Figure 3. Statue near the Potgul Vihāra, holding what may be a manuscript. Illustration by Natalia Lopez-Barbosa, after a photograph by Tyler A. Lehrer. Used with permission.

INTRODUCTION

ON THE COVER of this book is a curious structure known today as the Potgul Vihāra. Located just south of Poḷonnaruva, Sri Lanka's royal capital in the first centuries of the second millennium (ca. 990s–1215), the building's original function is uncertain. The elevated terrace it sits on, surrounded by four miniature *stūpa*s (hemispherical reliquaries), with monastic cells arranged beyond the terrace, identify it as a Buddhist site. The domed shape of the central building, however, is unusual for the place and period.[1] The modern name—literally "Library Monastery"—is based on the site's association with a nearby statue of an unidentified man holding what appears to be a palm leaf manuscript (Fig. 3).[2] Faint traces of paint on the inside walls suggest, perhaps, that it was once used as an image-house: a shrine for contemplation and veneration of the Buddha. The only clue to the site's history is a short donative inscription (*IC* 6.23) carved into its *maṇḍapa* (ritual entranceway).[3] This tells us that the original structure was built by Parākramabāhu I (r. 1153–1186), the period's most illustrious king; that it was later rebuilt by Līlāvatī, a widow of Parākramabāhu who later became a monarch in her own right; and finally that the *maṇḍapa* itself was constructed by Candavatī, another of Parākramabāhu's former consorts.

1 Sirisena, *Sri Lanka and South-East Asia*, 135–39.

2 Although cf. Paranavitana, "The Statue Near Potgul-Vehera."

3 Inscriptions are referred to in-text by their volume and number in *Inscriptions of Ceylon* (*IC*) or Tamil *Inscriptions in Sri Lanka* (*TISL*). References to primary sources are by text name only; full details are given in the bibliography.

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This structure and its accompanying inscription are little more than a footnote in most histories of medieval Sri Lanka. The Archaeological Survey's annual report for the year of the structure's (re)discovery, for example, concludes only that, "In twenty-six lines of clear-cut letters of the twelfth century is a record in Pali of its original construction by Parākramabāhu I, and its rebuilding and improvement by his two queens."[4] The most significant use to which this inscription has been put is as evidence that royal widows like Candavatī had independent means of patronizing such construction projects.[5] Candavatī's very name has a tenuous hold in modern historiography: the editors of the *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, in which this inscription was first published, suggest that she should instead be identified by the name "Rūpavatī."[6]

What none of these scholars dwell on is the fact that Candavatī's inscription is written entirely in Pali, rather than in the other languages used more frequently in medieval Lankan inscriptions: Sinhala, Tamil, or Sanskrit. Pali would later become ubiquitous throughout the Theravāda kingdoms of Southern Asia;[7] in such a context, it might be reasonable to assume that there was nothing particularly distinctive about Candavatī's choice of Pali as an inscriptional language. In reality, however, this is the *earliest* known example of a Sri Lankan royal inscription composed entirely in Pali.

Prior to the second millennium, Pali in Sri Lanka had largely been the preserve of monks: particularly those ordained in the Mahāvihāra *nikāya* (ordination lineage).[8] The Mahāvihāra's fortunes were rarely in the ascendant. Archaeological evidence, the travel writings of Chinese pilgrims, and even historical narratives (*vaṃśa*s) sympathetic to the Mahāvihāra together suggest that both royal and popular support went instead to its more illustrious rivals: the Abhayagiri and Jetavana *nikāya*s. While these latter institutions likely adhered to canonical texts written in Pali (including a

4 Bell, *ASCAR 1906*, 16.

5 Siriweera, "Economic Conditions," 54.

6 de Silva Wickremasinghe in *EZ* 2:240. The reasons for this renaming are discussed further in Chapter Seven.

7 The premodern application of the term "Theravāda" is contested among modern scholars. I deploy it throughout as an etic term, indicating "something, or some things, which can be seen, or argued, to be genealogically related to what we now call 'Theravāda,'" following Collins, "Periodizing Theravāda History," 18.

8 This differs sharply from parts of peninsular Southeast Asia, in which inscriptional evidence speaks to a longer-standing engagement with the Pali language. Assavavirulhakarn, *Ascendency*; Skilling, "Precious Deposits."

Pali-language *vinaya*, or monastic disciplinary code), both were receptive to Sanskrit texts, and possibly even to texts and practices explicitly associated with the Mahāyāna movement—today considered the great rival of proper, Pali-oriented Theravāda Buddhism.[9] At one point, the Mahāvihāra-penned *Mahāvaṃsa* laments, its very buildings were deconstructed in order to provide raw materials for expansions of the Abhayagiri compound.[10] While this may have been a dramatic embellishment, the first-millennium inscriptional corpus certainly suggests far more frequent royal engagement with the Abhayagiri, in particular, than with the Mahāvihāra. Of course, this is not to suggest that first-millennium kings were entirely uninterested in the latter institution and its Pali-language literature. For the most part, however, the notion that kings across the Indian Ocean would one day carve inscriptions in Pali, or heap praise upon the memory of the Mahāvihāra, must have seemed a very distant possibility.

