

Evolving Divinity: Tracing the Religious Conception of the Buddha in the Colossal Statues of Sri Lanka¹

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on Sri Lanka's colossal Buddha statues often focuses on analyses of style and scale, overlooking their connection to the evolving doctrine. This study traces the ideological evolution of monumental sculptures from the mid-first millennium to the 13th century CE, correlating artistic and iconographic changes with significant shifts in the conceptualisation of the Buddha in Sri Lankan Buddhist thought. This analysis identifies a fundamental transformation from the Anuradhapura Ideal, a standardised, solitary form depicting the transcendent *Mahāpurusa* (Cosmic Buddha) rooted in Pāli chronicles, that yields to the Polonnaruwa Synthesis. This Synthesis features integrated, multi-figure ensembles and narrative contexts, aligning with the Sinhala prose texts of the time that recast the Buddha as a Compassionate Guide. Consequently, the colossal scale is repurposed from signifying absolute cosmic authority to representing the vastness of his compassion and the protective power of his teaching (*Dhamma*). By linking these material changes to their literary foundations, this research reveals the statues as tangible records of a doctrinal shift in the conceptualisation of spiritual refuge, moving from the Cosmic Refuge to the Didactic Refuge in ancient Sri Lankan Buddhist society.

Keywords: Buddha statues, monumental sculpture, cosmic Buddha, doctrinal shift, conception of Buddha

1. Introduction

The creation of colossal Buddha images has been a recurring and significant feature in Buddhist art. Travel accounts by Chinese pilgrims such as Faxian (Fa-Hien), Sung-Yun and Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) from the fifth and seventh centuries CE describe giant Buddha statues in seated, standing, and reclining postures, fashioned in a variety of materials including painted wood, stone, and metal (Beal, 1869; 1884; 1906).² Due to their durability, stone and clay images have endured the test of time, with notable examples across Central and East Asia, including the Bamiyan Buddhas (now-destroyed) in Afghanistan and monumental statues in northern and western China, such as Yungang, Maijishan, Longmen, Dunhuang, Bingling, and Leshan, dating from the fifth to the ninth centuries CE (Blänsdorf, et al., 2009, p. 235; Wong, 2019, p. 12). Scholars have highlighted the presence of colossal Buddha images from a comparable period in the northwestern Indian subcontinent, particularly within Gandharan Buddhist art (Marshall, 1960, p. 111; Grunwedel, 1999, p. 83; Wong, 2019, p. 1).

¹ The preliminary findings of this study were presented at the 10th World Archaeology Congress (WAC-10) on 23 June 2025 in Darwin, Australia, and the corresponding abstract was published in the conference's abstract volume.

² See Beal 1869, pp. 20, 65, 151, 178, 205; 1884, vol. I, pp. 21, 50–52, 102–103, 134, 222; 1906, vol. II, pp. 103, 174, 258 for detailed descriptions of the various colossal Buddha images encountered by these travellers in the northwestern and northern regions of the Indian subcontinent.

Although the precise origin of colossi remains uncertain, by the fifth century CE, monumental Buddha statues had gained widespread prominence across Asia. This expansion was facilitated by both the overland Silk Road and maritime trade routes, eventually fostering local traditions in regions such as China and seafaring cultures along the Indian Ocean (Wong, 2019, p. 6; Brancaccio, 2020, p. 180). This tradition also took root in Sri Lanka, where colossal Buddha statues are found in many parts of the island. Beyond their religious significance, these monuments projected political authority, economic prosperity, and cultural identity, functions that, in many contexts, continue to this day.

This study focuses on colossal seated and standing Buddha statues created during the Anuradhapura period (6th century BCE – 11th century CE) and the Polonnaruwa period (12th – 13th century CE) in Sri Lanka. These statues, which exhibit varying scales and iconographic characteristics, are situated at major monastic sites including Avukana, Ras Vehera, Dowa, Buduruwagala, Maligawila, Gal Vihara, Tivanka, and Lankatilaka, primarily within the present North Central and Uva provinces (Figure 1). Most sites feature solitary representations of the Buddha, with notable exceptions such as Buduruwagala, which includes six accompanying figures identified as Bodhisattvas and attendants, and Gal Vihara, which comprises a group of Buddha statues depicted in multiple postures. Among the sites considered, Gal Vihara in Polonnaruwa uniquely houses a seated colossal Buddha image; the others predominantly feature standing figures. Reclining images are excluded from this discussion, as their symbolic and compositional context requires separate analysis.

Colossal Buddha statues encompass both physical scale and conceptual significance. This paper defines ‘colossal’ as statues measuring 15 feet (≈approximately 4.5 meters) or more in height, consistent with conventional definitions of immobile monumental sculpture and the largest standing and seated Buddha images in Sri Lanka. This is not simply a matter of physical size; in Buddhist contexts, height carries significant religious meaning. The *Buddhavaṃsa*, part of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, specifies the heights of the twenty-four past Buddhas to inspire faith and spiritual aspiration (Sri Lankananda et al., 1977, p. xiv). While the *Buddhavaṃsa* does not specify the height of Gautama Buddha, it describes his *vyāmaprabhā* (body halo) as radiating 16 cubits (Morris, 1882, p. 66; Sri Lankananda et al., 1977, pp. 236-237). Later Sinhala works, such as the *Pūjāvaliya* (13th c.), *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* (13th c.), and *Saddharmalankāra* (14th c.), continue this tradition by attributing idealised bodily dimensions to both past and present Buddhas, linking physical magnitude with spiritual excellence. In East Asia, standing Buddhas were typically around 16 feet tall, with seated images half that size, and statues exceeding these proportions were often revered as “Great Buddhas” (Wong, 2019, p. 3). In Sri Lanka, Buddha images range from regular-sized statues to monumental rock-hewn icons, suggesting a lack of a fixed canonical standard for absolute scale.³ Literary descriptions in the *Mahāvaṃsa* (Siri Sumangala & Batuwantudawa, 1917, pp. 122, 149, 157)⁴

³ While absolute heights varied significantly, a standardised proportional system known as the *Nava Tāla* (nine-unit) system was commonly employed for standing Buddha statues during both the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods. In this framework, the statue’s total height is mathematically determined as nine times the height of the face, ensuring aesthetic harmony regardless of the icon’s physical dimensions (Wickramagama, 2006, p. 49).

⁴ See the *Mahāvaṃsa*, 30:72; 35:89, 36:128,129.

suggest that movable images were typically life-sized or slightly larger in scale. In contrast, colossal images were inherently immovable and deliberately integrated into architectural or natural settings, reflecting their spiritual significance in the religious landscape.

Beyond size, the conceptual rationale for creating these superhuman representations warrants attention. Rowland (1963, p. 10) argues that colossal images, such as those at Bamiyan, reflect a conceptual transformation in the depiction of the Buddha as a *Mahāpuruṣa* (great being), influenced by the rise of Mahayana Buddhism. Citing early Mahayana sūtras such as the *Mahāvastu* and *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, He suggests that the Buddha came to be perceived less as a historical teacher and more as a transcendent, supra-human figure (Rowland, 1963, p. 8). This interpretation has gained wide acceptance, with scholars recognising that colossal Buddha statues often symbolised the Buddha's transcendence as well as the ideal of Buddhist kingship, blending spiritual and temporal authority (Dohanian, 1977, pp. 79, 83; Wong, 2019, p. 3). Contemporary studies suggest that such monumental statues partially express ethnic identity and religious visibility, particularly in borderland contexts (Johnson, 2011, p. 117). Within Sri Lanka, individual studies have interpreted colossal statues such as those at Avukana and Buduruwagala as expressions of Mahayana-inspired transcendental imagery (Wijesekera, 1962, p. 67; Dohanian, 1977, pp. 86-91; Wickramagama, 2006, pp. 24, 43).

