



# Collective and Proactive Female Patronage in Sri Lankan Buddhist Temple Art

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## Abstract

Art history research in Sri Lanka has surged in popularity. However, the focus remains mainly on a handful of well-known historic Buddhist temples and their connections to royalty. The existing knowledge gap and broader perspectives in social archaeology surrounding temple patronage in late colonial Sri Lanka requires exploration. Recent advancements in social archaeology have further emphasized the necessity for an inclusive historiographical approach using comparative analyses. This research examines five Buddhist temples from the Central Province of Sri Lanka, examining the donative inscriptions found in temple murals as primary sources. Additionally, archaeological evidence and historical texts are analyzed to provide comparative insights and to identify accurate depictions of the social landscape of the period. Outcomes of the research highlight village and peasant Buddhist art traditions in Sri Lankan history that were obscured in art history scholarship, particularly showcasing the concept of collective patronage in rural areas. The temple provides a vivid example of collective patronage and active female participation in the expression of religious faith and social responsibility. The participation of women from different social strata confirms their relative religious freedom and economic strength, which enabled such endowments. The tolerance of female participation at religious sites by male clergy, as well as the continuation of a hierarchically graded feudal social order are represented even in sacred spaces during a period of declining feudalism in gendered contexts. This research highlights a collective patronage zone, showcasing inclusivity and relative social unity within communities.



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## Introduction

The image houses in Buddhist temples exemplify the Buddha's status as a revered sacred idol and occupy a significant role in the typical Kandyan architecture of 18th to 19th century CE of Sri Lanka (Paranavitana, 1957; Prematileke, 1964; Bandaranayake, 1974, 1986; Silva, 1988). Notably, these religious structures are widely dispersed throughout the country, reflecting urban, suburban, and rural environments. Traditionally, Sri Lankan art historical scholarship tends to depict royalty as the sole patrons behind the construction of temples, including image houses, while celebrating the splendour of paintings within the 'Great tradition'. However, this narrative neglects the histories of diverse communities that existed outside these elite religious and political frameworks. This research investigates the dynamics of collective patronage, focusing on its gendered aspects and social interactions. The resurgence of Buddhism as a medium for religious communication gained momentum during the reign of King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe, associated with the significant religious movement led by Venerable Velivita Sri Saranankara, which united the clergy and laity (Holt, 1996). Buddhist image houses emerged on an unprecedented scale in village environments during the late colonial period, utilizing previously overlooked archaeological evidence from unrecorded temples (Karunarathna, 2015). Patronage at the following types of temples are described in this study: Raja Maha Vihara (RMV), Maha Vihara (MV), Purana Vihara (PV) and Tempita Vihara (TV). Many of these are located in the central hills of Sri Lanka, denoted as "up-country" while the coastal and intermediate-elevation zones are referred to as "low-country".

## The temporal background

It is widely accepted that the patronage of King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe (1747-1782 CE) significantly enhanced the recognition of the murals from that period (Holt, 1996). Additionally, the contributions of some court officials and regional leaders or elites were instrumental in creating these artworks. The *Cūlavamsa*, particularly in its account of the queens of King Vijaya Rajasinghe (1739 -1747 CE), offers the most comprehensive portrayal of material donations and religious aspirations of women (Geiger, 1992; pp.1-20), yet, highlighting the androcentric bias prevalent in Sri Lankan literature. For instance, the author of the *Cūlavamsa* highlights the Buddhist identity of the king by emphasizing the piety of his sister, who was married to the preceding king. This focus reflects the trend observed among the authors of the historical chronicles *Mahāvamsa* and *Cūlavamsa* in their androcentric narratives that celebrate male political figures (Karunarathna 2015). Literary sources, including the *Gazetteer of the Central Province* (Lawrie, 1898) and local folklore, provide substantial evidence for reconstructing the

history of donors involved in the sponsorship of Buddhist temple constructions. Information such as temple names, construction years, and the identities of patrons, along with village names, castes, family names, manor house names, and personal names, can be extracted from the *Gazetteer*, with some details supported by archaeological findings. The analysis of the *Gazetteer* reveals that 139 Buddhist temples were either built or renovated in the Central Province. The meritorious contributions came from 20 individuals belonging to aristocratic families, 22 officers, 25 monks, and 84 village peasants, highlighting the collective patronage that facilitated the majority of temple constructions (Karunarathna, 2015; 2020).

Various literary works and folklore offer substantial insights into the history of donors who commissioned the building of Buddhist temples. Among these, Henakanda Biso Bandara stands out as a significant donor from the up-country (Lawrie, 1898, p. 554). Folk narratives and literary accounts attribute to her the sponsorship of numerous up-country temples, such as Hindagala RMV, Wegama RMV, and Unambuwa TV (Tundeniya & Gunawansa, 1997).

Malalgoda (1976) highlights the religious history of the time, offering insights into how Buddhism evolved and faced challenges. The rise of mural paintings, commonly attributed to the “Kandyan” style, is linked to the religious revival of the eighteenth century. Thus, grasping the nature of Buddhism during this era provides a foundation for contextualizing these artistic developments. Malalgoda also examines the influence of colonial missionary efforts on Sinhalese society and Buddhism (Karunarathna, 2015). In this regard, a comprehensive analysis of the religious transformations in Sri Lanka during the colonial period is offered by Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988). They explore the integration of non-Buddhist deities into the Buddhist pantheon, which enhances the cognitive dimensions of Buddhism at the time. While this exploration facilitates a deeper comprehension of the social concepts and roles of non-Buddhist cults, they also introduce a novel aspect of Buddhism that they term *Protestant Buddhism*. This concept illustrates the religious reforms that primarily took place in the low country (coastal and intermediate-elevation zones of Sri Lanka), shedding light on the religio-cultural foundations of the murals in the region (Karunarathna, 2015).

