

Abhayagiri Nisawatta Inscription

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Abstract

This inscription which can be traced paleographically to the 9 - 10th centuries AC throws some light on the life style of the monks of the Abhayagiri monastery during the period. It also enables us to arrive at the correct meaning of a few words found in the ancient Sinhala Buddhist texts. Moreover this inscription helps us to identify a type of building found in Buddhist monasteries of the Anuradhapura period, but for what purpose that was used was not known earlier. The identification of the building and the meaning of the word *nisawatta* will be discussed in this article. The old *Sinhala* word *nisawatta* has been given different meanings by *Sinhala* scholars. It will be shown that a more accurate meaning to this word could be found in the interpretation of this inscription. As two letters in this inscription were not clear it was with some effort that they were deciphered. This inscription of one sentence contains an instruction. In the absence of syntactical separation of words and phrases, the sentence had to be reconstructed for easy reading, understanding and translation.

The Inscription

In August 1995 an ancient building constructed with polished stone slabs and a boundary wall was discovered by us while excavating a section of the Circular Road leading to the Abhayagiri Vihara at a point close to the north west of the Elephant pond. The building was of special interest to us as on the veranda of this building there was a well - preserved inscription of three lines reading as follows:

Buduviiyãiti Kenekun mē nisawattehi lā behed pala mē ä kisi kawari dāyak nowatavanu

Location is 2(9) 2(6) 2(5) of the grid s 11 w19 of the master plan of the Abhayagiri Vihara.

In the interpretation of this inscription there is some ambiguity in a few words found in it. One such word is *Nisawatta*. Although few scholars have already given some interpretations of this word depending on literary sources, this inscription enables us to arrive at a more reliable meaning

supported by archaeological evidence. We also feel that for the first time this inscription assists us to identify correctly a special type of building found in ancient monastic complexes.

If one examines carefully the interpretations of the word *nisawatta* given so far along with the information found in ancient literary sources and the architectural features of this peculiar building it would be possible to resolve the existing ambiguity. Rev. Velivitiye Sorata using the authority of ancient literary works such as *Butsarāṇa*, *Kudusika sannaya* and *Mahānīmi Jātaka* has interpreted the word *nisawatta* to mean a front part of a house or a portico. (Sorata, 1963:552) The Sinhalese Dictionary edited by D.E. Hettiarachchi and P. B. Sannasgala offers the same meaning. (Hettiarachchi and Sannasgala, p. 6352). Rev. Medauyangoda Vimalakitti while not agreeing with Rev. Sorata expresses the following view: "In the Sumangala dictionary the meanings given are front part of a building, hall in front of a house, or a portico. The main element of front of a house is *mīdhaya*. Same meaning is found in the Skt, word *pinda*. The Sinhalese word *pila* is derived from the word *pinda* and not from *mīdha*. The *mīdhaya* in a small house and *istōppuwa* (portico) in a large house are referred to by the word *pinda*. *Mīdha* and *nisawatta* are two different things. Hence one finds *mīdhante*, *paribhandante*. Although in some texts such as *Butsarāṇa* the word *nisawatta* is used for *mīdhaya*, the word *nisawatta* is used mainly to mean *paribhandaya*. The word *paribhandā* is used in the sense of surrounding as in *paribhandā pabbata* (surrounding hills) *paribhandā ñāṇa* (accompanied knowledge) and in the sense of higher ground descending gradually in such usage as *sineruparibhandā* (surrounding hills) and *cetiyparibhandā*. As the word *nisawatta* found in *Sikhavalandavinisa* means *paribhandā*, let us find out what this *paribhandā* is. A type of *paribhandā* is the little space left around a house between the outer and the inner wall enabling only one person to pass through it, a feature found in ancient residences and temples. In some houses in the up country one finds a type of small passage with a breadth of one and a half feet projecting from the base of the wall. That is also a *paribhandā*. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that a front house or portico is not a *paribhandā*. (Vimalakitti.M, 1955:107)