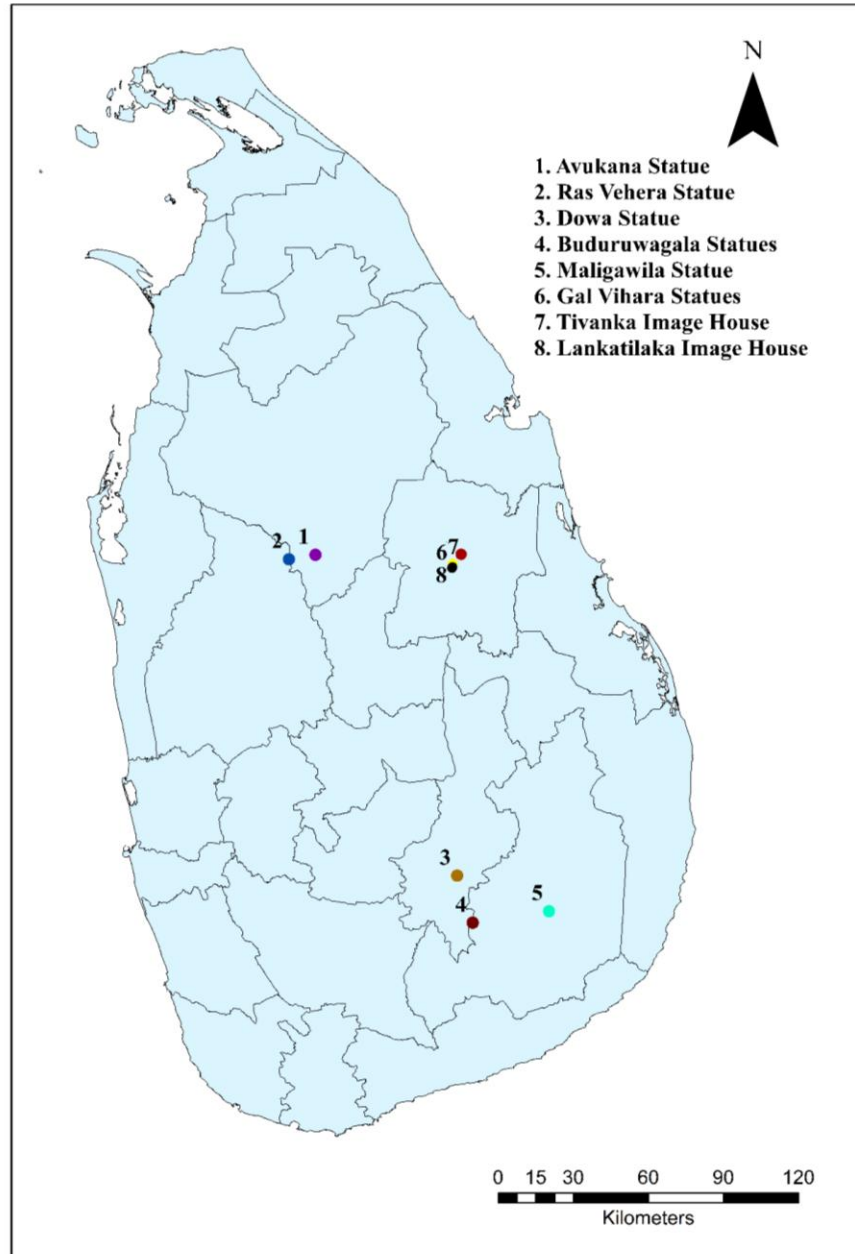


Figure 1. Geographic distribution of colossal Buddha sculptures in Sri Lanka, identifying major monastic sites in the North Central and Uva provinces. Map created by Vishwanath Premarathna, 2025.

2. Literature Review

The colossal Buddha statues of Sri Lanka have received significant scholarly attention, with studies focusing primarily on their artistic creation, stylistic features, symbolic meaning, and, more recently, their monumental character. Existing scholarship can be broadly grouped into four analytical approaches: (i) early fieldwork and documentation, (ii) detailed stylistic and chronological analysis, (iii) interpretation of doctrinal meaning and symbolism, and (iv) studies on monumentality and

cultural significances. The following review examines the significant contributions within these fields.

Early field surveys and documentation efforts were undertaken during the British colonial period, with a particular focus on the Avukana and Ras Vehera (also known as Sasseruwa) statues. Notably, S.M. Burrows and H.C.P. Bell conducted detailed investigations in 1894 and 1895, respectively. Both concluded that the two standing Buddha statues were initially designed in postures signifying benevolent blessings (Burrows, 1894, p. 76; Bell, 1895, pp. 6, 12). Burrows further suggested a deliberate connection between the Avukana statue and the nearby *Kalaveva* reservoir, highlighting the statue's precise eastward orientation. He noted its potential visibility from the reservoir bund, suggesting an intentional symbolic placement tied to ritualistic principles (Burrows, 1894, p. 76).

Moving beyond early documentation efforts, a second major scholarly approach focused on the detailed stylistic and chronological analysis. Scholars such as D.T. Devendra (1958), Senarath Paranavitana (1959), Kamburupitiye Vanarathana (1990), and Ulrich von Schroeder (1990) have clearly made significant contributions to the identification of the statues' stylistic features and chronological frameworks. Devendra (1958, pp. 32, 33) praised the craftsmanship of Sri Lankan colossi, drawing comparisons between the Ras Vehera and Bamiyan statues and remarking on the relative lack of expressiveness in the Buduruwagala images. Paranavitana (1959, p. 405) suggested that the tradition of erecting large-scale, freestanding, or rock-relief Buddha statues was adopted in Sri Lanka shortly after it was introduced by Buddhists, influenced by the Greco-Indian artistic culture of northwestern India. Vanarathana (1990, p. 29) attempted to establish a chronological sequence, dating the Ras Vehera and Avukana statues to between the third and fifth centuries CE, and positing Ras Vehera as the earliest known colossal Buddha image in Sri Lanka, dating to the late third century CE. Schroeder (1990, pp. 142-144) dates these images, considering stylistic features and artistry, to around the eighth century CE. While arguing that the statues emphasise the superhuman qualities of the Buddha, he also highlights the difficulty of associating them with any specific manifestation. Collectively, these studies have shed light on the stylistic evolution and historical context of Sri Lanka's monumental Buddha images.

A third, related area of inquiry has been the symbolism and the doctrinal meaning inherent in the monumental forms. Nandadeva Wijesekara (1962) explored the stylistic consistency and Mahayana influences in the images, such as the sculptures at Buduruwagala, while also noting the technical skill required for their production. Diran K. Dohanian (1965, 1977) and Chandra Wickramagamage (2006) further concentrated on the statues' symbolic and doctrinal dimensions. Dohanian's broader study of Sri Lankan sculpture highlighted the influence of Mahayana Buddhism, particularly in its representation of the Buddha as a transcendent figure. He analysed the Avukana statue's stylistic traits and traced influences from various Indian art schools (Dohanian, 1977, pp. 86-91). Wickramagamage offered a distinctive perspective by incorporating Buddhist literary sources, suggesting that the immense scale and specific mudras (hand gestures) of these statues could represent the Dīpaṅkara Buddha (Wickramagamage, 2006, pp. 24, 43).