The religious history of the Western world in general, and Europe in particular, is a popular subject of existing literature in the Global North. Several studies discuss patronage (Flora, 2012; Bearfield, 2009; Sorauf, 1960), the relationship between patronage and power (Eilenberg, 2012; Codell, 1988), principles of patronage (Nelson, 1996), patronage and community (Rees, 1973), and the role of monks, nuns, and patronage in the Cistercian Order (Jordan, 2012), illustrating the varying trends in Medieval Western culture.

In the context of Indian history, numerous studies examine collective patronage and the role of female patrons in Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu architecture. Thapar (1992),

in her article "Patronage and the Community", explores how Indian art historians typically sought individual patrons of monuments, often categorized by their dynasties. Thapar also addresses the relationship between patron and recipient, identifying community patronage as a cultural and social innovation of that era.

In recent decades, only a limited number of scholars have conducted systematic research on patronage. A "patron" refers to someone esteemed as a guardian and supporter. The art history of South Asia is rich with patrons, including notable rulers like Asoka, Raja Raja, and Akbar in India, who constructed vast monumental edifices to gain fame and religious merit (Dehejia, 1992). Dehejia mentions Charles M. Nelson's broader interpretation of patronage across different sectors such as politics, business, history, and antiquities (Nelson, 1996). He discusses the dual ambition of monarchs to attain worldly prestige, allowing them to claim the title of "great builder of temples," while also accumulating spiritual merit for their next life. Furthermore, Dehejia draws attention to the collective patronage of significant Buddhist stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut in India, funded by commoners lacking high social status (Dehejia 1992). Notably, she emphasizes early female patronage seen in Buddhist rock-cut architecture in Karle, as well as contemporary Jain structures, illuminating the untold contributions of women patrons in Indian history (Karunarathna, 2020). In a study on female patronage in Indian Buddhism, Willis (1992) initially focuses on notable female figures in early Buddhist texts, and subsequently examines the role of women in early Buddhist material culture, particularly at Sanchi, Bharhut, and Amaravati.

Dehejia (1988a) compiled a collection of essays focusing on royal patrons and significant temples. In those essays, various authors emphasize the contributions of royal family members often overlooked in history. The commissioning of the temples at Pattadakal by Chalukyan queens, as discussed by Bolon (1988), reveals a comparative analysis of female patronage. In the same vein, the dynamics of patronage (Bhattacharya, 2013), community and patronage (De Neve, 2000), and monastery and patronage (Shaw, 2011) further enhance the scholarship about patrons within the Indian religious context. In her study on social archaeology, Karunarathna (2004 & 2022) investigates the esteemed status within the Krishna Valley, India, during the Satavahana and Ikshavaku dynasties. This research analyzes Buddhist Prakrit inscriptions alongside comparative archaeological and historical evidence related to Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, and various other Buddhist sites in the Krishna Valley. It highlights the remarkable contributions of female patrons from the royal lineage and female lay devotees, demonstrating the economic and religious freedom experienced by women in matrilineal societies of that era.

Talbot (1991) examines the subsequent phase in Andhra Pradesh, focusing on temple patrons within the Hindu religious context. He emphasizes the trends of temple patronage in thirteenth-century South India. Similarly, Spencer (1983) investigates the

role of women as temple patrons during the Chola period. Orr (1999, 2000) explores the contributions of temple women in Tamil Nadu, India, by consulting and analyzing donative inscriptions found on temple walls. She investigates women's roles as donors, devotees, and temple figures, examining their religiosity within the context of South Indian Hinduism and Jainism. Her findings highlight women from royal families, varied professions, and different social classes. Their religious donations towards activities, daily upkeep, and temple construction reveal a narrative that transcends the historical portrayal of royal male patrons and their benefactions.

Kiribamune (1990) offers a brief exploration of the history of Sri Lankan women, focusing on their social identity in ancient and medieval times. She examines historical developments from the third century BCE to the tenth century, highlighting shifts in gender relations and changing perceptions of gender roles over time. The paper raises several theoretical questions regarding women's historical positions. Utilizing both historical and archaeological evidence from Sri Lanka's early historic periods, Kiribamune investigates women's behaviours within evolving historical contexts. A key finding of her research is that it contributes to a foundational understanding of the historical evolution of women's status (Karunarathna, 2015). In her 1990 study, Kiribamune narrates the political empowerment of women from the early historic era through the medieval period. She also examines religious history, emphasizing nuns - the *Bhikkhuni* order - and the vital support women provided to Buddhism, particularly during the time frames relevant to her discussion of women's political history. While, Kiribamune's focus remains on the early periods, offering valuable empirical data that presents a historical overview of the religio-political landscape for women before the study's specified timeline, the status of women highlighted by Kiribamune can be compared to that of pre-modern times, revealing their limited social privileges and accomplishments (Karunarathna, 2015).

