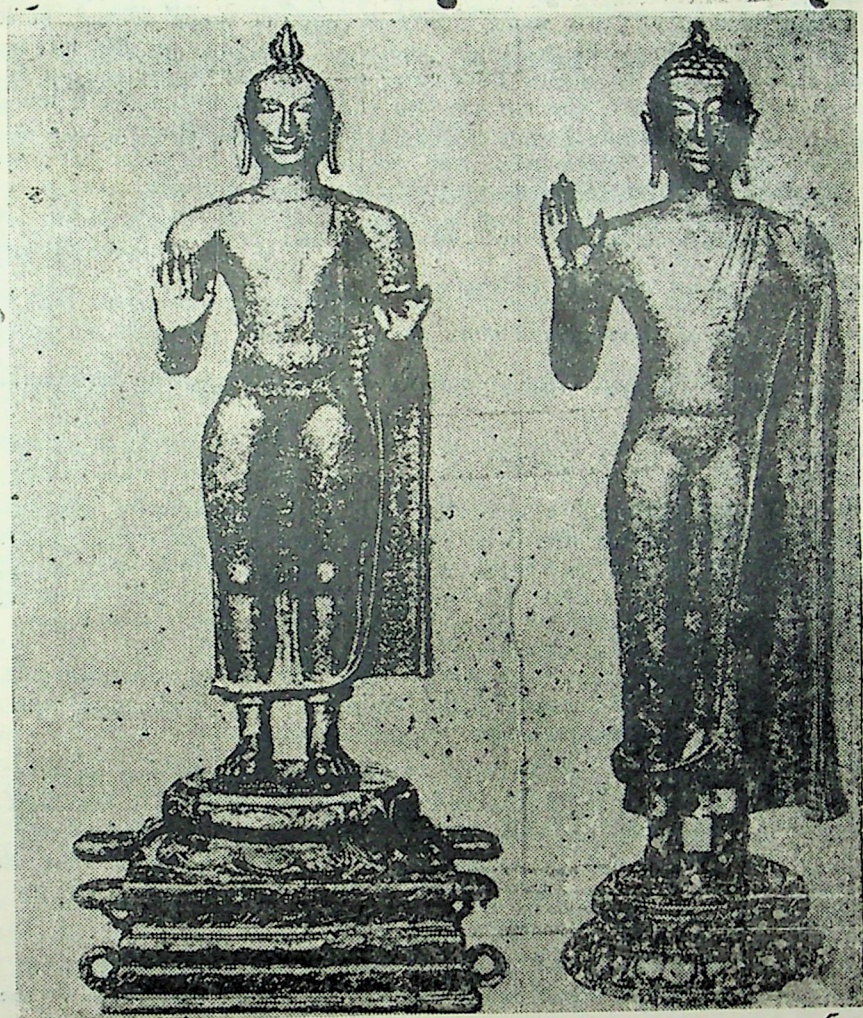
(fig. 1)



(fig. 2)



(fig. 3)



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(fig. 4)

An inscription is engraved on the pedestal of the statue in the Devanagari script. This could be read as Puvanesvari. Therefore, it can be assumed that the people of that age (when this was engraved) worshipped the statue as a Hindu goddess of this name. Considering the shape of the statue and other features including the technique and cloth dangling on the left hand, it may be assumed that the statue represents the style of Nagapattinam Buddhist art of the Cola period. The coronet on the head and the cloth hanging on the left hand are some of the similarities between Nagapattinam and Nagapaduvan statues (fig. 4).⁶ Similarities are noticeable in the technical aspects as well. The notable differences between the two are as follows,

- (i) The decorations on the chest of the statue.
- (ii) The shape of the ears of the statue.
- (iii) The style of wearing the cloth above the feet.
- (iv) The long left hand stretching downward below the hip representing the 'Varada hasta'.
- (v) The evidence for a vahana.

The features given above indicate that it is a distinctive one, although it belongs to the tradition of art vogue in Nagapattinam. Both have similarities in the wearing of clothes and to some extent in the facial expression also. On the basis of the facts cited above, one may arrive at the following conclusions.