More recently, scholarship has taken a broader view, focusing on the monumentality and cultural significance of the colossi within a transcultural landscape. For instance, Brancaccio (2020) examined the monumental character of these statues within a broader Buddhist landscape. She argued that the colossi served as visual markers in a transcultural Buddhist network, connecting long-distance travel, trade, and regional monumentality. Their spatial placement was also shaped by mythical narratives and contributed to the formation of collective Buddhist memory (Brancaccio, 2020, p. 175).

While early documentation established the colossi as important antiquities, earlier studies primarily focused on artistic techniques, stylistic comparisons, and chronology, often with limited reference to literary or contextual evidence. Recent studies have successfully integrated stylistic analysis with literary sources, exploring the Mahayana influences that portray the Buddha as a divine, transcendent figure. These interpretations—particularly those concerning dating and influence—are often complicated by the reliance solely on stylistic analysis and the challenges of distinguishing original creations from later imitations. The scarcity of direct legends or textual references concerning the origin and specific purpose of these statues has further limited investigations into their socio-religious context, especially when compared to similar traditions elsewhere in Asia. Therefore, this research seeks to move beyond debates of style and origin to understand how these statues reflect fundamental shifts in Buddhist perceptions of the Buddha.

Research Framework

2.1 Research Questions and Objectives

Despite extensive scholarship on the colossal Buddha statues of Sri Lanka, few studies have moved beyond stylistic analysis to explore how their material and iconographic evolution reflects changing spiritual beliefs. While the Mahayana influence is often cited, it does not fully account for the diversity of forms or their evolving religious and sociocultural meanings. This study, therefore, poses the primary research question: how did the construction of colossal Buddha statues in Sri Lanka reflect evolving religious conceptions of the Buddha from the Anuradhapura to the Polonnaruwa periods? The main question is supported by two sub-questions: (i) How did the colossal Buddha statues from the Anuradhapura to the Polonnaruwa periods evolve in style, iconographic and material terms? (ii) How did the material representation of the Buddha reflect changing religious beliefs and cultural conceptions over time?

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the evolution of the Buddha's depiction and conceptualisation in colossal sculptural form, with a particular focus on shifts in religious ideology and cultural values. Sub-objectives include: (i) To analyse the stylistic, iconographic and material variations of colossal Buddha statues from the Anuradhapura to the Polonnaruwa periods; (ii) To interpret how these artistic transformations reflect evolving religious beliefs and cultural understandings of the Buddha.

2.2 Scope and Limitations

This research is strictly delimited to the study of colossal seated and standing Buddha statues with a minimum height of fifteen feet spanning the Anuradhapura through the Polonnaruwa periods. To maintain a rigorous analytical focus on monumental verticality and iconic presence, reclining images, miniatures, and movable statues are excluded.

This study faced challenges due to the limited availability of inscriptions or contemporary textual sources directly associated with these statues. Preservation issues at specific sites, such as the destruction of plaster or the fading of colours, hindered detailed comparative analysis. Moreover, stylistic similarities across centuries made precise dating problematic, thereby complicating the tracing of chronological developments. The interpretation of religious symbolism and conceptual shifts was necessarily inferential, as it is constrained by the lack of doctrinal or dedicatory texts directly tied to the specific colossal statues.

2.3 Methodological Approach

This research employs an interdisciplinary qualitative approach, integrating methods from archaeology, history, and art history to analyse the transformation of colossal Buddha statues in Sri Lanka. Data collection involved a combination of library-based literature surveys, field observations, and iconographic analysis. The study began with a descriptive analysis of the statues' style, form, artistic features, techniques and material variations. This analysis helped identify visual changes and distinguish stylistic patterns across historical periods. Subsequently, a comparative study was conducted on selected sites, taking into account their stylistic, chronological, and historical contexts. This allowed for the identification of both similarities and differences in the representations of the Buddha, revealing regional specificities and broader cultural developments. Finally, the study contextualised these artistic transformations by correlating the visual data with historical and religious texts, specifically canonical and commentarial texts relevant to the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods. This helped uncover the broader socio-religious conceptions of the Buddha that influenced the creation of these monumental representations.

3. Colossal Buddha Statues in Sri Lanka: The Chronology and Geography

The dating of Sri Lanka's colossal Buddha statues has long been a subject of contention, particularly when stylistic criteria are employed as the primary basis for classification (Table 1). Wijesekera (1962, p. 219) argues that the Avukana statue, often celebrated as a masterpiece, may represent the earliest standing colossus, serving as a prototype for subsequent creations. In contrast, Vanarathana (1990, p. 29) argues that Avukana's refinement and intricacy suggest a later origin, possibly 150 years after the Ras Vehera image, dating to the late third century CE. Schroeder (1990, p. 141) similarly supports a later dating, noting the finely carved robe grooves. Despite these divergences, a broad scholarly consensus divides the colossi into two major chronological clusters:

- i. Anuradhapura period (3rd–10th centuries CE): Avukana, Ras Vehera, Maligawila, Dowa, Buduruwagala.

- ii. Polonnaruwa period (12th century CE): Gal Vihara, Tivanka, Lankatilaka.

Statue	Material	Type	Height	Chronological Range (Century CE)
Ras Vehera	Stone	Standing	36 ft	3-8
Avukana	Stone	Standing	41 ft	5-8
Maligawila	Stone	Standing	47.5 ft	7
Dowa	Stone	Standing	36 ft	7-8
Buduruwagala	Stone	Standing	42.6 ft	7-10
Gal Vihara	Stone	Seated	16.4 ft	12
		Standing	22.7 ft	
Lankatilaka	Brick & Plaster	Standing	44.6 ft	12
Tivanka	Brick & Plaster	Standing	28.8 ft	12

Table 1. Chronological overview of Sri Lanka's colossal Buddha statues based on stylistic criteria, with height measurements after Schroeder (1990, p. 142).

These chronological groupings also correspond geographically, spanning three principal zones: the Anuradhapura hinterland, the southern region of Rohana (the periphery of Anuradhapura), and the urban layout of Polonnaruwa. Collectively, they reveal the clear trajectory of Sri Lanka's colossal Buddha imagery, from its inception in the Anuradhapura hinterland, to its diffusion into peripheral Rohana regions during the late first millennium, and finally to its transformation into dynamic ensembles under the Polonnaruwa kings. While further empirical research is required, it can be suggested that this spatio-temporal progression serves as a demonstration of how monumental imagery was strategically employed to address evolving regional religious and political imperatives.