In the legendary history of Sri Lanka, King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe is recognized as a prominent patron. However, many donative inscriptions and archaeological findings from various donors, including temple leaders and villagers, attribute the support of numerous temples to King Kirti Sri himself (Karunarathna, 2015). Holt (1996) highlights the religious and political context of eighteenth-century Sri Lanka, centering on Buddhism, art, and politics during King Kirti Sri's reign (1747-1782). He challenges the traditional interpretation of Buddhism endorsed by King Kirti Sri and scrutinizes the king's goals as a patron of religious endeavors. Several temples, which provided murals for this research, were built with Kirti Sri's support. Holt's scholarship also interrogates the political motivations that shaped Kirti Sri's visual liturgy, while the reliance on elite literary sources and his disregard for folk traditions hinder his grasp of the social context surrounding the period's murals. He suggests that King Kirti Sri could mitigate Sinhalese opposition by adhering to his religiopolitical agenda. While it

is important to address the common belief that attributes temple patronage during this time to King Kirti Sri, Holt goes on to provide an analytical framework that sheds light on the religiopolitical implications of murals from mid to late-eighteenth-century Sri Lanka (Karunarathna, 2015).

Records of the up-country art tradition are primarily found in temples built under the patronage of Kandyan rulers. Notable examples include Dambulla RMV (Seneviratna, 1983), Medawala TV (Godakumbura, 1964), and Ridi Vihara (Tammita-Delgoda, 2006). Additionally, Somathilaka (2002) and Gunasinghe (1978) shed light on the royal patrons of Kandyan temples. Moreover, Somathilaka highlights several officials noted for their contributions to temple construction. In the later part of the colonial period, the emergence of women from different social strata as patrons of the murals is also prominent at Garakmedilla Temple (Karunarathna, 2015; 2019; 2020). The most prominent female donor from the low-country was Amarasekera Lamatani, known as the aristocratic lady Amarasekera of Kataluwa Walauva. An inscription indicates that she played a significant role in creating the Ranvella Temple in 1841. The main purpose of constructing the temple was to achieve the merit of receiving a child (Palihapitiya, 1993, p. 255). The Ranvella Temple demonstrates that women from prestigious families often acted as its patrons (Karunarathna, 2015).

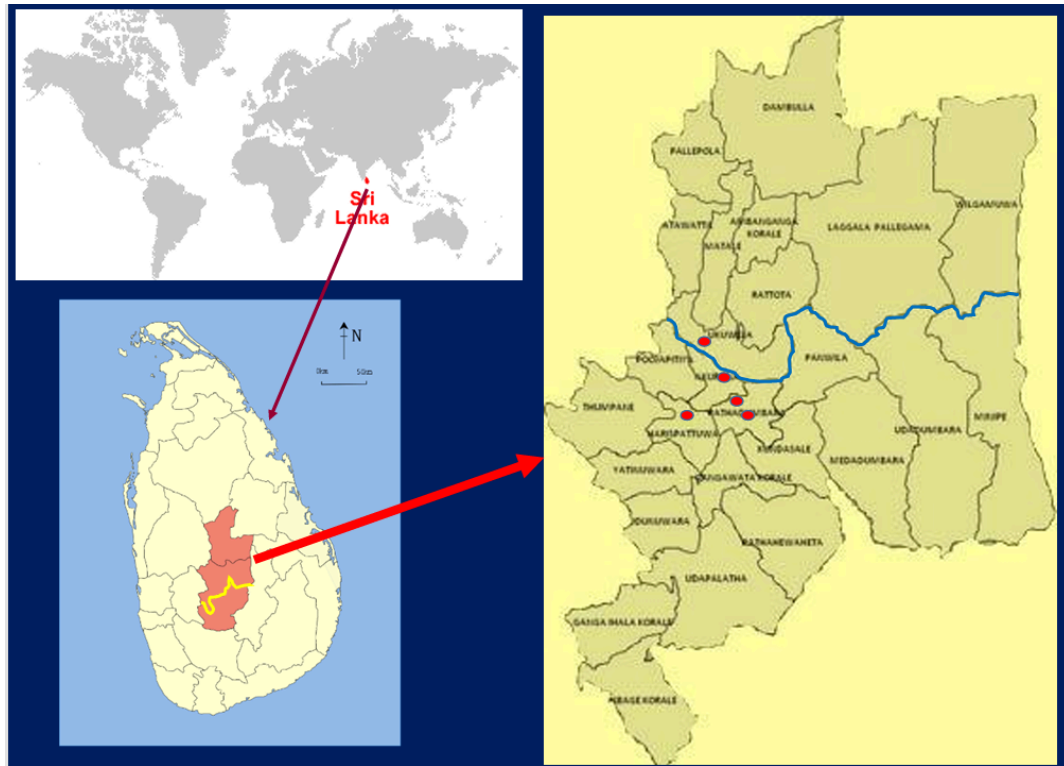
Jataka stories, depicting Gautama Buddha's previous lives are prominent features in Buddhist murals. At Uttamarama PV, a laywoman served as the patron for a panel depicting the *Ummagga Jātaka*, a well-known Jataka story. The donative inscription of the painting introduces her as "Daso Upasaka Amma," or lay mother Daso. In the low-country, female patrons were particularly recognized for commissioning murals of the *Ummagga Jātaka*, which features an astute woman. Thus, the inclusion of the *Ummagga Jātaka* in both Ranvella PV and Uttamarama PV indicates that women's involvement in patronage influenced the themes or subjects represented in the image house (Karunarathna, 2015).

