

# Monumental Rock-cut Images from Sri Lanka: New Perspectives

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The creation of monumental icons of the Buddha constitutes an important chapter in the history of Buddhist image worship. By the eighth century colossal sculptures hewn from the living rock marked the Buddhist world from Central Asia to China, to Western India and Sri Lanka, yet the phenomenon of Buddhist monumentality has been largely overlooked. In Sri Lanka, the placement and function of colossal rock-cut sculptures in the landscape suggest that this type of images were closely linked to long distance travel and trade and formed a local network of monumentality interwoven with myth and with the formation of a Buddhist collective memory. Colossal sculptures proliferated at a time of great mobility across the Buddhist world, and they may have functioned also as visual markers within a transnational Buddhist network that spanned South Asia.

The phenomenon of Buddhist monumentality is well attested on the island of Sri Lanka where gigantic sculptures of the Buddha carved from the living rock can be found in two main geographical regions: the North Central Province and the Uva Province (Fig. 1). In the North Central Province are the rock-cut standing Buddhas at Avukana and Sasseruva (also known as Ras Vehera), and the large *parinirvana* sculptures at Tantirimale, Ataragollewa and the famous Gal Vihara; in the Uva Province are the monumental images at Buduruvagala, Maligavela and Dova.<sup>1</sup> Given the number and relevance of sites associated with rock-cut monumentality in Sri Lanka, the present study will focus only on Avukana (Fig. 2) and Sasseruva (Fig. 3) located respectively in the districts of Anuradhapura and Kurunegala. Both sites were surveyed during a field research season sponsored by the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies in 2015.

The diffusion of Buddhist colossal sculpture in Sri Lanka remains a remarkable phenomenon if one considers that the tradition of carving in the living rock was not very developed on the island prior to the seventh and eighth centuries. Since the inception of the phenomenon of forest monasticism in Sri Lanka, Buddhist caves consisted of simple rock shelters devoid of any sculptural decoration. The earliest examples of elaborate sculptures in the living rock can be seen at the *vihara* of Isurumunya in Anuradhapura where the visual idiom employed clearly relates to the Pallava traditions of South India.<sup>2</sup>

## AVUKANA

The Buddhist site of Avukana is established on a rocky outcrop at a short distance from the Kalavava, a large water basin attributed to king Dhatusena in the fifth century CE.<sup>3</sup> The site, however, predates the establishment of the Kalavava tank as attested by the presence of early Brahmi inscriptions from a cluster of caves at the site. An epigraph mentions the existence *in loco* of a village tank called Kadapi run by a private

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Figure 1: Map with rock-cut monumental Buddhas in Sri Lanka.

owner that was likely expanded in the fifth century to create the Kalavava reservoir.<sup>4</sup> Today a small *cetiya* stands in the location where the original brick *stupa* once was erected, and only a modest size *bodhighara* is present at the site.

The colossal Buddha, originally enclosed in a *patimaghara* of equally impressive size, is the finest monumental sculpture on the island and the one that has attracted the most scholarly attention (Fig. 2). The sculpture has been dated anywhere between the fifth to the eighth centuries, and surely post-dates the establishment of the nearby Kalavava.<sup>5</sup> We are completely left in the dark as to who the patrons of this monumental Buddha may have been. In fact, no reference to the patronage of Buddhist colossi can be found in the Sri Lankan Buddhist chronicles, with one exception: a statue fifteen cubits high (6.8 meters) of the 'savior Metteya' erected by king Aggabodi IV of Rohana in the late seventh century, perhaps a reference to one of the colossal images located in the Uva Province.<sup>6</sup>

It is unlikely that the completion of colossal rock-cut sculptures in Sri Lanka, much like the establishment of the many water reservoirs, had nothing to do with the authority and power of the rulers. The carving of so many colossal Buddha images on the island, all placed in strategic locations, must have required enormous investments of money, workmanship and technology, available only through the patronage of the ruling elite.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the precise date of the Avukana Buddha, the chronological range proposed for the Avukana sculpture suggests that Buddhist monumentality in Sri Lanka acquired tremendous relevance within the same broad period as it did in the Northwest of the Indian Subcontinent and at sites along the Silk Road.

