

AN ANCIENT CLAY CANOE BURIAL TRADITION IN SRI LANKA

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By nature, early human societies were more attracted to make burials. Because death may be an uninterpreted metaphysical aspect to early communities. In primitive societies, birth represents procreation, the beginning and the known: death represents the departure, termination, the known and mysterious – hence the phenomena beyond control. (Seneviratne 1990: 145) Ancient people believed that the "spirits" of the dead were kept alien within the community which in turn gave rise to the ancestor – worship. (Radcliff Brown 1976: 155). The Early Iron Age was the prominent cultural phase related to the burial practices in Sri Lanka. However, the clay canoe burial system is considered as a specific burial tradition in the island due to its morphological dynamics. Therefore, the aims of the present work are to examine the research history, chronological and spatial parameters as well as the material culture dynamics of the clay canoe burials in Sri Lanka.

History of research in this custom can be traced back to the 1950s in the island. P.E.P. Deraniyagala recorded the *Bandattara* clay canoe burial located near the fourth milepost of the *Matara – Akuressa* road in 1952. (Deraniyagala 1952) In the *Ibbankatuva* cist burial site excavations during 1988 – 1991, researchers recorded a clay canoe burial as a 'Crematory flat form' in their reports. (Bandaranayake *et al* 1994, Weisshaar 1992) Next is the *Kalotuvawa* clay canoe burial site located in *Gampaha* district. (Perera 2000) Then, Somadeva discovered another clay canoe burial site at *Ranchamadama* government school premises near *Kolabage – Āra* in *Ratnapura* district in 2007. Totally, six clay canoes and two pit burials were uncovered during excavations. (Somadeva 2008) After that, Adikari and Dissanayake excavated four clay canoes at *Nikawalamulla* near *Ruwanwella* in *Kegalle* district. (Dissanayake 2009) In 2010 Somadeva

identified another clay canoe burial site in *Haldummulla* in *Haputale* DS division of *Badulla* district. Totally, four individual clay canoes were identified. (Somadeva 2010) Somadeva also discovered another clay canoe burial site at *Kalupahana Watta* near *Beragala* junction in the same district in 2011. (Somadeva 2011) Perera discovered one more clay canoe burial site at *Dummalasooriya* located near *Madampe* in *Puttalam* district. (Personal comm. with Nimal Perera) As a summary, most previous studies on the relevant area are isolated and regional scale studies. Therefore, the present paper attempts to understand the archaeological dynamics of this specific burial tradition in an island-wide context.

The current investigation involved assessing and analyzing chronological variations, geographical distribution and material culture diversity of the clay canoe burial tradition in Sri Lanka. Excavated data and excavation reports were the primary research materials for the present study. Personal communication with excavators, a comparative approach for chronological sequences and spatial and environmental approach for geographical distribution were the prime data analysis methods of the present paper.

Results of this research are depending on up to date investigations carried out related to the clay canoe burials. As a pioneer investigator, Somadeva argued that the earliest radiometric dates assigned to some sites recovered from the adjacent area of the central mountains extend back to the late third millennium BCE. (Somadeva 2010, 2014) In addition, he noted that he could observe some quartz chips interred in the burial pots in *Ranchamadama* clay canoe burials. (Somadeva 2010) Based on radiometric dates, he argued that the origin of this culture overlaps with the upper limits of the prehistoric microlithic culture in Sri Lanka. (Somadeva 2014, Deraniyagala 1992).

Name of the site	Radiometric date
<i>Ranchamadama</i>	1359 cal. \pm 163 B.C (Somadeva 2008)
<i>Haldummulla</i>	1750 cal. \pm 230 / 1700 cal. \pm 170 B.C (Somadeva 2010)
<i>Kalupahanawatta, Beragala</i>	2400 cal. \pm 250 / 2300 cal. \pm 250 B.C (Somadeva 2011)
<i>Ibbankatuwa (Crematory Platform)</i>	770-395 BC (Weisshaar 1992)
<i>Kalotuvava</i>	135 cal. \pm 51 B.C (Perera 2000)
<i>Nikawalamulla</i>	384 B.C. / 170 A.D. (Dissanayake 2009)
<i>Dummalasooriya</i>	86 – 345 A.D.

Table 01: Radiometric dates obtained for clay canoe burials

On the other hand, sites such as *Kalotuvava*, *Nikawalamulla* and *Dummalasooriya* represent the latest dates of third century B.C to fourth century A.D. (For a general overview of radiometric dates see table 01) Therefore, chronological sequences proposed that the origin of this burial tradition possibly goes back to the third or second millennium BCE and sustained for a prolonged period in the history. However, this clarification should be verified through further investigations.

Compared to the cist and pit burials, clay canoes represent a relatively low diversity of artefacts. (Perera 2000, Somadeva 2008, 2010, 2011, 2014) Majority of them are fragments of earthenware vessels. Some clay canoes contained a large number of pots and some are in very few. Plain Red Ware, Black and Red Ware and Buff Ware are common. Some of them are interior and exterior decorated ones. Few canoe burials especially sites

located in the upper latitudes represent some terracotta or glass beads and quartz chips. (Somadeva 2014) However, there is no sign of any metal object recovered from the clay canoes in the island. This material culture dynamic proved that the clay canoe burial tradition had its own special characteristics.

History of research suggests that the clay canoes are discovered in the various parts of the country. However, observations verified that the majority of sites are recorded from the wet and intermediate zones. Compared to the other types of burials, clay canoe burial sites are relatively low in numbers. Explorations suggested that clay canoe burials are highly disturbed by cultural formations, especially treasure hunters' activities. Local people called *Mukkaru Sohon* (Burials of *Mukkarus*) for clay canoes. According to legends, they believed that *Mukkarus* were the gem miners who migrated to the island from India in the ancient times. Finally, according to the above - mentioned morphological characteristics, it can be concluded that the clay canoe burials are unique burial tradition in the island compared to the other types of burials. Carbon 14 dates (eg. Beragala :2400+250 BC and Dummalasuriya:86-345 AD) confirmed that this clay canoe tradition was continued for nearly three millennia since the late third millennium BC in Sri Lanka. Therefore, a series of further studies are needed to verify the above-mentioned dynamics of this specific burial tradition.

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