

Anuradhapura-era Frescoes in the Ancient Cave Temple of Handagalakanda, Kabithigollewa

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This research paper examines the Anuradhapura-era wall paintings found in the cave of the archaeological site known as Handagala Kanda, located near Kabithigollewa. By studying the murals associated with the Handagala Kanda Cave Temple, several unique features can be identified. The objectives of this research are to study the murals of the Handagala Kanda Cave Temple. The research questions focus on determining whether these murals belong to the Anuradhapura period and identifying the classical painting characteristics evident in them. Field studies were used as the primary resource, while literature reviews served as the secondary resource. Visual analysis was employed as the methodology, and both stylistic and content features were examined through iconographic analysis. The cave temple is believed to have been constructed between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE. Murals belonging to two different periods can be observed within the cave. Specifically, two styles of painting-applied over two distinct layers of plaster on the same surface-can be identified. As the original paintings gradually faded, they appear to have been retouched using a very thin layer of lime-mixed plaster. Therefore, the murals can be attributed to two separate eras. Lime-mixed plaster was used for these murals, incorporating a binding medium of lime, sand, and organic fibers. A tripartite composition of plaster components can be recognized in the surviving sections. The remaining imagery includes a male figure in a dancing pose and a red-colored female figure. The research concludes that the murals of the Handagala Kanda Cave Temple, which exhibit early stylistic characteristics, can be interpreted as classical paintings. It can be determined that these murals belong to both the early Anuradhapura period and the 5th century CE

Keywords: Anuradhapura, Color, Paintings, Plaster, Subject matter

Introduction

The *Anuradhapura* period occupies a special place in the study of ancient classical murals in Sri Lanka. Numerous mural sites identified today are attributed to this era. Among them are cave paintings such as those at *Sigiriya*, *Vessagiriya*, *Kotiyagala*, *Gonagolla*, *Hindagala*, and *Situlpawwa*, as well as *Vahalkada* paintings found at *Mihintale's Kantaka Chaitya* and the *Ruwanweli Stupa*. The paintings in the relic chamber (*Dhathu Garbha*) of the small stupa discovered at *Mihintale* are also dated to this period (Wijesekera, 1990, pp.22-23).

Mural paintings belonging to the *Anuradhapura* period are further evident at the archaeological site of *Handagala Kanda* near *Kabithigollewa* (8.556472°N, 80.658412°E). However, compared to the extensive studies conducted on the aforementioned sites, scholarly attention toward the *Handagala Kanda* paintings has been limited. The scarcity of evidence available for analysis has created challenges in researching these murals. Several factors have contributed to this situation: long-term exposure to the natural environment, varying weather conditions (both rainy and dry seasons), damage caused by animals (such as bats and insects), the reduced depth of the cave interior, and the absence of formal conservation efforts.

Due to the lack of public awareness of this site, formal academic research on its paintings has yet to be undertaken. At present, three surviving sections of plaster are identifiable, and several line drawings remain visible. Current scholarship has extensively debated the historical context of these structures, yet a critical gap remains in the integration of material analysis with textual evidence. Previous studies have largely overlooked the physical data embedded within the structures themselves. To address this limitation, the present study examines these surviving features through a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach. By synthesizing literary references and written evidence with a rigorous material analysis of plaster composition, pigments, line quality, and thematic content, this research bridges the divide between textual history and physical conservation, offering a more holistic

understanding of the site's evolution. This research paper has been prepared through an in-depth study of the frescoes associated with the ancient cave temple on *Handagala Kanda* Mountain.

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Literary Factors and Documentary or Record Evidence

The *Handagala Kanda* temple complex is not limited to cave dwellings alone; it also includes a stupa, an image house, a monastery, a *pohoya-geya* (chapel), and several other Buddhist structures. During the *Anuradhapura* period, this cave temple appears to have been a well-developed and prosperous monastic center reserved for the use of Buddhist monks. However, due to repeated South Indian invasions, the shift of the capital to other regions, and the subsequent depopulation of *Anuradhapura*, the *Handagala Kanda* complex gradually fell into decline and disuse. Evidence suggests that the site underwent a phase of redevelopment during the *Kandyan* period (Udakandage, 2012, pp.1-2).