The Buddha hewn from a granite outcrop measures 11.36 meters in height (over 13 meters including the stone pedestal) and it is carved almost in the round thus appearing very three-dimensional (Fig. 4). The colossal sculpture was not entirely visible from a distance since it was enshrined within a *patimaghara*.

The temple measuring 6x15 meters was accessed from the east through two massive portals, and consisted of a central hall with twelve pillars and two lateral corridors leading directly to the sides of the image to enable its circumambulation at the level of the feet. The upper part of the building was likely completed in brick and timber, and the sockets that remain on the rock façade in proximity to the Buddha image suggest that the upper part of the sculpture was not completely enclosed by the temple and remained visible from far away. The Buddha's *ushnisha* as we see it today is a modern addition and it is possible that in antiquity a precious *siraspata* was inserted in its place.

In 1952, during conservation work, a small chamber containing five bronze sculptures was uncovered under the lotus pedestal that was carved and added as a separate piece at the feet of the Buddha.<sup>8</sup> The small bronze images were laid out as a mandala with a central, larger Brahma and four directional figures of Indra to the east, Kubera to the north, Yama to the south and Varuna to the west (Fig. 5).<sup>9</sup> An inscription dated to the eighth century was also reported on the northern wall of the shrine, and the pronounced monumentality of the stone masonry of the Avukana's *patimaghara* calls to mind building practices established elsewhere in Sri Lanka during the eighth century. In particular, at the site of Medirigirya near Polonnaruva one can observe a comparable use of large stone blocks as foundations for brick buildings, and a pronounced trend in sculptural monumentality in the *patimaghara* (Fig. 6). The central Buddha image in granite from the image shrine measures over two meters in height and appears to be stylistically related to the Avukana colossus.<sup>10</sup>

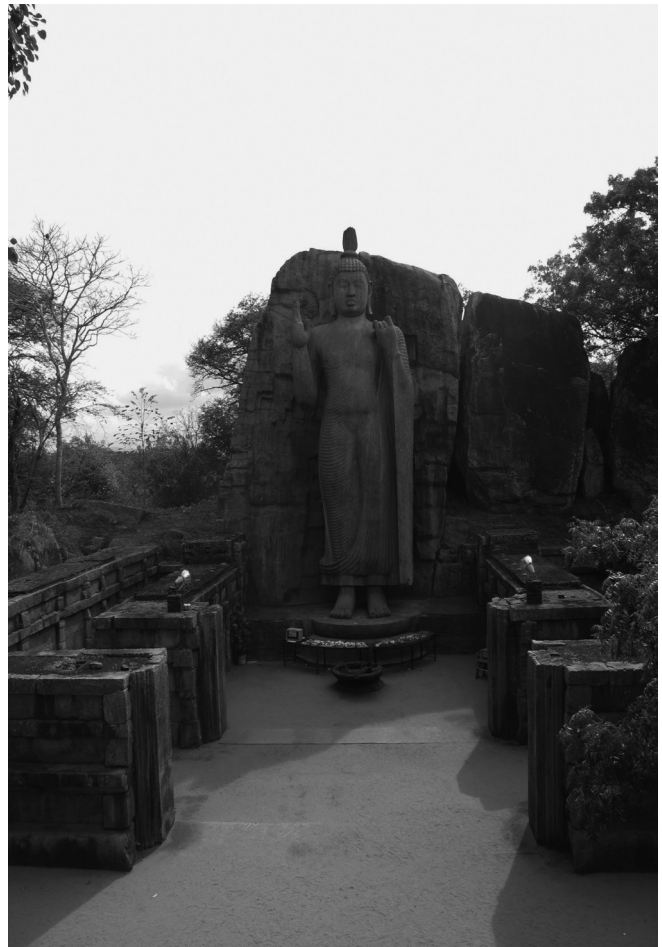


Figure 2: Avukana, monumental Buddha.

## Sasseruva

Sasseruva, also known as Ras Vehera, is a Buddhist complex located only eleven kilometres away from Avukana. It was probably a site of greater importance than Avukana with ninety caves scattered among the hills, some of which were occupied since the second century BCE as suggested by inscriptions.<sup>11</sup> One of these early epigraphs attributes the establishment of the *stupa* to a certain Batisabuti in the second century BCE;<sup>12</sup> the genealogy of the Avukana Bodhi tree also alludes to the relevance of the monastery as it establishes a direct link between the sacred plant at the site and the legendary shoot brought by Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE. Early monastic caves at Sasseruva were transformed into elaborate shrines during the Kandy period and in the seventeenth century were embellished with paintings and images.<sup>13</sup> In sum, all the evidence suggests that Sasseruva was a prominent center in antiquity well before the establishment of

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its colossal rock-cut statue, and possibly was more important than the nearby monastery at Avukana.

