



# Stone, Symbol, and Leisure: A Reassessment of Geometric Symbols on the Stone-Paved Terrace of Jetavana Stupa, Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

This paper examines the presence and potential function of geometric symbols engraved on the stone-paved terrace of the Jetavana stupa in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. Despite their frequent appearance in sacred architecture, the purpose of these symbols remains illusive. Scholars have speculated symbolic associations with fertility, menstruation, phallic and yonic symbols, birth, and *yantra*. Yet such interpretations lack robust archaeological or textual support. Through a comparative archaeological field study of geometric symbols located in the South Indian Hindu shrine of Mahabalipuram and the Jain monastic complex of Shravanabelagola, this research offers an alternative understanding of the engravings at Jetavana. The analysis suggests that these symbols are not ritualistic or religious, rather representing traditional board games, many of which are still played in South Asia today. This interpretation is supported by the spatial placement of the engravings. They are often located in peripheral areas of monastic architecture, where craftspeople may have gathered during breaks. Examples from religious sites of Mahabalipuram and Shravanabelagola in South India have comparable symbols to those at the stone-paved terrace of Jetavana, lending strong support to this interpretation. Ultimately, this study argues that these engravings reflect the social and occupational dimensions of ancient stone artisans' lives, rather than serving any overt religious or symbolic function. This research, with a focus on a specific region, contributes towards an appreciation of the labour of the creators of monumental architecture and the social elements of play embedded within the architectural landscapes of ancient complex societies.

**Keywords:** South Asia, Anuradhapura, board games, stone carving, monumental architecture

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## Introduction

The stupa, a dome-shaped building used to house relics, is arguably one of the most significant architectural features in Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture (Paranavitana 1946). The *Salapathala Maluwa*, a stone-paved terrace that encircles the stupa, is an important architectural component of stupas. Receiving its name denoting a pavement constructed using stone slabs, these terraces provide a smooth and structured surface for religious processions, circumambulation around the stupa, and other rituals (Paranavitana 1946). Beyond their usefulness as walkways, these stone-paved terraces are also known for the presence of curious geometric symbols engraved on parts of these surfaces.

The focus of this study is on the geometric symbols observed at the Jetavana stupa's stone-paved terrace, Jetavana monastic site in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. The Jetavana stupa was built in the 3rd century CE during the reign of King Mahasen (Paranavitana 1946), with its associated stone-paved terrace spread over 576 square feet (Seneviratna, 1994). Along with other symbols, geometric symbols appear on the stone-paved terrace of the stupa. These geometric symbols attract significant attention because of their positional and immaculately engraved nature. These isolated geometric symbols do not appear to be directly linked to their contemporary art and architectural features or inscriptions.

## Methodology

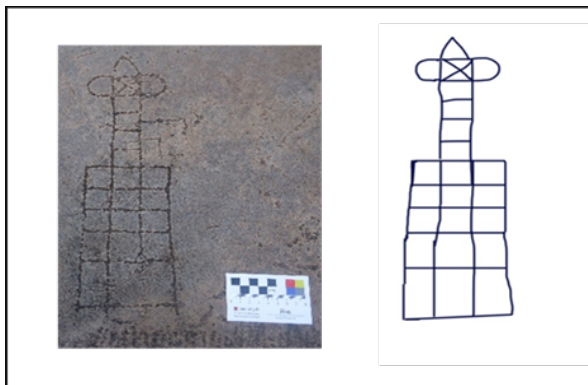
This study used primary data collected through on-site documentation of the geometric symbols engraved on the stone-paved terrace of the Jetavana Stupa over a two-week fieldwork period. The documentation process included systematic photography and the positional recording of each symbol. This dataset was complemented by targeted field visits to Hindu and Jain rock-cut cave temples at Mahabalipuram and Shravanabelagola in South India, where comparable geometric engravings were recorded over two weeks, following the same documentation protocol to ensure analytical consistency.

The analysis employed a comparative archaeological framework that integrated formal visual analysis, iconographic comparison, and contextual interpretation. Cross-site comparisons were carried out to identify patterns of similarity and divergence. By examining the symbols found at these non-Buddhist sites and comparing them with those in Sri Lanka, the study seeks to explore whether these symbols were part of broader cultural traditions in South Asia, potentially serving a common function across different religious contexts.