- (a) This statue might not have been brought from Nagapattinam but would have been moulded locally by the sculptors who were proficient in the art tradition of Nagapattinam.
- (b) The inscription on the statue, however, indicates that it is a Hindu goddess. It might be that this statue was moulded by a Buddhist sculptor from Nagapattinam who had adopted the style to fashion the Hindu deity. There are enough evidences in Sri Lanka to show that the Buddhist statues were moulded following the technical aspects of the Hindu traditional art and vice-versa.
- (c) It might also be possible that the statue might originally have been a Buddhist deity but later worshipped as a Hindu goddess, of the name engraved on it.
- (d) The name engraved might be the name of the devotee who was responsible for making this or who worshipped this later.

The statue discovered at Nagapaduvan was studied by Prof. Peter Shalk, the Head of the History of Religion, University of Uppsala in Sweden, during

his recent visit to Sri Lanka especially the Jaffna University. He was then collecting materials for Tamil Buddhism in Sri Lanka. His views were expressed in the seminars and the newspapers.⁷ They may be summarized as follows:

1. This statue belongs to the Buddhist art tradition of Nagapattinam of the Cola period.
2. This was moulded in the Amaravati art tradition during the Cola period.
3. This broken position in front of the statue could be a vahana of the deity or it might also be a mass of the metal gathered, while it was being moulded.
4. The thin elongation appearing in the backside can't be assumed as the tail of the vahana.
5. The inscription engraved on the pedestal cannot be read as Puvancsvari.

A careful analysis of his views in the light of the Art tradition developed in South India shows that his view on the influence of the Amaravati art tradition on that of the Colas is untenable. For there are many evidences in Tamil Nadu to show that the technique of metal casting and making of statues was introduced into that country, after the 6th century A.D. specially in the Pallava period much later than the period of the art of Amaravati and other traditions introduced from north of Tamil Nadu. This art tradition of the Sangam Age and the art technique of Amaravati and other art traditions introduced from north of Tamil Nadu. This art tradition is known as the Dravidian art tradition from the time of the Pallavas. This tradition assimilated new features which had changed beyond recognition. On the basis of the Pallava art tradition, many statues were moulded with some changes and better 'finish' during the Cola period. It is not correct to say that the Cola art tradition was influenced by the Amaravati art technique which had become obsolete five hundred years ago before the rise of the imperial Colas.

The argument put forward by the learned professor, that the front portion of the statue of Nagapaduwan has been result of a mass of metal gathered while it was being moulded is not borne out by facts, if one carefully surveys the history of the South Asian art tradition. Usually, if a statue is broken while it is being moulded, it is generally discarded and thrown into the water bodies. Some of the statues of Cola origin discovered in Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, are the evidences for this. An inscription is usually engraved only after the statue is completely moulded according to the canons of art.

He further argues that the thin sinus position is not the tail of the vahana. He is of the opinion that it might have been moulded to poise the

statue as a prop. But, there are evidences in the Hindu and Buddhist bronze statues in Sri Lanka for this. While they were moulded, a long tail-like support too is moulded to hold the statue in balance. But this Nagapattinam style statue is small one (nine inches in height), it is very difficult to accept his view.

Further, one cannot accept his argument that the inscription on the statue refers to the Buddha. It is clearly written in the late Devanagari script and anyone, who knows the script can readily read it. There is no doubt about this. Moreover, it may also be pointed out that most of the Buddhist statues discovered at Nagapattinam have inscriptions written in the Tamil script. Since the inscription in the Devanagari is clear, it might be that the inscription was engraved by the local Hindu devotee as stated in an earlier paragraph.

1. Pushparatnam, P. *Punakari — an Archeological survey* (Jaffna: 1903).
2. *Ibid*, pp. 12 — 26.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 47 — 56.
4. *Uthayan* (Jaffna: 3-6-1992).
5. Ramachandran, T. N., *Nagapattinam and other Buddhist Branzas in the Madras Museum*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (Madras: 1965), Plate, II, IV, V.
6. *Elanatham* (Jaffna: 28-8-1992).
7. Ramachandra, T. N. *Op. cit'* Pts. XXIV, XXII.

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