The monumental Buddha here is very different from the one at Avukana (Fig. 3).<sup>14</sup> The Sasseruva image is simply carved in high relief, thus making a *pradakshina* virtually impossible, and its base remains unfinished. It is hard to say if part of the original plan was to emancipate the sculpture from the rock cliff to convey an effect of more pronounced three-dimensionality. The statue was enclosed within a *patimaghara* that does not bear the monumental qualities of the construction at Avukana. It was a brick temple with twelve stone pillars – a few of them still lying on the ground in a fragmentary state near the shrine (Fig. 6). The interior of the *patimaghara* was laid out with two parallel rows of six stone pillars and a central bay for direct access to Buddha's feet. Judging from the sockets visible on the top and by the feet of the image, it would appear that the monumental Buddha was covered by a roof supported by vertical wooden beams.

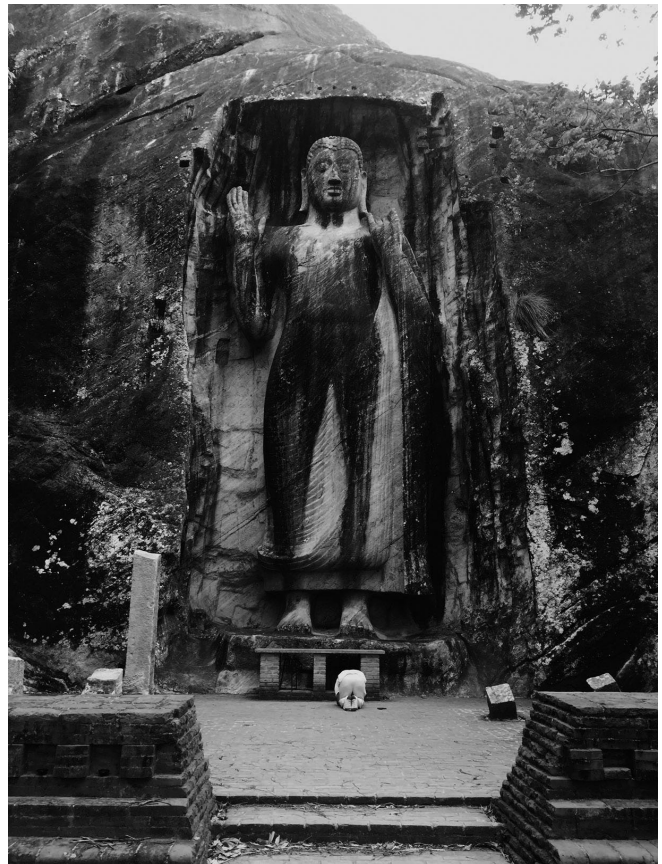


Figure 3: *Sasseruva, monumental Buddha and the foundation of the Patimaghara.*

### Monumentality and Myth

Monumentality in art is always the result of a deliberate choice – it highlights power relationships and distinction, and its implementation requires significant mobilisation of resources and technical know-how. Colossal structures like these Buddha images were deemed to enter the realm of memory and myth and ignited the collective imagination in the past just as they continue to do today. They also formed a set of permanent references in the geography for travellers and pilgrims – the Chinese pilgrims who travelled from China to South and Southeast Asia between the fifth and eighth century, often describe these huge images and dwell on their miraculous nature. Best known is the case of Faxian and Xuanzang who, in the fifth and seventh centuries respectively, reported seeing an image of Maitreya in the Darel valley that supposedly had very special powers and was made by an artist who visited the Tushita Heaven three times in order to render the accurate depiction of the future Buddha.<sup>15</sup> Xuanzang also reported a colossal image endowed with miraculous powers on an island in the Indian Ocean. The colossal statue was hewn from the living rock on a small island located off the coast of Sri Lanka, to the west of what he calls Na-lo-ki-lo.<sup>16</sup> The colossal Buddha in question was apparently carved on a cliff and reached 100 feet in height; it was facing the east and had a shining gem set in the *ushnisha*. According to Xuanzang, streams of water would run down from the image after the full moon. The Chinese pilgrim tells a story of a group of merchants who, during a storm, were driven by winds and waves to the island and were about to die of thirst when the image, after the full moon, started to deliver trickles of fresh water to quench their thirst. The merchants thought this to be a miracle and overwhelmed by profound faith, decided to stay longer on the island, eventually realising that the power of the image was connected to the gem fixed in its *ushnisha* and to the moon cycles.