The meaning given to this word in *Sikhavalandavinisa* by Sir D.B. Jayatilake is that it is a small veranda at the back of a house, at the end of *nisawatta* or *paribhandā*. (Jayatilake, p. 98)

Palaeographically the Abhayagiri veranda inscription belongs to the 9-10 centuries AC. *Sikhavalandavinisa* supposed to have been written in the 10th century AC gives a description of *nisawatta*. A comparison of this

description with the architectural features of the building in which the inscription is found will throw some light on the correct identification of what was meant by the word *nisawatta* in it. In the *vinaya* rules concerning the use of bowls by *Bhikkhus* we find the following:

“ If a bowl is kept on a NISAWATTA of less than the breadth of three feet without a circular holding pad it constitutes a wrong action (*dukkata*). Similarly if placed on to a *nisawatta* of three feet breadth. It is proper to place the bowl on a circular pad in a small *nisawatta*. What has been said about *nisawatta* applies also to *pilatta* (end of narrow veranda). (Vimalakitti, M. 1955: 106). According to this it is clear that what is meant by *nisawatta* in *Sikhavalandavinisa* is a veranda of a type of house specially constructed to keep the begging bowls. It is further confirmed by the statement *mē nisawattehi* (in this veranda) inscribed on the veranda of the small building found at Abhayagiri. This small building where the inscription is found measures 650x 435 cm with a well polished stone base. The building contains on all four sides a veranda constructed with well-polished stone slabs. Above this is found another narrow stone veranda adjoining the floor area filled with sand for the purpose of placing begging bowls for drying. Below the main veranda is found a well-constructed drainage system also is stone, surrounding the house except for its rear side. Exit for the water collected in the drain is by a small hole leading to a subterranean water way. This building is situated within a residential complex for *Bhikkhus* now wrongly designated as *pancāvāsa*. Although bereft of walls there is proof that it had a roof as indicated by the cavities meant for standing pillars to sustain a roof. All the features of this structure make it clear that it had been constructed as a place for keeping begging bowls for drying.

Since *Sikhavalandavinisa* mentions a *nisawatta* of less than a meter in breadth it cannot be said that it refers to a small house. Neither can it be taken to mean a forepart (*pramukha*) or a portico. The size *deriyan* roughly conforms to a meter and it would be correct to say that it refers to a veranda. According to *Sikhavalandavinisa* containing the rules of discipline it is prohibited for monks to dry begging bowls keeping them in the sun till heated. However it is permissible to let the bowls dry in the sun for a short while. (Ibid p.106) Small houses of the type mentioned above may have been constructed within the residential quarters of monks in the past in conformity with the *vinaya* rules so as to keep the begging bowls in a shade away from the sun light for further drying after there exposure to sunlight for a while as allowed. This view is further strengthened by the existence of a building slightly bigger in length and breadth but similar in all other respects to it in the Abhayagiri Vihara to the east of the main alms hall with

its stone troughs. The only difference is that small drains have been cut in some places of the veranda for water collected from the wet bowls to pass down to the drain constructed below.

It appears that monks have constructed these shelters with verandas of stone slabs wide enough to suit the rules of discipline applicable to the use of begging bowls. In both types of buildings the pillars have been so placed as to support a roof capable of covering the veranda on all four sides. We are informed that similar shelters are found in the residential area of monks in the *Jetavanārāma Vihāra* at *Anuradhapura*. Two shelters of this type are to be found at the residential quarters of the monks in front of the western gate of the *Jetavana stupa* towards the south. They are however, designated as *Jantāghara* or hot water house at present.