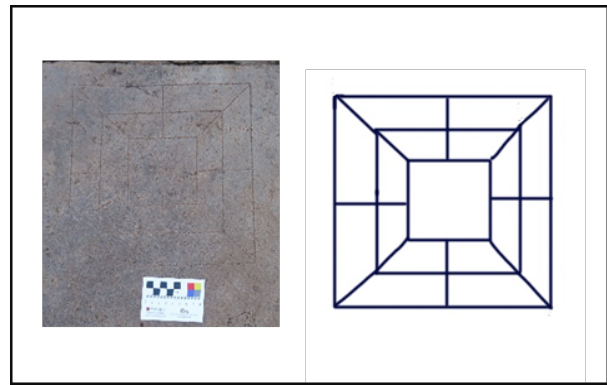
## Exploring the function of geometric symbols at religious sites

The geometric symbols found on the stone-paved terraces of stupas in Sri Lanka have long been a subject of scholarly debate (Chandavimala, 1997; Hettiarachchi, 2013; Saddananda, 2017). The interpretations have often linked these symbols to religious or ritualistic meanings, such as fertility, phallic and yonic symbols, birth, phallic and menstrual cycles, yonic and birth symbolism, and representations of *yantra* (Chandavimala, 1997; Hettiarachchi, 2013; Saddananda 2017). However, no concrete evidence has yet emerged to confirm their significance within the religious framework of the stupa.

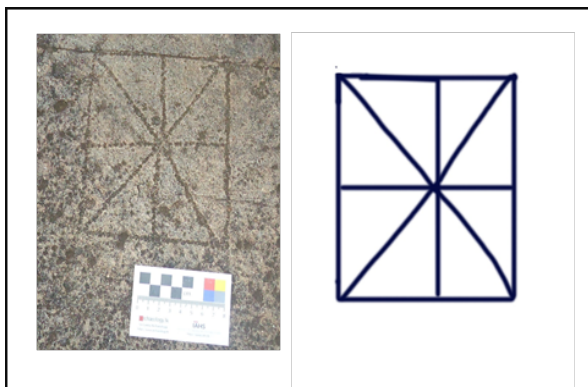
One of the most striking findings of this study is the lack of any direct connection between the geometric symbols on the stone-paved terraces and the architectural features or inscriptions within the stupa complexes. The symbols are scattered across the terraces without any clear relationship to ritual spaces, altars, or sacred motifs. They do not appear in any inscriptions that would link them to Buddhist religious elements, further supporting the idea that these symbols were not intended for ritual purposes. The absence of any religious association sets these symbols apart from other, more formally integrated, elements of the stupa. The following seven images (Figure 1 - a - g) show the geometric symbols found in the stone-paved terrace of Jetavana Stupa.



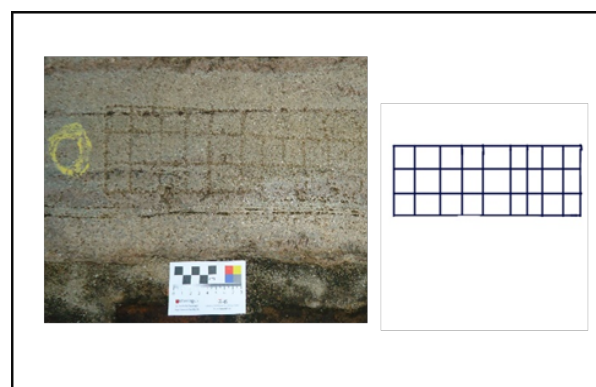
(Figure 1a)



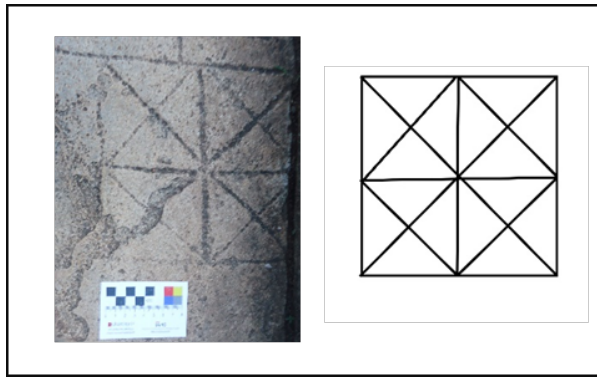
(Figure 1b)