Figure 4: *Avukana, side view of the Buddha with Patimagharawalls.*

## Monumentality and Landscape

The miraculous nature of the Buddha releasing streams of water to quench the thirst of merchants seems to elucidate upon a particular feature that is consistent with the phenomenon of Buddhist monumentality in Sri Lanka – the association of large rock cut images with water in the landscape. At Sasseruva, for example, significant traces of water erosion can be noted on both sides of the image suggesting that on occasions, during the rainy season, streams of water would flow down the rock by the Buddha visually evoking the miraculous scenario described by Xuanzang in the context of the image carved on an island in the Indian Ocean. A flaming bejewelled piece inserted on the *ushnisha*, likely resplendent in the light, would have completed the rock-cut Buddha at Sasseruva much like the colossus described by Xuanzang.

In Sri Lanka, all monumental images carved on cliffs are strategically positioned facing major bodies of water. There is a striking consistency in the placement of these sculptures in the topography, regardless of their chronology. The Avukana and Sasseruva Buddhas are both closely associated with the Kala Oya river system. The Avukana Buddha is established right next to the Kala Oya at a short distance from the incredibly large Kalaveva. The Sasseruva Buddha is on a tributary river to the Kala Oya, overlooking the smaller Nikaveva reservoir. A careful study of early settlement patterns in the Kala Oya basin published by Dr. Vidanapatirana in

2007 revealed that the region around the Kalaveva became especially populous and prosperous after the 5th century, when the tank was established by Dhatusena and an abundance of water led to flourishing agriculture and to the development of an active commercial route running along the course of the Kala Oya river.<sup>17</sup> This important road connected the Dakkhina-desa and the Dambulla area to the ancient port of Uruvela where the river meets the Ocean on the east coast of Sri Lanka. Along this road, midway between Avukana and the ocean, in proximity of the site of Giribava, an archaeological survey has revealed the existence of a centre for the mass production of glass bead at Pabulugala with significant findings of furnaces, glass fragments and slag, along with beads and shards of glazed ceramics.<sup>18</sup> The East-West route near Avukana also intersected another major route coming from Anuradhapura and crossing the Kala Oya. The colossal Buddha must have functioned as a beacon in the landscape establishing a clear link between monumentality, mobility and trade.

### Monumentality, Mobility and Trade

Xuanzang's tale of the merchants rescued by the miraculous powers of the colossal Buddha is illuminating in many ways. First of all, it shows that by the seventh century, rock-cut images of monumental size were popular beyond the Silk Road to the seafaring commercial circuits of the Indian Ocean. It also suggests that colossal icons functioned as landmarks along trade routes for merchants and pilgrims, and formed a recognisable, transnational visual network at a time of great mobility.

It has been argued that the name of the colossal Avukana Buddha in fact evokes the distant land of Afghanistan where the celebrated Bamiyan Buddhas were erected. According to Edward Perera, the toponym Avukana may be linked to the term Vokkana used in historical sources to denote the region of Wakhan in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> While such a toponomastic connection is hard to prove, the existence of a self-referential network of Buddhist monumentality in antiquity linking sites on the Silk Road to the Indian Ocean could explain the somewhat sudden popularity of the phenomenon of Buddhist monumentality across Asia. The *Christian Topography* by Cosmas Indicopleustes suggests that the seventh century was an intense time of long-distance travel and exchange in the Indian Ocean. This text written in Greek, describes Sri Lanka as a major international trade hub with many different foreign communities settled on the island to conduct business.<sup>20</sup> Already at the end of the fifth century the Chinese pilgrim Faxian tells about the presence of Central Asian merchants in the city of Anuradhapura.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 5: *Avukanabronzes: Brahma (centre), Kubera, Indra, Yama and Varuna (clockwise from the top). Archaeological Museum, Anuradhapura. After S. Paranavitana, Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Administrative Report: 1955 (1956), pp. 23-24.*