Several historical records related to the site originate from the period of British colonial rule. The earliest formal documentation is from 1892 by the first Archaeological Commissioner, *H. C. P. Bell*, who investigated *Handagala Kanda* during his excavation and survey work in the North Central Province (Bell, 1892, pp.7). Although *Bell's* examination of the site lasted only two days and was not an extensive study, his report remains one of the most significant early records of the *Handagala Kanda* cave temple.

In addition, three inscriptions from *Handagala Kanda* were recorded by *Edward Müller* in 1880, and in 1942, *C. W. Nicholas* reported the existence of thirty cave

inscriptions (Weerasekara, 2011). Professor *Senarath Paranavitana* 's Inscriptions of Ceylon Volume I also documents these thirty stone inscriptions (Paranavitana, 1970, pp.10). According to *Nicholas* 's classification (Weerasekara, 2011), fourteen inscriptions date to the 2nd century BCE, fourteen to the 1st century BCE, and two to the 1st century CE.

Materials and Methods

This research was conducted using both field-based and literature-based approaches. Field studies were carried out at the *Handagala Kanda* archaeological site to observe, document, and analyze the existing mural fragments. In addition, secondary data were obtained from the libraries of the National Museum Department and the Department of Archaeology. Final reports prepared by the Chemical Division of the Department of Archaeology were also examined to gather technical and conservation-related information. Furthermore, relevant books, scholarly publications, and credible online resources were consulted to support the analysis and interpretation of the mural paintings.

The Routes

The ancient temple site of *Handagala Kanda* can be accessed through several routes originating from *Anuradhapura*.

The first route runs from *Anuradhapura* to *Medawachchiya* and then to *Kabithigollewa* town, from where *Handagala Kanda* can be reached via the *Kabithigollewa-Ratmalgahawewa* road. The total distance from *Anuradhapura* is approximately 71 km.

The second route also begins in *Anuradhapura* and proceeds to *Medawachchiya*. From there, travelers can reach the *Pihimbijagollewa* Junction on the *Horowpathana* road after approximately 15 km. Turning left at this junction and continuing along the

Ratmalgahawewa road for about 6 km leads to a three-way junction, where a right turn directs visitors toward the *Handagala Kanda* cave temple. The total distance of this route is around 54 km.

The third route begins at *Anuradhapura* and proceeds via the *Rambewa* Junction along the *Ratmalgahawewa* road, covering a total distance of approximately 49 km to the site.

The Geographical Background of the *Handagala Kanda* Cave Temple

The *Handagala Kanda* cave temple is situated around a naturally formed rocky hill. The temple complex lies within the *Handagala Kanda* natural forest reserve, which covers approximately 700 acres. The site is located on a rocky ridge rising about 197 meters (648 feet) above sea level, with the hill itself standing roughly 91 meters (300 feet) above the surrounding terrain.

According to research and excavations conducted by the Department of Archaeology, evidence of 45 naturally formed rock caves has been identified in the area (Weerasekara, 2011). Drip-ledges have been constructed in each of these caves, indicating their adaptation for monastic use. In addition, inscriptions have been found in many of the caves, and these have been the focus of various scholarly studies (Nichols, 1953, pp.221-224). The inscriptions include both pre-Brahmi and Brahmi scripts.

Based on the pre-Brahmi inscriptions, it is assumed that the earliest phase of the temple dates back to the 3rd to 2nd centuries BCE (Paranavitana, 1970, pp.1). However, the exact historical conditions or state patronage that initially supported the establishment of this cave temple remain uncertain. Archaeological evidence confirms that construction and activity occurred in the vicinity of *Handagala Kanda* during multiple historical periods (*Anuradhapura* and *Kandy*), reflecting its long-term significance as a monastic site (Manjula, 2022). The specific archaeological evidence

and historical factors that substantiate the long-term historical importance and monastic significance of Handagala Kanda.