### **Materials: collective patronage at the temples in this study**

This research focuses on Buddhist temples built or renovated during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily examining five traditional up-country temples located in the Kandy and Matale districts within the Central Province of Sri Lanka (Figure 1). Four of these temples, located in the Kandy District, are Garakmedilla RMV, Anuragala RMV, Kullaketuwa PV, Malagammana RMV; while the Polkotuwa PV is located in the Matale District (Figure 1 and 2). These temples are situated in rural villages, distant from major political centers and urban areas. Additionally, all temples, with the exception of the Malagammana Temple, are overlooked and neglected by



archaeologists and art historians and not featured prominently as major religious or tourist attractions.



**Figure 1.** Map showing locations of the selected temples



Garakmedilla RMV



Anuragala RMV



Kullaketuwa PV



Malagammana RMV



Polkotuwa PV

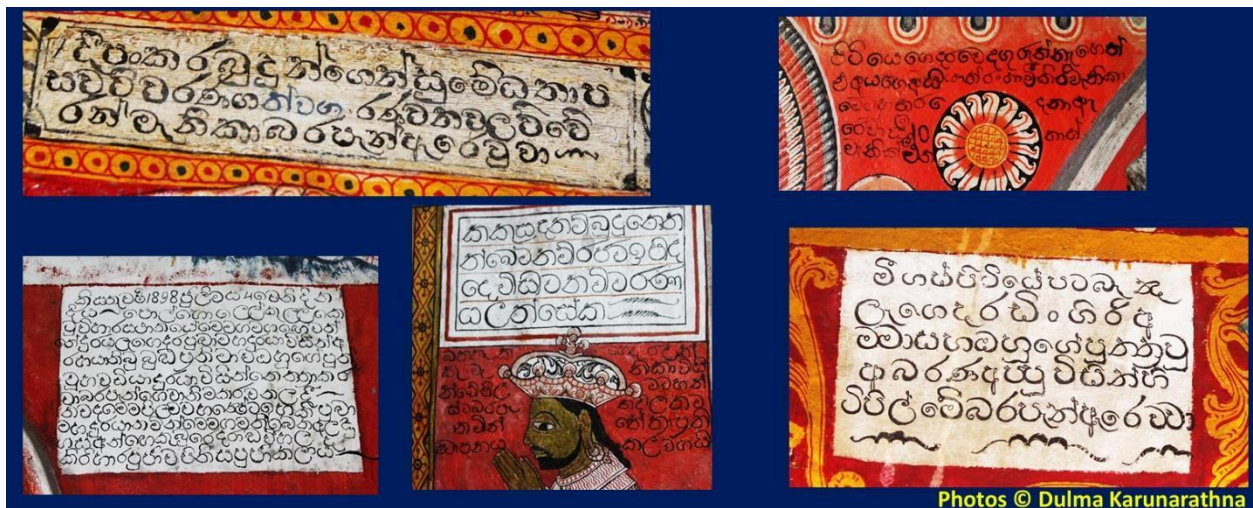
Photo © Dulma Karunarathna

**Figure 2.** Image houses from the selected temples

Tracing the names of temple donors in Sri Lanka is rare, typically found only in written vouchers or royal decrees linked to temples built by kings or elites. The donative inscriptions studied here are largely overlooked, undocumented, and remain unpublished components of Sri Lankan Buddhist art history (Karunarathna 2015, 2019, 2020).

For this study, primary data was gathered through observational field visits conducted in 2012, 2016, and 2017. The five temples selected, appear to have been built collaboratively through many small individual donations. The donative inscriptions (Figure 3) linked to the selected temples' murals were identified and analyzed as primary sources for a comparative assessment. Donative inscriptions appear at the entrance doorway, above, below, or beside the narrative panel, inscribed in old Sinhalese script from the late 19th - early 20th century CE. The inscriptions are painted in black, sometimes containing grammatical and typographic errors, revealing the literacy levels of the village artists creating the murals and inscriptions.

Most painting registers, excluding the Garakmedilla temple, were painted by anonymous donors, indicating their desire for silent patronage. The descriptions within these inscriptions include details about the donor's name, family, household, village name, amount donated (in shillings at the Anuragala temple), and social status, offering insights into the social hierarchy and social dynamics of that time.



**Figure 3.** Donative inscriptions from the selected five temples: I-Garakmedilla RMV, II-Anuragala PV, III-Kullaketuva PV, IV-Malagammana RMV, V-Polkotuwa PV

The mural paintings on the walls and ceilings of image houses (e.g., Figure 4) serve a decorative and religious communication purpose and are a distinct element of



this tradition. Horizontal painted bands segment the shrine's walls, allowing continuous narrative stories to unfold smoothly, with the paintings acting as a visual narrative. The themes of the mural paintings of the selected temples are the life of the Buddha, including Suwasi Wiwarana—the twenty-four proclamations from past Buddhas affirming the Bodhisattva (the future Buddha) as the chosen Buddha; Sat Sati—illustrating the seven weeks post-enlightenment; Dasa Bodhisattva (the ten Bodhisattvas); Vessantara Jataka; and the sixteen essential religious sites that the Buddha visited (Karunarathna, 2015).



**Figure 4.** Painting registers on the wall, Malagamman Temple. (© Dulma Karunarathna)

To analyze the nature of patronage, a wide range of material including cultural data, literary (religious) texts, and epigraphical data, records external to Sri Lanka (colonial records), and oral history sources were accessed. The five selected temples are described below.