In the *Nimijātaka* the author while describing the celestial mansions states: *mē prasādayehi vīduru ebū kavulu dora lakshayeka. Nisavatu sandakān miṇen nimiyāya. Mē prāsādayehi tanhi tanhi sinha vyāghra rūghana ranin nimiyāha.* (In this mansion there are one hundred thousand windows made of glass. Nisavatu (verandas) are made of moonstones. Images of lions and tigers found hither and thither are made of gold) *Jātaka*: 2155). Even this statement stands against the belief of some scholars that *nisawatta* stands for land or garden in front of a building for what is made of moonstone in *Nimijātaka* refers to a part of the building and not to the garden facing it. Even in the *Butsaraṇa* where how the Buddha tames heretics is described, the statement *siyalu satun sit nimavmin gandakiṇisawattehi vādasīti sēka* shows that it is a small place like a short veranda and not a garden (*Butsaraṇa*:103)

In the *Kudusikasanna* the two terms *mīḍhante* and *paribhandante* in the Pali stanza i.e.:

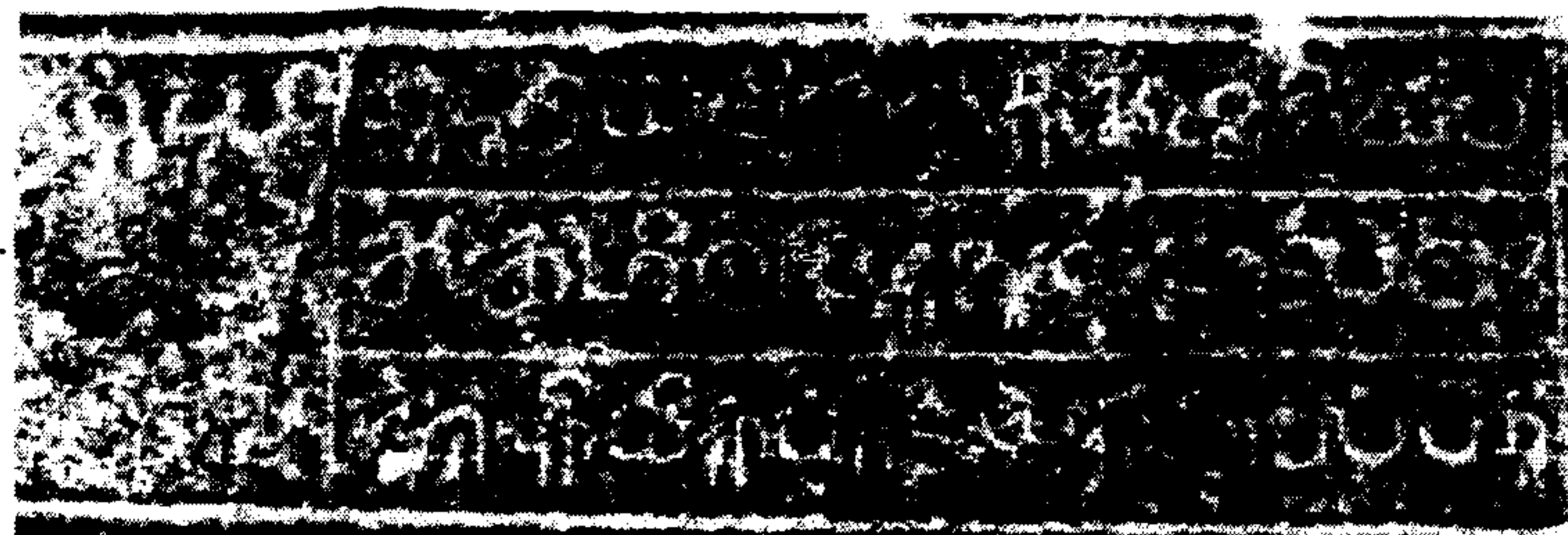
Mīḍhante paribhandante ankeya ātapattake

Pādesu mancapītheva thapetuṃ na ca kappati

are explained as two separate items i.e.: *pila keḷavara* and *nisavatu keḷavara* (at the end of the narrow veranda and at the end of the veranda). (kpvs: 68-69, *Jātaka Aṭṭva Gatapadaya*: 176) But Rev. Medauyangoda Vimalakitti has shown that in such texts as *Butsaraṇa* the *nisawatta* has been used to mean a veranda. *Nisavatta* and *pila* are two sections of a building joined together as seen in some of the temple buildings in the Kandian period.