Group 1: Anuradhapura Hinterland

The Avukana and Ras Vehera statues, located approximately 50 kilometres from Anuradhapura and only 15 kilometres apart, epitomise the earliest monumental phase. Their shared stylistic features—rigid frontal posture, *samabhanga* stance, and the *abhaya mudrā*, suggest a high degree of standardisation in early colossi. Ras Vehera, attached to a monastic site, has been linked to the patronage of King Mahāsena (c. 275–301 CE) (Vanarathana, 1990, p. 29), while Avukana is traditionally attributed to King Dhātusena (c. 455–479 CE) (Paranavitana, 1959, p. 405). While Avukana and Ras Vehera remain the best-preserved icons of this period, textual and archaeological evidence confirms that the hinterland contained additional monumental images, such as the 22-foot jasper Buddha recorded by Faxian at Abhayagiriya (Beal, 1869, p. 151),⁵ and fragments uncovered

⁵ Faxian, in his fifth-century travelogue, provides a vivid account of a remarkable 22-foot-tall jasper Buddha statue housed within the image house of the Abhayagiriya monastery. He describes the icon as being lavishly adorned with precious materials, noting that its “splendid appearance” and the “distinctive features of the Buddha” were so impactful that they defied verbal description. Faxian highlights explicitly the international character of the site's patronage, recounting how he observed a merchant offering a white silk fan imported from China as a mark of devotion. Furthermore, he records that on festive occasions, the sacred Tooth Relic was ceremoniously processed to this image house, serving as the focal point for elaborate state-level religious rituals (Beal, 1869, pp. 151, 152, 158).

at Jetavanaramaya (Vanarathana, 1962, p. 123; Vattala, 2011, p. 24). These examples underscore that colossal statues were reserved for the most prestigious monasteries, where they functioned simultaneously as religious icons and probably symbols of royal legitimacy.

Group 2: Rohana Region

The statues at Dowa, Maligawila, and Buduruwagala, dating from the seventh to the tenth centuries, mark the southward diffusion of the tradition into Rohana. The Maligawila Buddha, attributed to a King of Rohana (8th Century CE) (Paranavitana, 1959, p. 404)⁶, adheres to Anuradhapura prototypes, while the Dowa statue also replicates earlier iconography, though without strong legendary associations. Buduruwagala, however, represents a significant thematic departure. Here, the central figure, identified as the Buddha Dīpaṅkara, is accompanied by attendant Bodhisattvas, thereby signalling Mahayana influence (Wickramagamage, 1990, p. 52). This compositional innovation suggests that Rohana was not merely peripheral, but a site of both Theravada continuity and Mahayana experimentation, reflecting the growth of Mahayana beliefs during the later Anuradhapura period (Prematilleka, 2007, p. 641). It highlights the region's role as a crucible for religious diversity, illustrating the adaptive capacity of monumental Buddhist art in response to evolving doctrinal and devotional needs.

Group 3: Polonnaruwa Capital Zone

Colossal Buddha imagery attained its artistic and ideological zenith in the twelfth century under the Polonnaruwa rulers, particularly during the reign of Parākramabāhu I (c. 1153-1186 CE) (Basnayake, 1990, p. 95; Wickramagamage, 1991, p. 5; Paranavitana, 2006, p. 72). The Gal Vihara ensemble, comprising seated, standing, and recumbent Buddhas carved into a single granite outcrop, exemplifies narrative dynamism and compositional sophistication (Wijesekera, 1962, p. 229). Unlike the solitary colossi of earlier centuries located in distant hinterlands, these images were integrated into a coherent programme within specially designed shrines, amplifying their ritual and didactic functions within the city's urban core. The Tivanka and Lankatilaka images, constructed in brick and plaster, further demonstrate the period's emphasis on scale, architectural integration, and symbolic authority. Their location within the urban layout of Polonnaruwa underscores their role in consolidating royal patronage, reinforcing the city's position as both political and religious capital.

4. Stylistic, Iconographic and Material Variations: An Analysis of Transformation

4.1 The Anuradhapura Period: The Standardised Image

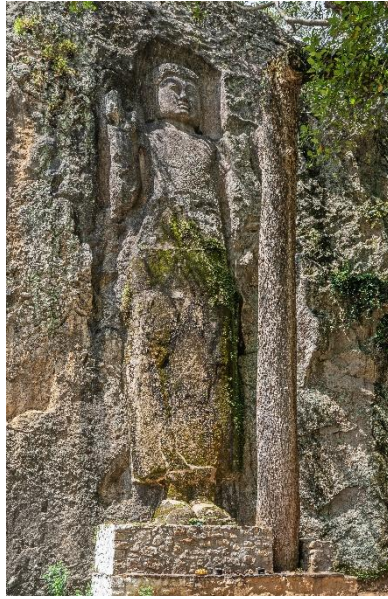
Early investigations established the material and technical features of the colossal Buddha statues, which fall broadly into two categories: rock-cut reliefs and freestanding figures. Examples for the former include relief carving at Ras Vehera, Dowa, and Buduruwagala (Figures 2-4). Although Maligawila Buddha was carved entirely in the round as a freestanding colossus (Figure 5), and the

⁶ See *Mahāvamsa*, 47:44, which records that King Aggabodhi VIII (c. 804-815 CE), ruler of Rohana, made offerings to a Buddha statue sponsored initially by his grandfather (Siri Sumangala & Batuwantudawa, 1917, p. 52).

Avukana Buddha is nearly freestanding, the latter remains subtly anchored to its parent cliff face by a narrow strip of stone behind the torso (Figure 6). This distinction in technical approach, first documented by scholars like Burrows and Bell (Burrows, 1894, p. 76; Bell, 1895, pp. 6-7, 12-13), places Sri Lanka's tradition alongside international Buddhist rock sculpture, such as that in Gandhara and Bamiyan (Devendra, 1958, p. 78; Paranavitana, 1959, p. 405; Brancaccio, 2020, p. 175). Notably, many of these stone images were originally finished with plaster and paint, elements crucial to their intended symbolic impact. Indeed, sites like Buduruwagala preserve traces of these vibrant embellishments (Wijesekera, 1962, p. 290; Schroeder, 1990, p. 292), illustrating that the absence of surface layers often leads to misinterpretations of the intended refinement of weathered figures like Dowa and Ras Vehera (Wijesekera, 1962, p. 58; Vanarathana, 1990, p. 28).



*Figure 2. Buddha of Ras Vehera.
Photo: V. Premarathna, 2025.*



*Figure 3. Buddha of Dowa.
Photo: V. Premarathna, 2025.*



*Figure 4. Buddha of Buduruwagala.
Photo: V. Premarathna, 2025.*



Figure 5. Buddha of Maligawila.
Photo: V. Premarathna, 2025.

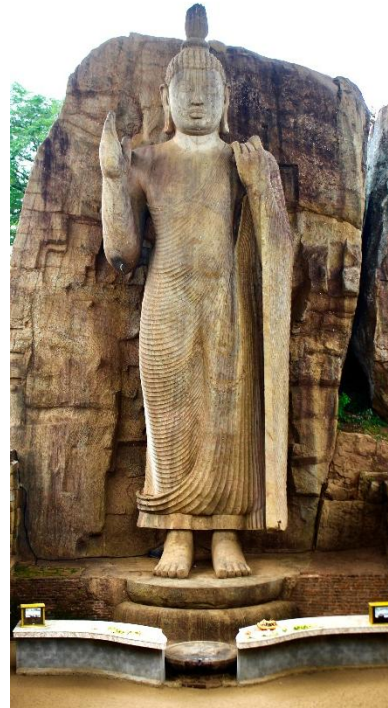


Figure 6. Buddha of Avukana.
Photo: V. Premarathna, 2025.

