

A GENDER-ARCHAEOLOGICAL READING ON *HENAKANDA BISO BANDARA* CULT

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This study undertakes a gender-archaeological reading of *Henakanda Biso Bandara*, a god/goddess from Sri Lanka's late medieval pantheon, to explore the complexities of gender identity in the Gampola kingdom. The primary purpose of this study is to explore the significance of *Henakanda Biso Bandara*'s gender identity for our understanding of gender and sexuality in Sri Lankan history and culture and to examine how her/his non-conformity to traditional gender norms challenges and complicates our understanding of gender identity in Sri Lankan society. Gender archaeology is a relatively modern archaeological trend that emerged after the post-processual archaeological movement, leading to a more qualitative approach to understanding the past by incorporating insights from other disciplines. This approach, rooted in gender archaeological theories, enables a more holistic understanding of gender identities and behaviors in the past. The cult surrounding *Henakanda Biso Bandara* is shrouded in mystery, with rumors and folklore surrounding her/his life and character. This study employs a qualitative approach to identify *Henakanda Biso Bandara*'s gender identity and contemporary society's ideology. Iconographic data, folklores, and literary data were collected from selected temples and *Devalas* in the *Udunuwara*, *Yatinuwara*, and *Kothmale* regions, where the cult is still alive, as well as through interviews with local communities, devotees, and expatriates on gender and gender archaeology. Mainly, iconographic analysis was employed to analyze the data, informed by Roberta Gilchrist's gender archaeological theory, which served as a guiding framework for understanding the phenomena. The study also drew upon contemporary literature sources and iconographic analysis of statues and paintings from the *Gampola* period to understand masculinity and femininity in the *Gampola* period, with a special reference to the *Henakanda Biso Bandara* cult. The *Henakanda Biso Bandara* statues and paintings found in shrines primarily depict the figure as male. While this may reflect the gender norms of the divine concept during that period, there were a number of female goddesses in Sri Lanka prior to this time. The findings suggest that *Henakanda Biso Bandara* did not conform to traditional gender norms in the *Gampola* society but rather defied categorization as male or female.

Keywords: Gender-archaeology, gender identity, *Henakanda Biso Bandara*, Sri Lankan history and culture