#### *Garakmedilla Raja Maha Vihara*

The Garakmedilla RMV is a Buddhist temple located in the village of Arambepola, Harispattu, in the Kandy District. The old image house on this site was built under the royal patronage of King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, serving as a Tempita Vihara Lawrie (1898). Although the mural within is now in ruins, the temple continues to exude magnificence. Lawrie further mentions that the temple was abandoned and reconstructed in 1812. The second image house, located next to the old one, is a modest single-storey structure in a simple design. Despite the absence of royal endorsement, the artist decorated the inner wall at the entrance with a portrayal of the king and Venerable Saranankara (a leading Buddhist monk of the time), adhering to historical customs. Insufficient evidence exists to determine as to why a second-image house was constructed without further renovations to the old one. Perhaps the temple authority aimed to maintain the old royal temple, while accommodating new patrons by approving the new image house. The walls of the shrine in the new image house feature horizontal painting strips that create a continuous narration of 31 scenes depicting Buddhist themes. This site lists the names of 29 out of 31 donors, with a remarkable number of 26 female donors prominently commissioning the temple murals. As stated in the inscriptions, the donors from the village of Arambepola and neighbouring areas, including Harasgama, Ranavana, Nagolla, Makulloluwa, Aweriela, Arambewatta, Alawathugoda, Aswedduma, and Ganhatha, came together for this community activity that is meant to confer merits.

#### *Anuragala Raja Maha Vihara*

This Buddhist temple is situated in Jambugahapitiya, Patha Dumbara, in the Kandy District. The image house, originally constructed in 1862 by two brothers, underwent renovations led by a Buddhist monk and the family of a local Indigenous medical practitioner (“Vedra”) (Lawrie, 1898). The temple is quite large, featuring two storeys. The paintings reflect the traditional Kandyan village style. The walls of the shrine contain three horizontal strips of paintings and two decorative strips that together illustrate a continuous narrative of Buddhist themes across 56 scenes. Forty-two panels were contributed anonymously, while 14 include the names and details of their donors. Most inscriptions indicate the amount donated in shillings,

providing insight into the currency used at that time and the potential cost of a painting. This temple showcases collaborative donations from men, women, and family members. Furthermore, many inscriptions also detail the occupations of the donors. These inscriptions mention donors from the village of Jambugahapitiya and neighbouring areas, including Bokalawela, Kajugahakotuwa, Pitiyegedara, Hentenna, Tittadeniya, Nugapola, Udatta, Meddegoda, and Warakadeniya supported this activity.

#### *Kullaketuwa Purana Vihara*

This village temple is situated on the Doragamuwa Road in Polgolla, Kandy District. It embodies the unique Kandyan village art style. Established in 1898, the temple features a small image house constructed by various local families. The temple has an oblong shape, with its longer dimensions adorned by 30 paintings, while the remaining two walls display large artworks from two donors, totalling 32 painting panels. Most of these panels were donated anonymously, although four donors included their names and details. The inscriptions reveal the village names, social statuses, and a family name that shows a connection to the low-country and colonial influence in Sri Lanka. As mentioned in the inscriptions, the donors from the village of Polgolla and neighbouring areas, including Ganewatta, Ranavana, Hurikaduwa, and Dembatagolla, came together for this collaborative activity.

#### *Malagammana Raja Maha Vihara*

The Malagammana Temple is situated in Malagammana, Nugawela, in the Yatinuwara region of the Kandy District. This temple has a rich history and has long been a site of royal patronage. The original image house was destroyed by the Portuguese and Dutch, prompting a renovation request in 1868 (Lawrie, 1898). The restoration efforts for the mural paintings were funded by local elites, including the Nugawela Ratamahattaya, his sons, and local villagers. Most of the artwork inside the old image house originates from a renovation in the late 19th century CE. The outer walls and the shrine situated behind the main shrine feature murals from the early 20th century CE. When compared to the other four temples, the paintings in this temple closely resemble classical Kandyan styles. This royal temple attracts greater scholarly and spiritual interest than others in the area. The artwork at Malagammana RMV is primarily spread across three walls, encompassing 43 panels; 37 were anonymously donated, while six had identified donors. Among these six contributions, three were commissioned as individual donations by women, while the remaining three were joint donations from both men and women. The inscriptions note that donors from the

village of Malagammana and nearby areas, such as Nugawela, Kulugammana, Welagedara, and Kurukude, joined for this meritorious initiative.

### *Polkotuwa Purana Vihara*

The Polkotuwa Temple is located in Tenna, in the Matale District, adjacent to the Kandy District border and in relative proximity to the other four selected temples. As noted by Lawrie (1898), the villagers constructed the Polkotuwa PV image house in 1835. This image house features an inner shrine adorned with paintings on both the outer wall of the inner shrine and the inner walls of the main shrine. The paintings are considerably large, with each wall displaying only two horizontal strips of artwork. A total of 15 painting panels are present, six of which were contributed by anonymous donors, while nine were donations from both men and women, either individually or jointly. Notably, some panels were created through the collective patronage of the entire village. These paintings reflect the unique village style. The inscriptions indicate that contributors from the village of Tenna and surrounding regions, including Kalavitigoda, Wattegedara, Gomagoda, Ovilla, Sapugoda, Dombagasdeniya, Henepola, and Tibbatuwawa, collaborated in this community work.