Figure 6: *Medirigirya, Buddha images in Patimaghara.*

Overlapping with a thriving international trading system was a network of Buddhist monastic exchanges with monks from Sri Lanka journeying all the way to Afghanistan and, along the Silk Road, to China. These monks, aside from their interest in Buddhist texts and doctrines, may have functioned as important vehicles for the transmission of Buddhist imagery, especially when it came to icons that left a trace in the Buddhist imagination. Already in the sixth century, the Chinese history of the Wei dynasty known as *Wei Shu*, speaks of monks from Sri Lanka bringing to China Buddhist images, in particular carrying a painted copy made by Buddhnanandi of the legendary effigy of the Buddha's shadow impressed on the wall of a cave at Hadda in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> The image of the shadow of the Buddha from the Hadda's cave was an extremely famous Buddhist landmark also described in detail a century later by Xuanzang.<sup>23</sup> The text of the *Wei Shu* also includes an interesting statement about the fact that the copy of the Hadda image drawn by Buddhnanandi was superior to all other copies – which means that it was customary for travelling monks to sketch and draw relevant images seen on their travels, therefore contributing to the dissemination of visual models across the Buddhist world.

This reference is of great interest as it draws direct connection between the Buddhist artistic traditions of Sri Lanka and those of Afghanistan and beyond. As Buddhist mobility seems to have increased during the seventh and eighth centuries, judging from the Chinese biographies of eminent monks from the Tang

period, it is tempting to reconstruct a scenario where colossal images like those at Bamiyan in Afghanistan and the Avukana Buddha in Sri Lanka made conscious reference to each other and functioned as powerful markers of a transnational Buddhist network that emerged between the sixth and eighth centuries.

Within Sri Lanka, the geography of rock-cut colossal images seems to indicate that in parallel with a transnational network, a clear web of local monumentality existed on the island and was linked to regional mobility. As mentioned earlier, the colossal images cut on cliffs are all situated in clusters, in strategic positions along major transit areas – if we plot them on a map, it will become apparent that they towered the main trade routes



Figure 7: *Sasseruva, Fragmentary pillars and bases originally from the Patimaghara.*

linking the central areas of the island to ports located in the east and in the south. One can notice an internal system of reference within the colossal rock-cut sculptures of Sri Lanka where images such as that at Avukana in the Anuradhapura region and the sculpture at Buduruvagala in the Uva Province, even if erected at different times, seem to make explicit and conscious reference to each other, as do the *parinirvanas* at Tantirimale and the famous image at Gal Vihara in Polonaruwa.<sup>24</sup> These icons are replete with reciprocal visual allusions, creating a formidable self-referential visual web that may have functioned in similar ways to the one established along the Silk Road.

The colossal rock-cut Buddhas discussed in this article do not find a place in the Sri Lankan Buddhist historical narratives. However, as we place these images within a broader context, and we link them to trade, mobility and landscape, we enhance their relevance. Sculpting in the living rock not only enabled the proliferation of oversize Buddha images, but also ensured their enduring presence as beacons in the landscape, with the notion of permanence being at the very core of monumentality.

## NOTES

1. Ulrich von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculpture of Sri Lanka* (Weesen: Visual Dharma Publications, 1990), pp. 142-145. An isolated rock-cut image representing a colossal Bodhisattva is also found at the site of Kushtarajagala in Valigama.
2. This connection was first noted by Ananda Comaraswamy; A.D.T.E. Perera, *The Enigma of the Mand and the Horse at Isurumunyia* (Moratuwa: Cultural Research Publications, 1977).
3. R.L. Brohier, 'The Interrelation of Ancient Reservoirs and Channels in Ceylon', *The Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 24 (1937), p. 69.
4. S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon* (Colombo: Department of Archaeological Survey, Sri Lanka, 1970), no.1150.
5. See the article by Diran K. Dohanian, 'The Colossal Buddha at Avukana', *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, XIX (1965); a complete bibliography of this colossal Buddha appears in von Schroeder, p. 158.
6. 45.62 in Wilhelm Geiger, *The Culavamsa (Being the More Recent Part of the Culavamsa)* (Colombo: The Ceylon Government Information Department), vol. 1, p.95.
7. James Osborn, 'Monuments and Monumentality', in *Approaching Monumentality in Archaeology*, ed. by J. Osborn (Albany: SUNY, 2014), pp. 1-19 (p. 9); John Holt relates the patronage of the Buddhas at Avukana and Sasseruva to manifestations of exaggerated claims to power and protection of the *dharma* on behalf of 8<sup>th</sup> century Sinhalese



rulers who were significantly exposed to cultural and political traditions of the Pallavas from South India; John Holt, *Buddha in the Crown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.83.