Iconographically, the Anuradhapura colossi display remarkable uniformity (Prematilleka, 2007, p. 626). They adhere to a restrained, static mode: standing erect in the *samabhanga* (perfect equilibrium) posture, with the right hand raised in the *abhaya mudrā* (gesture of fearlessness) and the left grasping the robe. This stylistic canon is reinforced by balanced proportions and features, such as half-closed eyes, which together convey inner serenity (Bell, 1895, p. 6; Basnayake, 1990, p. 95). The most highly refined example is often cited as the Avukana Buddha, which projects serene authority and transcendental presence from its double-lotus pedestal (Burrows, 1894, p. 76; Bell, 1895, p. 6; Dohanian, 1965, p. 17; Vanarathana, 1990, p. 29; Wickramagama, 1990, pp. 51, 52). While the Maligawila Buddha adheres to this form, it distinguishes itself by its exceptional monumental scale (Paranavitana, 1959, p. 405). The Ras Vehera and Dowa images, conversely, appear less expressive due to surface degradation. Overall, the consistent adherence to the *samabhanga* and *abhaya mudrā*, despite minor variations potentially reflecting workshop or sectarian affiliations (Wickramagama, 1990, p. 52)⁷, establishes a definitive stylistic canon in Anuradhapura that prioritises transcendental authority and spiritual calm.

⁷ According to Wickramagama (1990, p. 52), the stylistic traditions of the Mahāvihāra and the Dhammaruci (Abhayagiri) are differentiated by three primary criteria: the presence or absence of the *uṣṇīṣa*, the orientation of the right palm (turned either toward the front or the left), and the mandatory inclusion of a lotus pedestal. Interestingly, the Buduruwagala Buddha serves as a significant intersection of these traditions. At the same time, it embodies Mahāyāna concepts, its formal features—specifically the right palm facing forward—align it with the Mahāvihāra stylistic framework as classified by Wickramagama.

Beyond their stylistic features, the Anuradhapura statues convey deep symbolic and ritual dimensions. Their monumental scale evokes the Buddha as a *Mahāpurusa*, a superhuman figure endowed with the *Dasabala* (Ten Powers) and positioned above the supramundane sphere (Vanarathana, 1990, p. 29; Wickramagama, 1990, pp. 51, 52; Prematilleka, 2007, pp. 625, 626; Basnayake, 2007, p. 656). The *abhaya mudrā* conveys spiritual reassurance and protection, while the erect *samabhanga* posture embodies the strength and nobility of the Buddha's transcendental presence. Scholars have also proposed that some images may represent Dīpaṅkara or Maitreya Buddhas (Vanarathana, 1990, pp. 29, 30; Wickramagama, 2006, pp. 24, 43), linking the iconography to past and future Buddhas and integrating the statues into a cyclical conception of time and rebirth. Particularly, the Buduruwagala complex, with its central Buddha flanked by Bodhisattvas, reflects Mahayana influence and forms a *maṇḍala*-like composition of Buddhist cosmology (Paranavitana, 1959, p. 405; Dohanian, 1965, p. 18; Prematilleka, 2007, p. 638). Their spatial placement within monastic sanctums, such as Avukana and Maligawila, and along circumambulatory paths suggests a function analogous to stupas, serving as focal points for ritual engagement (Dohanian, 1965, p. 17).

4.2 The Polonnaruwa Period: Compositional Innovation

In contrast to the earlier standardised tradition, the colossal statues at Polonnaruwa—constructed from either stone or plastered brick, mark a decisive shift toward compositional innovation and narrative dynamism. The Gal Vihara complex exemplifies this transformation (Figure 7 & 8). Unlike the solitary colossi of earlier centuries, this site features a coherent sculptural ensemble of four principal images, including a seated colossal Buddha in *dhyāna mudrā* (meditation) juxtaposed with a standing figure in a slightly bent (*ābhanga*) posture with crossed arms.

The iconography of the standing figure has generated significant debate: while some early scholars identified the figure as Ananda, the Buddha's grieving disciple (Burrows, 1894, p. 90; Smith, 1930, p. 150; Rowland, 1953; Coomaraswamy, 1972, p. 163). Others contend that the figure represents the Buddha himself (Wickramagama, 1991, p. 11), possibly reflecting the *anīmisa locana* attitude (steadfast gaze) (Prematilleke, 1966, p. 65) or the *paradukkhkha dukkhkhitā mudra*, symbolising sorrow for the suffering of others (Paranavitana, 1960, p. 605), and self-surrender, denoting an expression of the fulfilment of an attempted task (Wijesekera, 1962, p. 230). This ambiguity contrasts sharply with the explicit gestures of the Anuradhapura statues. Furthermore, while the Polonnaruwa images are celebrated for their technical precision, critics argue that their emotional restraint and non-erect posture diminish the overall grandeur and nobility projected by the earlier *samabhanga* statues (Basnayake, 1990, pp. 95, 96; 2007, p. 655). Nevertheless, these figures form part of a unified sculptural ensemble, including another smaller seated Buddha and a monumental recumbent figure, which creates a panoramic and conceptually layered visual program.

The symbolic language of Polonnaruwa is defined by synthesis. Wickramagama (1991, p. 7) argues that the Gal Vihara complex, with its various postures, integrates both Theravada and Mahayana elements, presenting a comprehensive vision of Buddhist doctrine. For instance, the seated Buddha ensemble, including five miniature Buddha figures, may symbolise the *Pañca Dhyāni Buddha*

Maṇḍala, a central tenet of Mahayana teaching (Wickramagama, 1991, p. 7). Additionally, the various postures are interpreted as representing the Buddha practising *Dhyāna* in different modes: seated, standing, and lying; specifically, the standing figure is identified as being in a walking (*gati* or *caṅkamaṇa*) posture, signified by the arms in a *svastika* (crossed) gesture (Senadeera, 1990, p. 250). This complex visual program underscores the evolving symbolic complexity of medieval Sri Lankan Buddhist sculpture.

This period also saw a significant material shift, notably the use of brick and plaster for images like Tivanka and Lankatilaka (Figures 9 & 10). Although many of the earlier Anuradhapura images were likely enshrined, only architectural traces survive today. In contrast, colossal brick-and-plaster statues of the late Polonnaruwa period are preserved within their original architectural settings (Wickramagama, 1991, p. 5). The Tivanka image is maintained in the graceful *tribhanga* (triple-bend) posture, while the Lankatilaka statue likely represents a non-erect asymmetrical stance. Despite their damaged condition, these statues demonstrate a mature sculptural tradition (Prematilleka, 2007, p. 661) and reflect the intentional creation of sacred space for the reverence of the icon within painted image houses. Ultimately, the Polonnaruwa colossi, exemplified by Gal Vihara's ensemble and the brick-and-plaster monuments, mark a decisive shift from a singular, transcendental image to a complex, integrated visual program that accommodated diverse doctrinal perspectives.

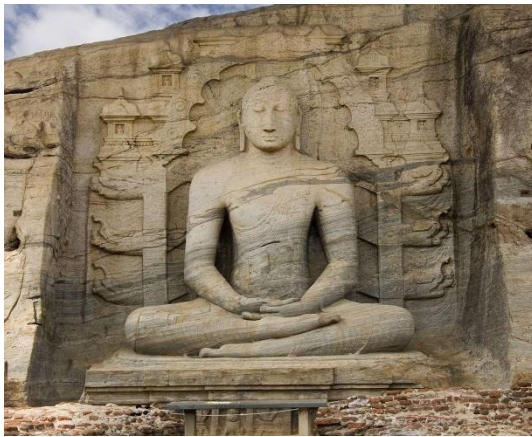


Figure 7. Seated Buddha at Galvihara
Photo: V. Premarathna, 2025.



Figure 8. Standing and recumbent Buddha at Galvihara
Photo: V. Premarathna, 2025.



Figure 9. Buddha of Tivanka Image House

Photo: V. Premarathna, 2025.



Figure 10. Buddha of Lankatilake Image House

Photo: V. Premarathna, 2025.