1. Epigraphical Evidence (Early & Later Brahmi Inscriptions)

The primary factor determining its long-term activity is the chronological spread of rock inscriptions found on the site. The Evidence: Renowned epigraphists and archaeologists such as Dr. Edward Muller, H.C.P. Bell (Bell, 1892, pp.7), C.W. Nicholas (Nicholas, 1953, pp.221-224), and Prof. Senarath Paranavitana (Paranavitana, 1970, pp.10-11,89-90) documented 30 distinct cave inscriptions at Handagala Kanda.

14 inscriptions belong to the 2nd century BCE.

14 inscriptions belong to the 1st century BCE.

2 inscriptions belong to the 1st century CE.

Out of these, 28 inscriptions explicitly record the donation of caves to the Sangha (the Buddhist monastic order). This proves that the site transitioned smoothly from a pre-Christian era hermitage into an established monastic institution over centuries.

2. Architectural Development & Structural Ruins

The architectural remains showcase a transition from simple, reclusive cave-dwelling to an organized, large-scale monastery. The isolated hill features approximately 45 natural caves, almost all carved with drip-ledges. Aside from the caves, the site features architectural ruins including a ruined brick stupa (dagoba) mound on the summit, image houses (vihara), stone pillars, several tiers of stone steps leading up the 300-foot hill, and ancillary monastic buildings. The variation in construction styles and building materials shows that the site underwent structural additions and renovations across different eras (including the Anuradhapura period and later revitalizations during the Kandyan period) (Manjula, 2022).

3. Artistic Evidence (Fresco Paintings)

The inclusion of high-quality art indicates that Handagala Kanda received prominent patronage during the height of the Anuradhapura Kingdom. In his 1892 archaeological report, Commissioner H.C.P. Bell documented fragments of fresco paintings on a cave roof at Handagala. The style, medium, and technique of these paintings closely align with the famous Sigiriya tradition (5th Century CE), proving that monastic activity and elite artistic sponsorship continued long after the cave-donation period of the 1st century BCE (Bell, 1892, pp.7).

Results and Discussion

Murals

According to archaeological and epigraphic evidence, the *Handagala Kanda* cave temple was established between the 2nd century BCE and the 1st century CE (Nicholas, 1963, pp.162). Therefore, the cave paintings found at the site are generally attributed to the *Anuradhapura* period. However, a definitive conclusion regarding their precise date has not yet been reached. It is possible that the murals were created during the same period in which the caves were inscribed and donated to the monastic community—approximately between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE. Alternatively, the paintings may belong to a slightly later phase, sometime after the 1st century CE.

The artistic characteristics of the surviving fragments show stylistic affinities with the *Sigiriya* painting tradition. If this connection is accurate, the murals of *Handagala Kanda* may date to around the 4th or 5th century CE, corresponding to the period when the *Sigiriya* artistic style flourished. Nevertheless, based on the available technical and stylistic evidence, these murals can more reliably be identified as belonging to the early *Anuradhapura* period. The artistic characteristics of the surviving fragments show stylistic affinities with the *Sigiriya* painting tradition.



Figure 01: Cave with Frescoes, (3rd century BCE to 1st century CE), Handagala Kanda, Kebithigollewa.

A significant similarity can be identified between the paintings of Handagala and Sigiriya, particularly in their use of line (Somathilake, 2001, pp.301). The paintings at both sites have been executed through the effective use and combination of various linear elements. Furthermore, observation of the paintings indicates that Handagala employs a colour palette closely comparable to that of the Sigiriya frescoes. The predominant colours include yellow, reddish-brown, black, and white (Charles, 2017, pp.25).

