

Panel II: The Illustrated Kitchen

Dr. Dulma Karunaratna

WAS THE KITCHEN SOLELY A WOMAN'S DOMAIN IN PRE-MODERN SRI LANKA? A SOCIO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF BUDDHIST TEMPLE MURALS

Abstract:

For centuries, domestic activities in general and the tasks at kitchen in particular have generally been assigned to women in many different cultures around the world. Food preparation is one of the gendered tasks universally assigned to women, and the kitchen where they prepare food is seen as a gendered space. The aim of this paper is to understand whether the Sri Lankan artists also reinforced that firm social ideology in pre-modern social contexts. The murals that embellished the Buddhist temples of pre-modern Sri Lanka were examined as primary sources for a comparative study. Primary data were collected through observational field surveys. This research identifies two kinds of kitchen spaces: household and royal and consequently, attempts to understand whether the artists intended to differentiate tasks as strictly masculine or feminine within these spheres. According literary sources in the time, there are several responsibilities, which were assigned to women by society and denominated as “Women’s work” or “Women’s business” in pre-modern Sri Lanka. Women are often shown in murals performing the task of cooking, which is described as women’s work in texts. One of the notable factors of these cooking scenes is the assistance provided by the husband in the preparation of family meals.

It is prominent that the artists of the time depict a number of scenes associated with royal kitchens. At the same time, the literary sources both local and foreign provided an opportunity to understand the comparative nature of the service of women who worked in the royal kitchen. The mural paintings depict several kitchen scenes where women cook, but they do not exactly show that women prepared food for the king. It is notable that the analysis of workloads borne by kitchen maids, as visualized in murals, also confirms similar activities, such as providing necessities to prepare foods, carrying water and different stages of cooking. Though the literary sources do not highlight the female contribution to serving food, these murals very often

show that serving also was performed by women. Likewise, men are shown being involved in activities such as stirring up the cooking pot and serving. The actual involvement of men in royal kitchen may be a reason for the depiction of male cooks in murals, and this suggests that cooking was not gendered work. The association of both men and women in the royal kitchen is clearly visible in both mural paintings and textual sources. There were gendered services in the kitchen, though these murals also illustrate some shared or common activities performed by both men and women. However, the results of this research convince that cooking was a task performed by both men and women and the kitchen was not solely a gendered space of women within the household.

Biography:

Dr. Dulma Karunaratna, Senior Lecturer, Department of Archaeology, University of Sri Lanka. She has a B.A. (Peradeniya), M.Phil (Peradeniya), Postgraduate certificate in research training (Newcastle, United Kingdom), PhD (Newcastle, United Kingdom). She is a Commonwealth Scholar. Research interests: Ancient Built Environment of South Asia, Architecture and Paintings of South Asia, Social archaeology of gender, Socio-economic history of South Asia, Pre industrial craft and technology. Dulma is an artist, photographer and poet.

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