5. Textual Conceptions and Material Representations of the Buddha

Scholarly inquiry into colossal Buddha statues has often focused on specific identification (e.g., Dīpaṅkara, Śākyamuni and Maitreya) (Sinha, 1988, p. 10), a task complicated in Sri Lanka by the striking stylistic uniformity and the absence of distinguishing iconographic markers. Nevertheless, some scholars have proposed that specific images represent Maitreya or Dīpaṅkara Buddha (Wickramagama, 2006, pp. 24, 43; Vanarathana, 1990, pp. 29, 30), though these identifications remain speculative and lack substantial evidentiary support. This suggests an iconographic uniformity of all Buddhas, though textual and historical sources indicate that earlier Buddhas, specifically *Kakusandha*, *Konagamana*, and *Kassapa*, were also revered and visually represented from the beginning of the Common Era.⁸ Indeed, the foundational narratives of major monastic sites frequently cite visits by these four past Buddhas, integrating the concept of a multi-Buddha⁹ lineage

⁸ Emperor Asoka's connection with the concept of past Buddhas is exemplified by his Minor Pillar edict from Nigali Sagar, in which he documented his expansion of the stupa of Buddha *Kanakamana*, doubling its size (Hultzsch, 1925, p. 165). In the early accounts found in the *Mahāvamsa*, the narratives about the visits of the four previous Buddhas in this country are closely intertwined with the propagation of Buddhism during the 3rd century BCE by the renowned missionary Mahinda Thero, who happened to be Emperor Asoka's son. See chapter 15 of the *Mahāvamsa*.

⁹ This enduring conception of multiple past Buddhas became deeply embedded in the Theravada tradition, contributing to the integration of Buddhist narratives, memory, and sacred geography into the physical landscape—a process often described as “Buddhification” (Tournier, 2019, p. 96). Consequently, man-made monuments such as stupas and statues were incorporated into monastic precincts as material markers of past Buddhas’ presence and activity. By the time, the canonical enumeration of past Buddhas had expanded, and Sri Lankan sources recognised a lineage of twenty-four past Buddhas (Siri Sumangala & Batuwantudawa, 1917, p. 1).

deeply into the sacred geography of the island (Gnanavimala, 1970; Siri Sumangala & Batuwantudawa, 1917).¹⁰

5.1 The Anuradhapura Rationale: The Transcendent *Mahāpurusa*

Given the difficulty of precise identification and the rich tradition of past Buddhas, this study shifts its emphasis from purely iconographic analysis to understanding how the Buddha was conceptualised within the social and religious milieu of the Anuradhapura period. Textual sources, including the *Dīpavaṃsa* (4th century CE), *Mahāvaṃsa* (5th century CE), and *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* (7th century CE), are examined to explore the two consistent primary aspects emphasised by contemporary communities: the Buddha's miraculous and superhuman abilities, and the spiritual qualities and alternative titles ascribed to him.

The Pāli chronicles consistently portray the four Buddhas of the *Bhadrakalpa* as possessing extraordinary powers that transcend the limits of ordinary human beings. These narratives functioned to inspire awe and devotion, highlighting the Buddha's cosmic presence and compassionate engagement. For Gautama Buddha, the texts detail multiple visits to Sri Lanka where he demonstrates complete mastery over the elements and non-human entities (e.g., *Yakshas* and *Nāgas*). These events are detailed in chapters 1 and 2 of the *Dīpavaṃsa* (Gnanavimala, 1970, pp. 116-127), chapter 1 of the *Mahāvaṃsa* (Siri Sumangala & Batuwantudawa, 1917, pp. 1-6), and *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* (Amarawansa & Dissanayake, 2001, pp. 48-53). On his first visit, for instance, 'the Buddha confronts the Yakshas at Mahiyāṃgana. Traversing the sky from Jambudvīpa, he employs his miraculous powers to subdue these powerful beings by conjuring violent windstorms, torrents of rain, and showers of stones, weapons, charcoal, ash, sand, and mud, followed by chilling darkness that blinds the Yakshas to one another and scorching heat.' These events vividly portray his mastery over natural forces. Crucially, the texts emphasise his Cosmic Scale: to protect the human inhabitants and overcome the *Yakshas*, the Buddha enlarges his body to span the entire island, his head reaching the heights of *Brahmalōka*. Divine beings present fragrant flowers in homage, and in response, the *Yakshas* themselves seek refuge in him. On his subsequent visits, the Buddha offers sanctuary to the *Nāgas* at *Nāgadīpa*, overwhelming them with a display of intense darkness and radiant light. During a third visit to *Kalyāṇi*, he demonstrates exceptional aerial prowess, traversing the sky with effortless grace.

In these narratives, Gautama Buddha is portrayed with an extraordinary emphasis on his superhuman qualities, highlighting his capacity to eliminate threats, dispel fear, and exercise healing powers. He is depicted as possessing remarkable abilities that enable him to create miraculous environments, ascend into the sky, traverse it effortlessly, and alight gracefully upon solid rocks. Through these acts, he alleviates fear and sorrow, offering refuge and solace to all who seek it. Literary descriptions often liken him to a radiant, pure moon illuminating the heavens (Gnanavimala, 1970, p. 123),¹¹ inspiring awe and reverence in the imagination of devotees. This portrayal

¹⁰ According to the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa*, several monastic establishments within the *Mahāmeghavana* Park, including major landmarks such as *Thūpārāma* (the first stupa), the Bodhi Tree Shrine, and the *Ruwanweliseya*, were founded at locations believed to have been visited by the four past Buddhas (Gnanavimala, 1970, pp. 13,14,32,127,153; Siri Sumangala & Batuwantudawa, 1917, pp. 59-67). For more detailed information, refer to *Dīpavaṃsa*, 2:62-69 and 6:14, and *Mahāvaṃsa*, 15:20-173 and 37:60.

¹¹ See *Dīpavaṃsa*, 2:25.

emphasises the Buddha's transcendence and cosmic presence, standing in marked contrast to textual accounts such as the *Parinibbāna Sutta*, which foreground his human qualities and teaching role.

This superhuman status is extended to the past three Buddhas—*Kakusanda*, *Konagamana*, and *Kassapa*—who are likewise depicted with equivalent superhuman capabilities.¹² Their legendary visits involve descending from the sky onto rocks, radiating divine brilliance, and performing great acts of benevolence. For example, *Kakusanda* arrived specifically to prevent and heal the spread of illnesses, *Konagamana* alleviated drought through rainfall, and *Kassapa* mediated conflicts. These acts underscore the protective and benevolent aspect of their power, which inspired kings and laypeople to offer reverence and seek refuge.¹³

Collectively, the literature presents all Buddhas as transcending human limitations, endowed with advanced spiritual attainments.¹⁴ These qualities, the power to dispel fear and suffering, perform miracles, maintain composure, radiate brilliance, and wield authority, are what elevate the Buddha to the status of Supreme Being. This is reinforced by a wide array of spiritual epithets attributed to him in the texts¹⁵—such as *Mahāveera*, *Mahāmuni*, *Purisuttamo*, *Nārāsabho*, *Sugato*, *Mahiddhiko*, *Lokaggo*, *Sattanukampako*, *Mahākaruṇiko*, *Sabbalokahito*, *Abhaya Jinān*, *Panahito Jino*, *Devatīdevo*, *Lokanātho*, *Lokanukampako*, *Lokanayaka*, and *Ativipulādayo Lokadīpo*—which underscore the Buddha's preeminent status as a spiritual figure in Sri Lankan society by the mid-first millennium CE.