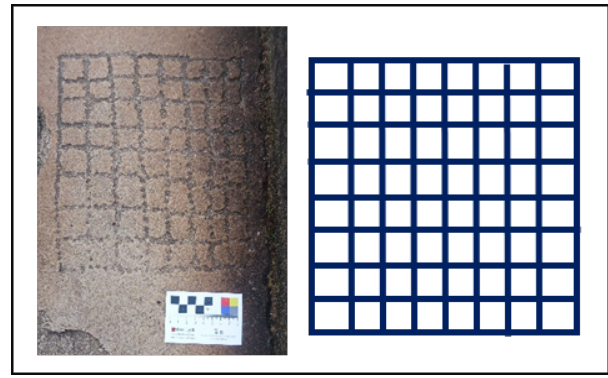
(Figure 1c)



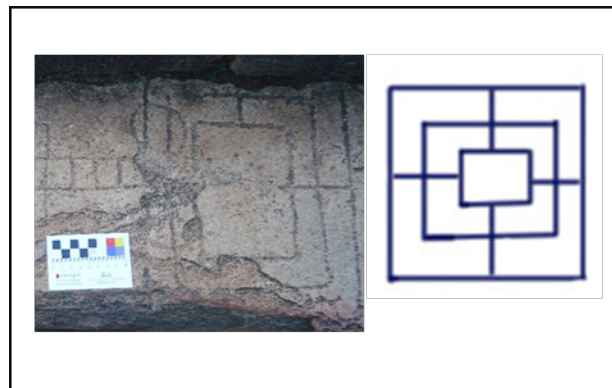
(Figure 1d)



(Figure 1e)



(Figure 1f)



(Figure 1g)

**Figure 1 (a - g).** Geometric Symbols carved on the stone pavement of Jetavana Stupa, with line drawings of each

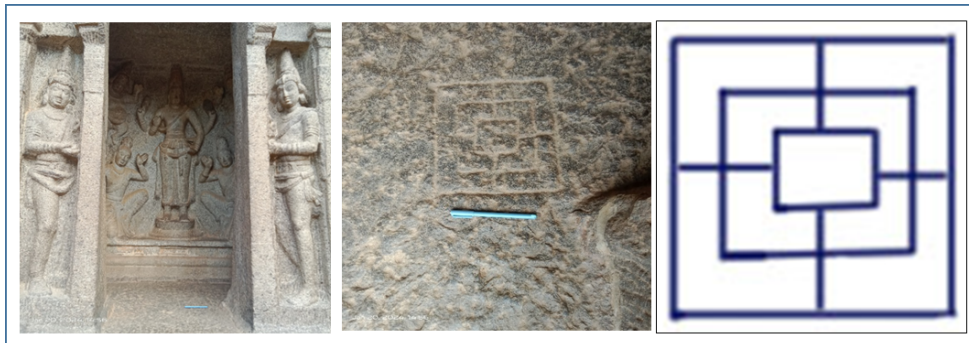
The absence of these geometric symbols in any formal religious context, combined with their similarity to board game patterns, leads to the conclusion that these symbols were likely created as a form of entertainment for those who spent long hours working at the site. The stone slabs laid in the stone-paved terrace of the Jetavana stupa were probably cut and polished elsewhere before being placed on the terrace. While the work was ongoing, this long-term activity may have led the artisans to engrave board games onto the stone slabs in their work environment, to play, while on breaks or leisure time. However, when the slabs were transported and installed in their set location on the stupa terrace or steps, the engraved board games would also have inadvertently remained. The haphazard nature of the positioning of these symbols in various areas point to this explanation.

While this study focuses on symbols on the terrace of Jetavana stupa, the stairs to the Jetavana stupa and other locations within the monastic complex and other monastic sites such as Abhayagiriya also have such symbols: on the east entrance staircase of Jetavana stupa, the stairway near the 'Sadakadapahana' (moonstone), and on the stone slab near the second Samadhi statue at the Abhayagiri Buddhist monastic site also in Anuradhapura.