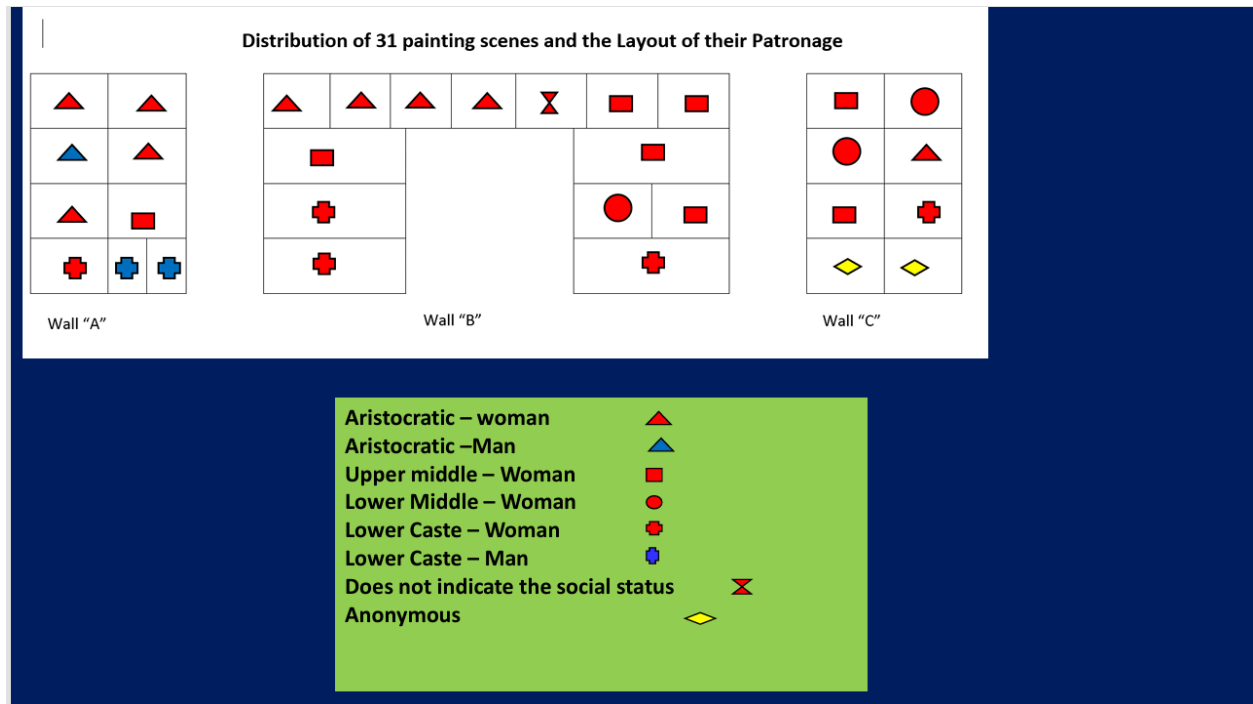
## **Methods and analysis**

A variety of methods and techniques were employed in this case study approach. Observational field visits were conducted to explore over a hundred temples in the Kandy and Matale Districts (2012, 2016, 2017). Notably, these five temples are the only sites that feature such donative inscriptions. The details regarding each temple's location (village, area, district) were identified and mapped on a Central Province map (Figure 1). The close proximity of the five temples indicates a collective patronage zone. Historical texts related to the respective temples were comparatively studied, and the houses and ten villagers from the selected five villages, representing various social statuses, were interviewed. Interestingly, the relatives of the donors still reside in the temple villages. For instance, individuals with the family name Wariga Jeshta Mudiyansele live near the Garakmedilla Temple and confirmed that the donors, Wariga Dehetti Mudiyansele, are their ancestors.

This study utilizes a theoretical framework that integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods. The shrine room and wall structures were observed and drafted by hand, with all painting strips and panels numbered and marked accordingly. The names of the painting panels were determined from the inscriptions associated with each panel, and a comparative approach was used when labels were absent, erased,



or omitted. Jataka stories were particularly prominent among the narrative stories related to Kandyan temples. Notably, none of the five selected temples features a single Jataka story. Donations were categorized based on several criteria: single contributions, joint contributions, men, women, couples, and family or village members. Personal names, family names, and house names were compiled separately. Additionally, various occupations such as teachers, Indigenous medical practitioners, craftspeople, blacksmiths, and dhobies (washer caste) along with their social statuses were identified from the inscriptions. Village names mentioned in the donations were mapped for each temple and cross-referenced with Lawrie's Central Province *Gazetteer*. This analysis offers insights into service villages within the Kandyan feudal society and sheds light on the social status of individuals. Panels were marked with symbols, distinguished by colours and shapes, corresponding to the donors' sex, social status, and the nature of their contributions (Figure 5).