Since this colour scheme is a common characteristic of mural paintings belonging to the Anuradhapura period, the Handagala paintings may also be considered part of the Classical Tradition of Sri Lankan mural art (Bandaranayake, 1986, pp.11-14). Moreover, as at Sigiriya, a thick layer of plaster was applied to the rock surface before painting to cover natural depressions and irregularities. A similar thick plaster layer can also be observed at Handagala. This technical resemblance suggests a close relationship between the painting traditions and artistic practices employed at the two sites (Charles, 2017, pp.25).

From a thematic perspective, another noteworthy feature of the Handagala paintings is the depiction of a female figure, comparable to those represented in the Sigiriya frescoes. Therefore, considering the similarities in linear treatment, colour palette,

plastering technique, and thematic content, it can be concluded that Handagala and Sigiriya share significant artistic and stylistic affinities (Somathilake, 2001, pp.292-293)

From the caves at *Handagala Kanda*, mural elements can currently be identified in only one cave (Figure 01). This cave is located to the left of the main staircase leading to the temple, towards the southeastern side of *Handagala Kanda*. The presence of murals in only one out of the forty-five identified caves is a distinctive and noteworthy feature of the site. The reason why paintings were created exclusively in this particular cave remains uncertain, as no clear archaeological evidence explains.

There is no indication that murals were once present in the cave housing the main Buddha Image House, nor is there evidence to suggest that the highest or most prominent caves were used for mural creation. It is also plausible that one of the larger caves, which has deeper natural recesses than the painted cave, may have been more suitable for such artistic activity, yet no traces of paintings have been found in them. This raises the possibility that the painted cave may once have functioned as an early Buddha Image House. However, no structural or material remains survive today to confirm this hypothesis.

The painted cave is connected to an adjoining rock in a way that forms a triangular enclosed space. This architectural arrangement suggests that the cave may once have supported a roofed structure, possibly serving as a sheltered Buddha Image House in the past.

At present, three fragments of plaster can be identified within the *Handagala Kanda* painted cave. Two of these are clearly distinguishable, while the third survives only in faint traces. The plaster averages about one inch in thickness, although in some places it reaches up to three inches. Likely, the same type of plaster commonly used during the Anuradhapura period was employed for these murals as well. The plaster appears to have been prepared using the dry-plaster (tempera) method.

Multiple layers were used in the preparation of the plaster. Materials such as lime, sand, and various plant fibers appear to have been incorporated. Judging from its texture and composition, the final conservation report issued by the Chemical Conservation Division of the Department of Archaeology in 2018 indicates that the plaster was prepared using a mixture of clay, fine sand, and lime (CaO) (Wijerathna, 2018, pp. 1). The plaster bears similarities to that used at *Sigiriya*, where elements like paddy husk, cow dung, and different types of clay were added to enhance bonding and elasticity. The *Handagala Kanda* plaster has a pale coloration, and a very thin finishing layer of lime plaster was applied on top, upon which the paintings were executed.

Over time, organic materials in the plaster-such as plant fibers and dung-have deteriorated, leading to corrosion and a weakening of the surface. This has caused portions of the plaster to detach, creating holes and exposing the underlying rock. The thin lime finish has also peeled away in several areas.

A limited range of colors can still be identified in the remaining mural fragments. The most prominent is a deep, dark red, which has also been used extensively for line drawing (Wijerathna, 2018, pp.1). An orange hue is also visible, likely representing the altered or degraded state of the original red pigment. Yellow pigments have been used in certain areas, and a gradation from yellow to dark red is observable along the upper section of the largest plaster fragment. There is also faint evidence suggesting the possible use of green and white pigments (Wijerathna, 2018, pp.1). Due to heavy fading, the full extent of the original color palette cannot be determined with certainty. Linework plays a dominant role in the *Handagala Kanda* murals. The most visible surviving elements are line drawings, executed with precision and confidence. Unlike the *Sigiriya* paintings, where corrections or secondary lines are sometimes visible, the *Handagala Kanda* lines show no hesitation or alteration. Each line maintains a consistent quality, although line thickness varies according to the representational needs of the image.