Although in modern houses there is only one veranda, we find a narrow veranda at a higher level extending to a wider veranda below it in the temple buildings of the Kandian period. The narrow veranda referred to above is

called *kaiyōruva* today. It is the same thing referred to as *mīdhaya* in ancient buildings. It is clear that *nisawatta* therefore refers to the wider veranda below the *mīdhaya* used for sitting and resting etc. The building where the above inscription was discovered contains both these features.



The other key words of the inscription are *sunu*, *behed pala*, *kisikavaridāyak* and *novatavanu*. Here the word *sunu* is derived from the Skt. *cūrṇa*; P. *cunṇa* meaning powder but in this context it refers to medicinal preparation known even today as *cūrṇa*, powder applied to the skin as a sort of soap in bathing, often combined with *mattikā* (clay) in distinction of *chunna* which is for delicate use (tender skin) *cunṇāni besajjāni* an application of *cunna* (Vin:1.202;1.47-52 Pail Text Society's Pali English Dictionary, Ed. T.W. Rhys Davids & William Stede, London, Reprint 1949). *Behed* and *Pala* mean different kinds of medicinal concoctions and fruits. The word *novatavanu* composed of the prohibitive particle *no* and *vatavanu* is used in the *Saddharmāḷankāraya* to mean grinding and for turning in the story of *Dasa Jataka*. (*Saddharmāḷankāraya:02*). The term 'kisikavaridāyak' stands for *kisikavaradeyak* meaning anything whatsoever. *Sikhavalndavinisa* a literary work contemporary to this inscription has *kisikavarikeneku* to mean whosoever, *kisiyamkenek* in modern parlance. (*Sikhavalndavinisa*. 107).

In view of these findings the contents of the inscription can be translated as follows: **No one desirous of achieving Buddhahood should grind anything including medicinal herbs and fruits placing them on this veranda.**

Similar rules prohibiting the use of a place meant for a particular purpose for another were in vogue as seen from the inscription belonging to king Mahinda IV found at Jetavanarama in Anuradhapura. It states thus with reference to the use of *pānmaṇḍapa* at the gate.

Me doratu pān maḍiyehi navātān nodenu isā.. pānmaḍu kusalān pilibanda upakaranayen vādi anun pilibanda upakarana notabavanu isā.

(No one should be allowed to rest at the water pavilion of this gate...any articles used for purposes other than those used for the jars at *pānmadu* should not be caused to be placed here.) (EZ,111 226-229) It is clear therefore, that the inscription found at *Abhayagiri Vihāra* is also meant to impose a rule on an occasion when a building put up for a particular purpose has been used for some other activity. The stone slabs forming the *nisawatta* surrounding the building are well polished. However the interior of the building is not covered with stone slabs. *Sikhavalanda states: Koros bima ev tabat dukulāve sihin vāllē taba varada nāti (Sikhavalandavinisa, 106)*

(It is not proper to place (a bowl) on a coarse floor. It befits if kept on fine sand. This explains why the stone slabs covering the verandas are polished. The interior of the building may have been covered with fine sand as required by the *vinaya* rules.

CONCLUSION

It will be clear by now that a special type of building had been constructed in the premises of the buddhist monasteries of the 9-10 centuries for drying the bowls used by monks at their meals. The inscription on the stone platform of this special type of building prohibits the monks bathing at the Elephant pond from using this space for grinding medicinal herbs etc. prescribed in the books of discipline used at the adjoining *Jantāghara*. The inscription shows that the *Abhayagiri* monks had used this place for grinding purposes as the statement *buduviyāti kenekun* clearly refers to those who have left the household life, i.e. the monks in the *Abhayagiri Vihara*. This view is further confirmed by another inscription discovered by us on the way to the main *Āvāsa* of *Uttaramūla* of *Abhayagiri Vihara* behind the *Bodhighara* now known as Second Samadhi Image House. This contemporary inscription exhorts the monks to give up worldly life or pleasures and strive unhesitatingly to achieve Buddha hood. Buildings with architectural features similar to this building where the inscription is located are found among other monastery complexes of the Anuradhapura period. By comparing these features it was possible to identify the purpose of having this peculiar construction.

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