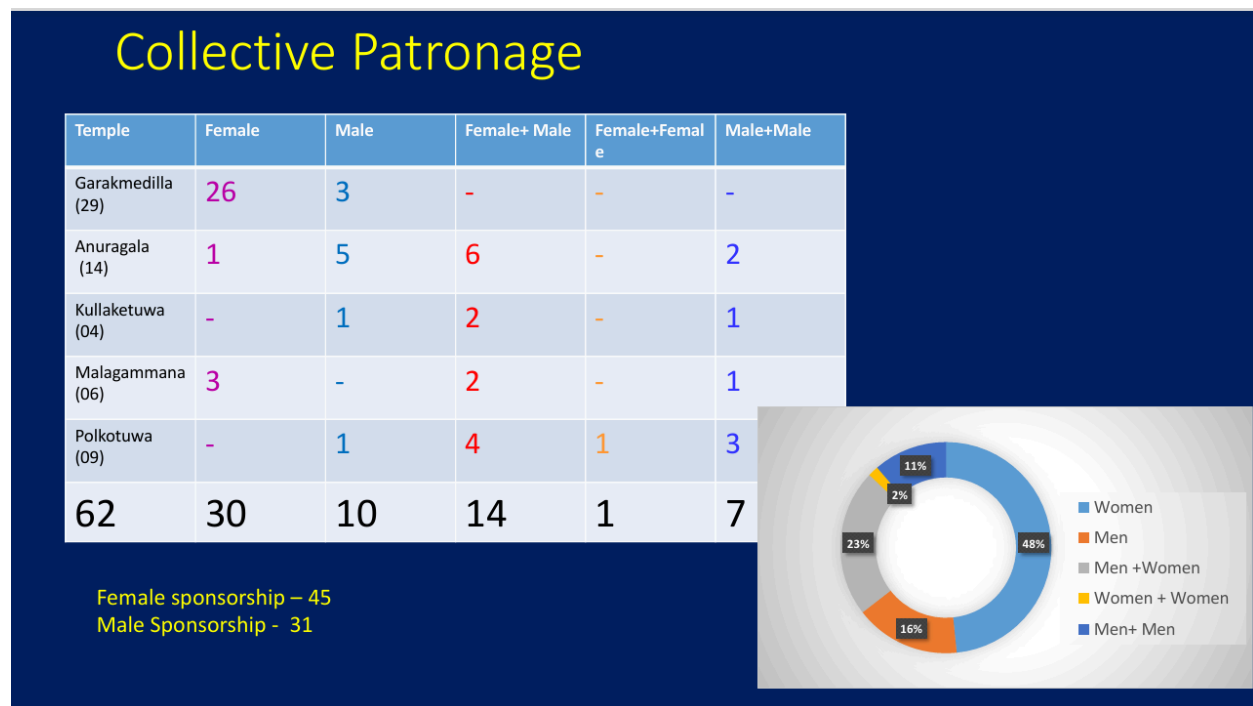


**Figure 5.** Distribution of painting panels: gender and social status of the patrons of Garakmedilla Temple.

Ultimately, this study provides an analysis in social archaeology concerning gender and social hierarchy in the late 19th - early 20th century in the central region of Sri Lanka.

## Results and Discussion

In this exploration of collective patronage across the five selected temples, there are at least 62 donative inscriptions linked to approximately 88 distinct patrons (Table 1). Not every mural panel includes these donative inscriptions, and many anonymous donors have chosen to keep their identities private. The inscriptions that identify specific donors come from all five sites, with 29 from Garakmedilla RMV, 14 from Anuragala RMV, 4 from Kullaketuwa PV, 6 from Malagamma, and 9 from Polkotuwa. These include 30 individual donations from women, 10 from men, 14 joint donations from both genders, 10 from women along with another woman, and 4 collaborations among men. A significant finding from the data shows that women contribute 48% of total donations, while men account for 16%. Joint contributions between men and women make up 23%, with female-only donations at 11%, and joint male donations at 2%. Notably, none of these 62 inscriptions refer to royalty.



**Table 1.** Collective patronage and gender

The table and graph above (Table 1) demonstrate that female donors can be categorized as sole donors of a painting panel, joint contributors with a man, or with other women. Female sponsorship is notably greater in these temples. This study indicates that many donations were frequently made jointly by husbands and wives, and several painting panels were often supported by family members or individuals

from the same village. Since the village name is included in the donative inscription, it can be inferred that the majority of donors likely lived nearby. The most remarkable finding from the data is the presence of exclusive female patronage.

The analysis of donative inscriptions and their distribution shows that family members or individuals from the same village often collaborated to fund sets of consecutive painting panels on the same wall. Additionally, a panel of Polkotuwa Temple was commissioned by all residents from three specific villages, Tibbatuwawa, Henepola and Dombagasdeniya. The majority of donors were found in the surrounding area. Occasionally, donors mention their past professions. These inscriptions reflect a range of occupations, including Indigenous medical practitioners or healers, teachers, village headmen, artists, craftsmen, Dobi men and women, blacksmiths, and service workers from various nearby villages.

In the outstanding case study of Garakmedilla RMV, the evidence indicates that donors from aristocratic, upper-middle, and lower social levels, as well as individuals classified as lower castes, have commissioned mural representations. Notably, women, totalling 26, significantly outnumber the male donors (three), and two additional anonymous contributors to the murals are identified. These quantifications testify the active participation of women in religious venues and temple patronage. The establishment of religious sites and practices during this period occurred under the guidance of royalty and aristocracy. Women from craft and service backgrounds, including those marginalized as "untouchables," had also wished to express their religious devotion by supporting the arts. Importantly, the arrangement of paintings and their contextual placements reflect the prevailing social hierarchy. The shrine walls feature four horizontal strips of paintings, with the top panel, which dominates the visual landscape, funded by elite women. In contrast, the lower panel features murals funded by men and women of lower caste status. Families from the Ranawana Walauva (manor house) and their relatives demonstrated their social status by sponsoring most of the painting panels on one wall. In contrast, the lowest panel contains murals funded by women of lower-caste status. This visual arrangement reveals the lived reality of the existing social hierarchical system and the efforts of elite groups to uphold social stratification, even amidst a waning feudal system.