The literary emphasis on the Buddha's superhuman powers and cosmic scale provides the conceptual justification and textual rationale for the monumental dimensions of the Anuradhapura statues. The colossal physical size is not arbitrary; it is the material manifestation of the Buddha's transcendent "grand personality." This monumental presence, reserved for the most influential monasteries, is reinforced by Faxian's records, which describe the giant representations as evoking "a sense of mysterious awe" and radiating "brilliant light and a miraculous presence" enhanced by their dazzling golden hues and the precious ornaments (Beal, 1884, pp. 103, 134; 1906, pp. 103, 151). Consequently, the specific iconography of the solitary standing statue in a fixed *samabhanga* posture is a direct visual translation of this textual concept:

- Colossal scale: directly embodies the cosmic reach, grand personality and superhuman abilities of the Buddha, such as to enlarge his body to span the island.

¹² Refer to chapters 15 and 17 of *Dīpavaṃsa* (Gnanavimala, 1970, pp. 212-217, 226-233), chapter 15 of *Mahāvaṃsa*, (Siri Sumangala & Batuwantudawa, 1917, pp. 59-67) and *Vaṃsatthappakāsini* (Amarawansa & Dissanayake, 2001, pp. 268-277).

¹³ This theme appears recurrent in the stories of significant religious figures, such as the account of Mahinda Thero (Emperor Asoka's son), arriving at the *Mihintala* rock. It is said that he descended from the sky from *Jambudvīpa*, intending to leave a lasting impression on King Devanampiyatissa and lay the foundation for Buddhism in the country (Refer to *Dīpavaṃsa*, 12:33-37 and *Mahāvaṃsa*, 14:1-5).

¹⁴ It is important to note that the supernatural abilities of Buddha are often associated with his advanced spiritual attainments achieved through *Dhyana Samadhi* or meditative concentration. Please refer to *Dīpavaṃsa*, 1:52-54 (Gnanavimala, 1970, p. 117), *Mahāvaṃsa*, 1:79-82 of (Siri Sumangala & Batuwantudawa, 1917, pp. 5, 6), and *Vaṃsatthappakāsini* (Amarawansa & Dissanayake, 2001, p. 271).

¹⁵ Refer to chapters 1 and 2 of the *Dīpavaṃsa*, chapter 1 of the *Mahāvaṃsa* and *Vaṃsatthappakāsini* (Amarawansa & Dissanayake, 2001, pp. 1, 2).

- *Samabhanga* posture: conveys the spiritual calm and stability, ultimate strength and contemplative poise of the enlightened state.
- *Abhaya mudrā*: emphasises the Buddha's capacity for protection and fearlessness, aligning perfectly with the textual narratives of him eliminating threats and subduing powerful beings.

The positioning of these statues into natural rock formations elevates the colossal form, reinforcing a sense of enduring stability and directly linking the Buddha's transcendence to the permanence and immovability of the natural world. This deliberate material and spatial contexts embody the Buddhist conception of the Buddha as an eternal spiritual presence and a source of unshakeable cultural authority within the early Sri Lankan Buddhist landscape.

5.2 The Polonnaruwa Transformation: From Static Power to Didactic Narrative

The transformation of colossal Buddha imagery from the Anuradhapura period to the Polonnaruwa period reflects a fundamental shift in the conceptual emphasis of the Buddha, moving from a transcendent cosmic figure towards an accessible and didactic guide. While earlier Pāli verses emphasise static, unshakeable power, the Sinhala prose works of the Polonnaruwa, such as *Butsaraṇa*, *Dharmapradīpikā*, and *Amāvatura*, prioritise the Buddha's limitless compassion and practical refuge through his teaching of *Dhamma*. Indeed, the Polonnaruwa period is considered the golden era of the praise works of Buddha (Dhammananda, 1968, p. 47).

Vidyācakravartin's *Butsaraṇa* (refuge in the Buddha): A prose text devoted to the Buddha, was designed to be heard during reading and is intensely devotional (Guruge, 1964, p. 32; Dhammananda, 1968, p. 54). It strategically recounts the Buddha's life narratives to establish his worthiness of honour, praising his incomparable qualities, spiritual powers, and wisdom, thereby encouraging the act of taking refuge (Soratha, 1959, p. i; Saparamadu, 2006, p. 109). Notably, the *Butsaraṇa* stands apart from earlier Sinhalese works due to its terse and swift narrative prose (Saparamadu, 2006, p. 110). While maintaining the concept of the *Mahāpurusa* and superhuman miraculous powers (Soratha, 1959, p. 31), the traits inherited from the previous chronicles, the *Butsaraṇa* recounts these powers through vivid stories of the Buddha's present and past lives, elevating these qualities into a practical course of security and devotion. Crucially, the text introduces new imagery that contrasts sharply with the cosmic scale of the Pāli chronicles:

"Like a crescent moon, from the time he became a Buddha until the time he passed away, for forty-five years, he maintained a beautiful gait that neither decreased nor increased, not even slightly. When he started walking, either from sitting down, standing up or reclining, he always stretched out his right foot, without hitting his knees, without bending his thighs, without straining..." (Soratha, 1959, pp. 40, 41).

This emphasis on the Buddha's graceful, lifelike pose and gentle movements is entirely different from the earlier emphasis on miraculous traversing or cosmic enlargement. This humanised depiction of the Buddha's movement, specifically his refined gait, may have directly influenced the production of the Polonnaruwa *tribhanga* colossi, which abandoned the rigid *samabhanga* stance for a more relaxed, gentle curve.

Gurulugomi's *Dharmapradīpikā* (lamp of the *Dhamma*): Serving as another textual rationale for this shift. As a detailed Sinhalese commentary written for the literate community, it consciously organised the knowledge of Buddha and his life—his attributes, *Mahāpurusa* features, *Dasabala*, and significant life events—to present narratives of the Buddha's life meaningfully; encompassing Buddhist cosmography, cosmology, ethics, and philosophy (Guruge, 1964, pp. 24-27; Dhammananda, 1968, p. 53; Saparamadu, 2006, p. 107). In examining the Buddha's fundamental qualities, his form (*Rupavilāsa*), conversational ability (*Vacanavilāsa*), and knowledge (*Gnanavilāsa*), the text stresses their ultimate spiritual attainment by defining him as: inconceivable, unmentionable, incomparable, and unascendable. The text explains that “because he is inconceivable, he is beyond the realm of the mind; because he is unmentionable, he is beyond the realm of speech; because he is incomparable, he is beyond the parable; and because he is unascendable, he is beyond the grasp of knowledge” (Wimalawansa, 1967, pp. 2, 3). Crucially, despite establishing this ultimate depth of spiritual attainment, the *Dharmapradīpikā* intentionally excludes the superhuman miraculous powers (*Irdivilāsa*) (Wimalakeerthi & Sumangala, n.d., p. xxxi) that dominated the earlier narratives. By neglecting his divine might, the text de-emphasises the cosmic, solitary figure in favour of the intellectual teacher. Instead, it foregrounds narratives detailing his teachings, parables, and spiritual meditation. This literary preference for the engaged, didactic Buddha, promoting an intellectual understanding of his teaching career and encouraging the reader to view his life as a sequence of doctrinal events, provides the necessary conceptual framework for the Polonnaruwa period's visual innovations: the emergence of complex, integrated narrative ensembles (like Gal Vihara) and the use of diverse postures, including the seated *Samādhi* image, which better convey active guidance and spiritual attainment rather than static, cosmic composure.