8. S. Paranavitana, *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Administrative Report: 1955* (1956), pp. 23-24; Dohanian describes the deposit chamber as located in a natural rock cavity behind the projection of the image base; Diran K. Dohanian, *The Mahayana Buddhist Sculpture of Sri Lanka* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), p.80. Paranavitana proposes a date 'no later than the 8th century' for the Avukana bronzes. Based on a stylistic comparison with other images, S. Paranaviatana, 'The Gods of Adam Peak', *Artibus Asiae. Supplementum*, 18(1958), pp. 5-78 (p. 49); for the bronze technology employed to make these bronzes see the recent work by K. A. Anusha Kasthuri, 'Preliminary Investigation of Sri Lankan Copper Alloy Statues', *STAR: Science & Technology of Archaeological Research*, 2.2 (2016), pp. 159-176, DOI: 10.1080/20548923.2016.1209055.
9. Consecration deposits like the one from Avukana containing bronze images of *lokapalas* are relatively common in Sri Lanka; T. B. Karunaratne, 'Garbhapatra: Ritual Deposit Vessels of Buddhist Shrines in Ancient Sri Lanka', *Ancient Ceylon*, 5 (1984), pp. 125-219. On Sri Lankan consecration practices see the work by Anna Slaczka, *Temple Consecration Rituals in Ancient India: Text and Image* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2007).
10. von Schroeder, p. 156, 35 C-E.
11. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, nos. 994-1017 and 1208-1212; S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon 2*, ed. M. Dias (Colombo: Department of Archaeological Survey, Sri Lanka, 2001), n. 294.
12. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, no. 1950.
13. N. Chutiwongs, L. Prematilleke and R. Silva, *Paintings of Sri Lanka: Sasseruwa* (Colombo: Archaeological Survey of Sri Lanka Centenary Publications, Central Cultural Fund, 1990).
14. Only a few studies have been conducted on the Sasseruva Buddha; for the complete bibliography see von Schroeder, p. 160.
15. J. Legge, *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), p. 25; S. Beal, *Si-yu-ki. Buddhist Records of the Western World* (London: Trubner & Co., 1906), vol. I, p.134.
16. S. Beal, *Si-yu-ki. Buddhist Records of the Western World* (London: Trubner & Co., 1906), vol. II, pp. 252-257.
17. P. Vidanapatirana, *Settlement Patterns of the Malvatu Oya and Kala Oya Basins. A Study in the Historical Geography of Sri Lanka* (Colombo: PGIAR, 2007), pp.136-137.
18. *Ibid.*, p.110.
19. A.D.T.E. Perera, 'The Avukana Buddha - was it Sakyamuni Buddha or the Primordial Buddha Amitabha', *The Buddhist*, 45 (1974), pp. 35-37.
20. J.W. Mc Crindle, *The Christian Topography* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1847), pp. 364-373.
21. Legge, p.104. On Sri Lanka's relevance in Indian Ocean Trade see S. Bandaranayake, L. Dewaraja, R. Silva and K.D.G. Wimalaratne (eds.), *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea* (Colombo: The Sri Lanka National Commission for Unesco and the Central Cultural Fund, 1990); O. Boparachchi, 'Seafaring in the Indian Ocean: Archaeological Evidence from Sri Lanka' in *Tradition and Archaeology. Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean*, ed. by H.P. Ray and J.F. Salles (Delhi: Manohar, 1996), pp. 59-77.
22. Alexander Soper, 'Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China', *Artibus Asiae. Supplementum*, 19 (1959), p. 96
23. Beal, *Si-yu-ki*, vol. I, pp. 193-195.
24. von Schroeder, pp.141-145.