Similar geometric symbols are reported in Hindu and Jain temples in southern India, such as at the rock-cut cave complexes in Mahabalipuram in Tamil Nadu and Shravanabelagola in Karnataka (Figure 2 - 4). In these temples, the symbols appear in non-ritual spaces such as on steps, in shaded areas, or on peripheral surfaces. A key observation that emerged from this study is the strategic placement of the symbols on the pavements. In most instances, these symbols are found in shaded locations that are less exposed to harsh sunlight. For example, in Mahabalipuram, beneath Krishana's butter ball and inside the rock-cut caves (Figure 2 and 3) and inside *mandapas* and rock-cut caves in Shravanabelagola (Figure 4). These share positional similarities with the symbols found in the stone-paved terrace of Jetavana Stupa in Sri Lanka.

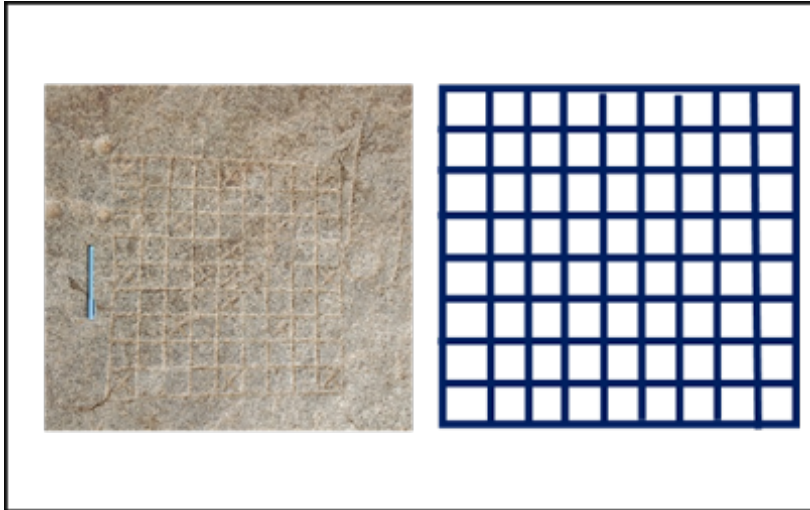
The craftspeople and other workers involved in the construction of these monumental sites may have used these spaces during their breaks to engage in leisure activities, such as playing board games.



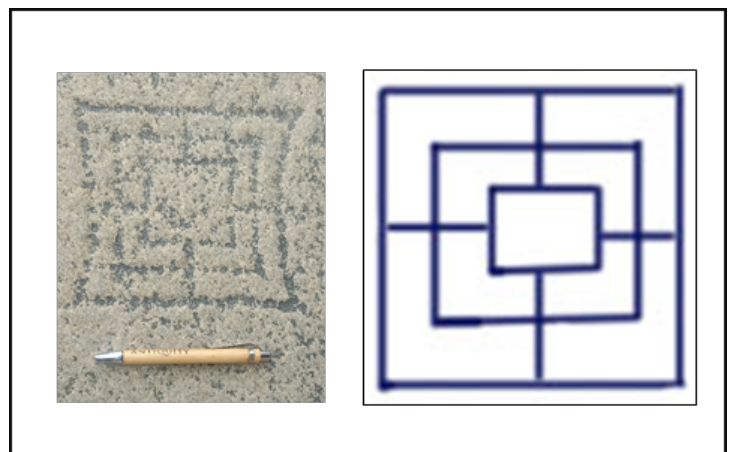
**Figure 2.** A geometric symbol located inside a triple cell rock cut shrine (adjacent to “Gopi’s churn”), Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu



**Figure 3.** A geometric symbol on the edge of Gopi's Churn, Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu



**Figure 4.** A geometric symbol under the granite boulder “Krishna’s butterball”, Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu



**Figure 5.** Shravanabelagola Jain Temple in Karnataka and a geometric symbol from the site

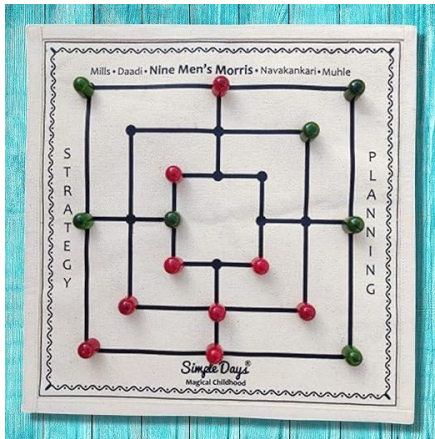
The similarities of these geometric symbols across different religious contexts shed light on aspects that may not have been exclusive to any one tradition, but were part of a commonly shared material culture and associated social elements of play. These cross-cultural parallels suggest that these symbols held secular meaning and significance that fall beyond what is encompassed in particular religious traditions. It is clear that these symbols were part of broad South Asian cultural practices.

Interestingly, the above symbols located in South India closely resemble patterns used in existing traditional board games, such as Pakida (Kerala), Navakankari and Pachisi (South India). These games are practised in some parts of South India even today (Figure 6 - 8) and often involve grid-like designs that could have easily been created on stone slabs in ancient times.

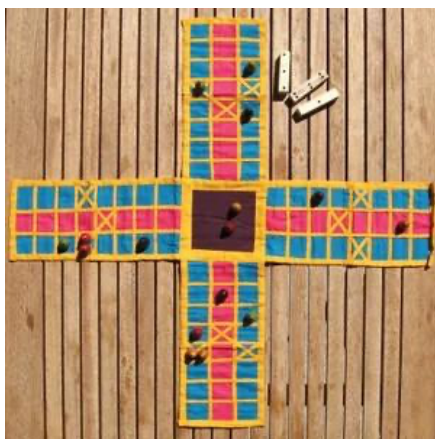


**Figure 6.** People playing Pakida at the University of Kerala premises, Kerala, India (March 19, 2025)





**Figure 7.** Navakankari: “Nine Men’s Morris” traditional Indian board game  
<https://share.google/MwiNFa1rj7YvCNsNO>



**Figure 8.** Pachisi, a board game for four players (partially representative of Figure 1a in this study)  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pachisi>

## Conclusion

The study of geometric symbols on the stone-paved terrace of Jetavana stupa in Sri Lanka has shed light on their function and cultural significance in contemporary society. Scholars of Sri Lankan archaeology have interpreted these symbols as religious or ritualistic markers earlier, but this research challenges such assumptions. Nevertheless, in the peninsular Indian context, such geometric symbols, commonly found engraved on stone surfaces in temples and monastic complexes, are interpreted as board game designs (Rogersdotter, 2015; Gawli et al., 2021).

The comparative study of similar symbols found in Hindu and Jain rock-cut temples in South India and Buddhist monastic sites in Sri Lanka suggests that the geometric patterns were not unique to Buddhist architecture in Sri Lanka but were part of a broader cultural tradition that transcended religious boundaries in ancient South Asia. The scope of this research does not encompass a global analysis, rather a regional study. Further research and global archaeological comparisons are warranted as board games are associated with interactive elements of play in liminal spaces within complex societies of the past (Crist, 2019). There are no specific extant board games in Sri Lanka where a clear connection to past geometric engravings and practices can be traced. Yet, similar board games and variations are practised even today in South India. This connection can be the impetus for future studies in ethnoarchaeology associated with the material culture encompassing board games of the region.



The absence of any direct connection between the symbols at Jetavana and religious rituals, along with their arbitrary placement on the stone-paved terrace, strongly indicates that they were not intended for spiritual or symbolic purposes. Instead, they seem to reflect a social and recreational function. It is clear that these engravings have been used as leisure activities in the form of board games, by the craftspeople and labourers who were directly involved in the construction of large architectural features. Furthermore, this study illuminates the everyday life and cultural practices of the people who built and interacted with these monuments. Rulers and aristocrats are honoured in historic chronicles as the patrons who “built” large monuments. However, these geometric engravings appear to have left an indelible signature of the people who actually provided the labour and skills to build such monuments.

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