Gurulugomi's *Amāvatura* (the delivery of nibbāna): This third work, also authored by Gurulugomi, focuses entirely on the Buddha's role as the compassionate guide of *Purisadhammasārathi* (controller of men to be tamed) throughout his previous and present lives (Gnanaloka, 2004, p. i; Saparamadu, 2006, p. 109). Gurulugomi selects incidents from the Buddha's life to illustrate how and why he earned the epithet *Purisadhammasārathi* (Saparamadu, 2006, p. 109). At the same time, the *Dharmapradīpikā* focuses on the *Dhamma* (teachings), the *Amāvatura* centres on the *Buddha carita* (Gnanaloka, 2004, p. ii; Guruge, 1964, p. 28). The core theme is the boundless compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) of the Buddha, portraying him not just as an object of awe, but as an actively engaged saviour whose most outstanding quality is his skill in teaching and guiding others. Though the work recounts the use of miraculous acts, these powers are always secondary to the spread of the *Dhamma* and the conversion of beings: “The Buddha, by first preaching and presenting miraculous acts and the way of preaching, took all of them to nirvana by weakening the heresy of sramana, brahmana, householders, kings and other various hundreds and thousands of beings.” A vivid example is the taming of the *Nālagiri* elephant: “Buddha preached to *Nālagiri*, saying that ‘*Nālagiri*, you are from the animal family, I am from the Buddha family. From now on, do not be rude, do not be a killer, spread the loving kindness,’ while rubbing the right hand on his head... and preached him the *Dhamma*.” This literary focus on compassion and didactic action necessitates a shift from the rigid, static perfection of the earlier period toward a form that can embody this teaching purpose, aligning perfectly with the development of the material narrative and effectively visualising the teachings of the historical Buddha.

5.3 Synthesis: The Colossal Shift

The transformation from the monolithic, erect images of the Anuradhapura period to the compositionally complex and narratively charged ensembles of Polonnaruwa directly parallels this literary shift. The twelfth-century Sinhala prose tradition consciously shifted its focus away from the Pāli chronicles' emphasis on cosmic transcendence towards the Buddha as a compassionate guide (*Amavatura*), intellectual teacher (*Dharmapradīpikā*), a historical exemplar, and an accessible source of refuge (*Butsaraṇa*). The table below (Table 2) summarises the core distinctions between the literary and material articulation of the Buddha's image across the two periods.

Period	Literary Concepts	Material Articulation
Anuradhapura (Pali Chronicles)	<i>Core concept:</i> Transcendent <i>Mahāpurusa</i> (supreme being, static spiritual authority)	<i>Iconography:</i> Rigid, erect <i>samabhanga</i> posture (perfect equilibrium) with <i>abhaya mudrā</i> (fearlessness/protection)
	<i>Theme:</i> Cosmic scale, awe and subduing of beings	<i>Composition:</i> Solitary, singular, non-narrative icon, anchored to rock
	<i>Thematic purpose:</i> Manifestation of ultimate spiritual power and unshakeable stability	<i>Scale meaning:</i> Embodiment of cosmic reach, superhuman physicality, and uniqueness.
Polonnaruwa (Sinhala Prose)	<i>Core concept:</i> Compassionate guide (didactic teacher, accessible refuge)	<i>Iconography:</i> Relaxed, bend <i>ābhanga</i> or <i>tribhanga</i> (lifelike movement), with varied, less rigid gestures
	<i>Theme:</i> Skill in teaching <i>Dhamma</i> , didacticism, lifelike grace	<i>Composition:</i> Integrated, multi-figure narrative programme (sequential reading), typically within designed shrines or carved rock settings
	<i>Thematic purpose:</i> Visual commentary on the historical Buddha's life and boundless compassion	<i>Scale meaning:</i> Vastness of compassion and protective power of the <i>Dhamma</i> .

Table 2. Synthesis of Conceptual and Material Shifts in Sri Lankan Colossal Buddha Statuary.

This conceptual transformation drove the material shift from the non-erect, slightly bent postures (*ābhanga* or *tribhanga*) observed in the standing figures at Gal Vihara and in the brick-and-plaster complexes (Tivanka, Lankatilaka), diminishing the rigid, superhuman frontalis of the earlier Anuradhapura style, allowing the figures to embody a greater didactic capacity that aligns with the literary need to portray the Buddha as a compassionately active teacher, rather than a static object of awe. While the colossal scale was retained, its meaning was repurposed from signifying only

cosmic transcendence to representing the vastness of the Buddha's compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) and the protective power of the *Dhamma*. This didactic focus provides the rationale for the integrated Polonnaruwa complexes, where the seated (enlightenment or meditation), standing (ambiguity, grief or compassion), and recumbent (final release or Parinibbāna) figures are spatially organised to be read as a coherent, sequential program illustrating the historical Buddha's life, ultimately transforming the colossal statues from singular, transcendental icons into didactic visual commentaries on the *Dhamma*.

Conclusion

Although colossal Buddha statues in Sri Lanka are widely recognised, most existing scholarship focuses narrowly on stylistic attributes. This research moves beyond material analysis to address broader conceptual transformations, contextualising the colossi within the evolution of Buddhist thought and practice. It demonstrates how these monumental representations functioned as vehicles of ideological expression, embodying evolving spiritual conceptions of the Buddha across different historical contexts. This investigation reveals a fundamental movement in how spiritual refuge was conceptualised in Sri Lanka, transitioning from Cosmic Refuge (Anuradhapura) to Didactic Refuge (Polonnaruwa).

The study confirmed that the Anuradhapura Ideal, exemplified by the monolithic, erect *samabhanga* colossi, served as the material manifestation of the Transcendent *Mahāpurusa*. This conception was deeply rooted in the Pāli chronicles, where refuge was found in the Buddha's superhuman powers, which dispel fear and sorrow through cosmic acts. Consequently, the standardised, awe-inspiring posture and *abhaya mudrā* offered a form of spiritual security dependent on divine intervention. The figure's monumental stance conveys the absolute, unwavering promise of protection: "I am here, perfectly balanced, and nothing can move me or my promise of refuge." This foregrounds monumental authority and transcendental presence.

In sharp contrast, the Polonnaruwa Synthesis, embodied in narrative ensembles such as the Gal Vihara, was driven by the rise of the twelfth-century Sinhala prose tradition. Texts like *Amāvatura* and *Butsarana* shifted the focus toward the Buddha as the Compassionate Teacher whose primary tool is the *Dhamma*. Refuge became practical and accessible, found in the Buddha's accessible qualities, specifically his conversational ability and knowledge. The resulting visual programs, utilising compositional innovation and narrative subtlety, transformed the colossi into didactic visual commentaries that rely on the intellectual understanding and application of his teachings.

Crucially, the colossal scale itself underwent conceptual evolution. In Polonnaruwa, it ceased to signify mere cosmic transcendence and instead represented the vastness of the Buddha's compassion and the protective power of his teachings. In conclusion, the colossal statues of Sri Lanka stand as tangible and monumental records of shifting faith. They demonstrate that the image of the Buddha was not a static, singular entity, but a dynamic spiritual locus constantly reinvented to address the evolving doctrinal and devotional needs of ancient Sri Lankan society. By integrating literary and

conceptual history, this research provides a textual rationale for the transformation of these iconic monumental forms.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the author used Gemini 2.5 Flash (a large language model) in order to perform minor language refinement and editing of the manuscript. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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