The contours of human figures are drawn with clear, controlled linearity. Thicker lines appear in depictions of clothing, while variations in line width help to convey bodily form and the detailing of jewellery. The darkness or lightness of the lines also changes depending on the intended emphasis and location within the composition. The composition employs a prominent outer contour delineated with a thick line, complemented by a secondary inner contour of lesser thickness. Furthermore, it is evident that the outer contour is painted in a darker red hue than the inner contour, thereby enhancing the visual definition and depth of the figure.

H. C. P. Bell's 1892 notes include one of the earliest references to the *Handagala Kanda* murals. He recorded that frescoes were visible on the ceiling of the cave and identified two principal figures, one male and one female (Bell, 1892, pp.7). Although only faint traces remain today, *Bell's* observations confirm that the painted surface was once more extensive and better preserved.



Figure – 02: Main plaster block, (3rd century BCE to 1st century BC), *Handagala Kanda*, *Kebithigollewa*

On the main surviving plaster block-measuring approximately 12 square feet (Figure 02) one dominant life-size figure can still be identified. Portions of the waist, lower garment, and left arm remain visible (Figure 02). The upper body, from the waist to the abdomen, is partly preserved, while traces of the neck, chest, and head have now completely faded. Near the left central area of the plaster, linear markings are visible that may represent hands. This figure has generally been interpreted as male and is believed to be shown in a dancing posture. If not a dance pose, the figure may represent a deity (Bell, 1892, pp.7). Beneath the main layer of plaster, clear outlines of an upper arm from the wrist appear in the lowest layer, suggesting earlier stages or corrections in the composition.

The distribution of the three surviving fragments, combined with the spatial extent of the cave, indicates that the original mural once covered a substantial area. This suggests that a larger and more complex composition was present, likely including multiple figures or scenes.

Bell's identification of the figure as part of a dance scene opens several interpretive possibilities (Main plaster block) (Figure - 02):

01. Since the *Handagala Kanda* cave temple has functioned as a Buddhist shrine from the 3rd century BCE to the present, it is important to consider how dance imagery fits within this religious setting. If the scene is connected to Buddhist literature, it may reflect the moment of the Great Departure (*Abhiniṣkramaṇa*), in which Prince *Siddhartha* witnesses his sleeping attendants in unattractive postures before renouncing worldly life.

Another possibility is that the painting depicts the attempts of *Māra's* daughters-*Tanhā*, *Rati*, and *Ragā* - to tempt the Bodhisattva through dance and seductive gestures. This theme is found in Buddhist artistic traditions and may correspond to *Bell's* observation of two figures (Figure 05).

The depiction may also represent a traditional dance scene, especially if musical instruments such as drums were painted nearby. This interpretation gains support from the fact that the surviving figure appears male, which would be consistent with certain ritual or folk dance traditions. Comparable dance-themed murals have been identified at sites such as *Vessagiriya*, indicating that dance imagery was not uncommon in early *Anuradhapura* art.

02. Thus, the theme may represent a broader artistic convention of the period rather than a uniquely symbolic or narrative scene. When examining the iconography of the *Handagala Kanda* murals, certain features suggest that the figures may represent deities. Similarities can be observed with figures depicted at sites such as *Vessagiriya* and *Mihintale*. The artistic characteristics also show affinities with the *Sigiriya* painting tradition. Depictions of deities were widely used in *Anuradhapura*-period art, and Buddhist literature contains numerous stories involving divine beings. It is therefore possible that a narrative involving a deity or deities was illustrated on these cave walls.