At the Garakamedilla RMV, among the mural patrons, villagers and residents from nearby areas can be identified. This RMV, located in Arambepola, is approximately eight miles from Kandy on the Matale road. The Harasgama Walauva is a prominent aristocratic family manor in this region, and Harasgama Walauve Bandara Manika, a member of this family, sponsored one of the temple panels (Karunarathna, 2015). Lawrie (1988) notes that the Harasgama family belonged to the Dugganna rank (ombudspersons of the king/concubines), further elaborating their higher status (p. 331).

Temple patronage also shows women from a variety of social strata including non-elites: a woman from a blacksmith's family, two washerwomen, a woman from a honey-producing village, and two men from service families. It is noteworthy that individuals considered to be non-elite participated in such collective religious efforts and could afford to make donations. The reforms and shifts in the traditional feudal system in Kandy, which occurred during the British colonial rule, may have contributed to this phenomenon. Christian missionary Selkirk recorded an incident from 1836 during the Christmas festival, stating that "low-caste girls had been permitted to sit with high-caste girls and were even served coffee in cups previously used by others" (Mettananda, 1990, p. 60). Many foreign accounts highlight how colonial administration empowered women and those outside the aristocracy (Mettananda, 1990, p. 60). This dismantling of previous oppressive systems can largely be viewed as a positive outcome of colonial governance, creating a more 'emancipated' environment for women and commoners. However, the emergence of women making donations warrants further investigation, as it was not highly prevalent in the 18th and 19th-century Kandy (Karunarathna, 2015). Similarly, this situation evokes the same female enthusiasm seen in the Mihintale Early Brahmi Inscription from the 3rd century BCE (Paranavitana 1970).

Lawrie observed that the male line of the Harasgama family had died by the end of the 19th century, a situation faced by many families due to the colonial administration's assassination of thousands of aristocratic men who opposed colonial rule. Wimalananda (1970) discusses the painful experiences of the Great Rebellion of 1818, which was the first war of independence against the British colonial government, and how the rebellion of 1848 devastated village life with the loss of men in the up-country region. Consequently, women from various social castes had to step up as patrons of Buddhism during the late colonial period. This serves as a contextual factor for female patronage at the second image house of Garakmedilla RMV, highlighting women's potential to act as activists of Buddhism and the collective responsibility enacted by women.

As mentioned earlier, women's involvement in religious donations is reflected in both literary and archaeological records. Women contributed various types of donations, including land and paddy fields, to temples. Additionally, some women funded the construction of temples, adorned them with murals, and facilitated renovations. The murals from the late 19th century at Gangarama MV in Galle, coastal Sri Lanka, uniquely illustrate women's patronage in establishing Buddhist religious structures (Figure 6). This evidence demonstrates women's role as active patrons of Buddhism, the freedom to donate that they exercised, their access to property, and their economic independence, while actively engaging in the Buddhist practice of listening to religious teachings and discourses.





**Figure 6.** Female patron depicted in the Gangarama Temple, Galle District (© Dulma Karunarathna)

## Conclusion

The religious spaces and observances during the late 19th-early 20th century CE were largely supported by royalty and aristocrats. In contrast, the image house was built through contributions from ordinary villagers, exemplifying collective patronage that extended beyond the elite. This research highlights village and peasant art traditions in Sri Lanka that were obscured by history, particularly showcasing the concept of collective patronage found in rural areas. The construction of image houses was driven by the generosity of the commoners, as evidenced by numerous inscriptions related to their donations. This finding is also supported by textual sources. The highest number of donors likely came from the surrounding areas. An analysis of the inscriptions *in situ* indicates that several painting panels were typically donated by individuals from the same family or by people from the same village. Thus, the spatial scope of the study can be identified as a "collective patronage zone".

The patrons of these murals originate from various social classes, exhibiting regional differences. People from crafts and service families, including marginalized communities (untouchables), were patrons of art. The arrangement of the paintings and their locations illustrates the existing social hierarchy. The visual display of hierarchy in the panels reveals the reality of the prevailing social hierarchy and underscores the efforts of elite groups to uphold the social gradation, within a waning feudal order. However, the involvement of donors from lower castes unprecedentedly indicates that marginalized communities were also keen on expressing their religiosity as patrons of Buddhist art.

In this study, temple murals are seen to vibrantly illustrate the active involvement of women in practicing their religious faith by contributing to the arts. Women from

various social backgrounds appear to demonstrate their economic independence that facilitates their charitable contributions and reflects the relative religious and social freedom they experienced. Women's engagement in charitable activities with their access to property and the economic autonomy they enjoyed can be discerned by revealing their role as active patrons of Buddhism and their potential as champions to protect Buddhism that faced colonial threats. This study highlights collective female action and responsibility that extend beyond traditional roles limited to the domestic sphere. As well, we identify historical social trends that will serve as reminders to empower modern Lankan women and women globally. Collective and proactive temple patronage studied here can offer us valuable insights into alternative societies of the past. This study exemplifies practices that showcase how individuals from diverse social strata interacted, offering insights into how marginalized communities have reconciled and coexisted in relative harmony.

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