Although the exact theme of the *Handagala Kanda* murals cannot be determined with certainty, the site's long history as a Buddhist monastic center suggests that the paintings likely represented Buddhist themes or scenes influenced by Buddhist cosmology. The fluid, controlled, and continuous linework visible in the surviving fragments indicates the work of highly skilled artists, capable of producing elegant, uninterrupted outlines and clearly defined forms.

The second-largest plaster block, located to the right, measures approximately 8 square feet (Figure 03). On this surface, a female figure is visible, rendered with bright red pigment and supported by detailed line drawings. Several noteworthy features can be identified in this fragment:

- I. The female figure, which is the only part of the mural filled with color, differs noticeably in scale from the other figures. The proportions do not correspond to those of the surrounding imagery, and stylistically, there is a clear disparity. While the surrounding figures demonstrate refined, elegant, and controlled linework, the linework of the female figure is comparatively less restrained. This suggests that the female figure may belong to a different artistic phase or layer.



Figure 03: Second plaster block, (3rd century BCE to 1st century BC), Handagala Kanda, Kebithigollewa

- II. The female figure appears to have been painted on a second or intermediate layer of plaster rather than on the topmost lime-plaster finish used elsewhere. This indicates that the figure was likely added during a later phase of mural creation. Several examples support this interpretation, though further examination would be required to determine the chronological order of the plaster layers and the modifications made by later artists. The *Handagala Kanda* murals

exhibit multiple plaster layers, which provide insights into their creation and later modifications:

- The paintings were applied on a slightly brown-colored (*paduwan*) plaster, which imparts a subtle brownish hue to the colors. Traces of the underlying lime plaster layer are visible, particularly on the painted female figure.
- To the left of this plaster fragment, a clear section of lime plaster can be observed, partially covering the red-painted areas, indicating that repainting or restoration occurred at a later stage.
- From these observations, several conclusions regarding the chronology of the murals can be drawn: the evidence suggests that the *Handagala Kanda* murals were executed in two distinct periods.
- The red-painted female figure likely belongs to the first phase.
- Over time, as the vibrancy of the original colors faded, a very thin layer of lime plaster was applied, and the paintings were repainted during a subsequent phase.

The frescoes on the lower layer share stylistic similarities with the *Hindagala* temple paintings, suggesting that they may date to the 6th- 7th centuries CE. Consequently, the upper-layer paintings could correspond to the Polonnaruwa period or the latter part of the Anuradhapura period, and are potentially comparable to the *Tivanka* image house paintings of the 12th century CE.

Alternatively, if the original murals were created during the initial construction of the cave temples (2nd Century BCE to 1st century CE), the upper layer could belong to the 4th - 5th centuries CE and reflect the *Sigiriya* painting tradition



Figure 04: Third plaster block, (3rd century BCE to 1st century BC), Handagala Kanda, Kebithigollewa.

The third surviving plaster block is very small, covering approximately 1 square foot (Figure 04), and is located in the innermost part of the cave. This fragment is exceptionally thick, suggesting that it was removed from the rock surface abruptly. No visible traces of paintings remain on this block, and only the thin lime plaster surface is preserved.



Figure 05: Main plaster block sketch, (3rd century BCE to 1st century BC), Handagala Kanda, Kebithigollewa (Bell, 1892, plate xxv).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study of the murals at the ancient *Handagala Kanda* cave temple reveals several features characteristic of *Anuradhapura*-period paintings. The murals were created by applying plaster to the rock surfaces of the naturally formed caves, using the dry plaster or tempera technique. The plaster consists of multiple layers, incorporating elements typical of *Anuradhapura*-period mural construction.

Several human figures, including male and female representations, hand drawings, and traditional drum motifs, are discernible. The color palette includes red, yellow, orange, green, and white, with the compositions primarily structured through precise line work. Analysis of the plaster layers and stylistic variations indicates that the murals were executed in two distinct phases. Thus, the *Handagala Kanda* cave temple murals can be identified as artworks spanning two chronological periods, reflecting both early *O* and later stylistic influences.

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