In light of this, inscriptions like that of Candavatī take on a new significance. We cannot simply dismiss the choice of the Pali language, or, more generally, expressions of support for the Mahāvihāra, as an uninteresting expression of an underlying and unchanging affinity between Sri Lankan kingship and "Theravāda Buddhism." Such references represent instead a radical reconfiguration of royal attitudes towards Buddhist languages and Buddhist institutions. Some of these moments of reconfiguration are found in the inscriptions of those men who dominate modern historiography. Most notably, perhaps, this includes the Galvihāra inscription of Parākramabāhu I (*IC* 6.13), discussed further in Chapter Five. However, far more of these critical inscriptions, in which royal attitudes towards Buddhist monastic institutions and languages seem to shift, are the product of slightly more peripheral figures. Candavatī's inscription may be the earliest to be composed *wholly* in Pali, but she was following in the footsteps of another royal consort: the Great Lady Sundarā, the wife of Vikramabāhu I (r. 1111–1132) and mother of Gajabāhu II (1132–1153). As I discuss in Chapter Five, Sundarā's inscriptions contain the earliest Pali verses known in Sri Lankan inscriptions, as well as evidence for patronage of a *Mahāvihāra*-aligned monastery which would later play a pivotal role in Parākramabāhu's later restructuring of the monastic community (*saṅgha*).[11] But Sundarā, like Candavatī, is largely

9 Cousins, "Teachings."

10 *Mahāvaṃsa*, ed. Geiger, ch. 37, vv. 10–12.

11 We should note here the Nāgarī-script copper-plate inscription unearthed from the Jetavana compound in 1893, dated on palaeographic grounds to the second half of the tenth century. Scholars are divided on whether this inscription is a Sanskrit absent from extant histories of Poḷonnaruva. It is, I suspect, not merely an unfortunate oversight that these women's inscriptions, or the inscriptions of other noblewomen from Poḷonnaruva, have been so long overlooked. Rather, it is symptomatic of a broader problem in our historiography of the Poḷonnaruva period, and therefore of our histories of how the Theravāda came to be as it is today.

A plethora of material evidence from the Poḷonnaruva period—inscriptions, art, architecture, coinage—is available to us, and indeed has been well-studied in the fields of archaeology and art history. Our understanding of the history of Poḷonnaruva, however, and of the religious transformations therein, has thus far been overwhelmingly reliant on a series of textual narratives composed from the thirteenth century onwards. The historical value of Poḷonnaruvan inscriptions rests, in one illustrative example, on the basis that they "very often corroborate statements in the [textual narratives] and occasionally supplement the knowledge we have from the latter source. It is only very seldom that these inscriptions contradict the [textual] account of the period."[12] Material culture is used to flesh out the positivist bones provided by these narratives, which remain ossified at the core; when material data contradicts or simply falls outside the remit of the narratives (as does the inscription by Candavatī, who has no place in later texts about Poḷonnaruva), it is similarly overlooked by modern historians.[13]

The dangers of such a heavy reliance on textual accounts are compounded when we consider their own historical context. The foundation of modern historiography is the thirteenth-century "extension" to the *Mahāvaṃsa* (sometimes called *Cūlavaṃsa*) composed in the Daṁbadeṇiya-based court of Parākramabāhu II (r. ca. 1236–1269).[14] The *Mahāvaṃsa* focuses its attentions on the careers of two exemplary kings: Vijayabāhu I

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verse (*EZ* 1.3) or a quotation from the Pali-canonical Vaṭṭaka-jātaka (*EZ* 3.16). If the latter, then Sundarā's inscription would be the earliest use of original (rather than citational) Pali verses.

12 Wickramasinghe, "Sources," 174–75.

13 See Jeganathan, "Authorising History"; Walters, "Buddhist History," 163.

14 On the dominance of the *Mahāvaṃsa* over modern historiography, see Walters, "Buddhist History"; Walters and Colley, "Making History." Given their self-representation as seamless "continuations," dating the *Mahāvaṃsa* extensions is difficult. Sirima Wickramasinghe argues that while chs. 59–79 were written in the court of Parākramabāhu II, chs. 33–57 may have been written during the period of Cōḻa occupation: Wickramasinghe, "The Age of Parākramabāhu I," 11–19. Her evidence for this, however, is relatively tenuous, and so I follow the traditional interpretation that chs. 33–79 *in toto* were written under Parākramabāhu II.

(r. ca. 1070–1110), who rose up against his Śiva-worshipping Cōḻa overlords, established an independent kingdom based at Poḷonnaruva, and then revitalized the monastic orders which had suffered under Cōḻa tyranny; and Parākramabāhu I, who reunited the island after a period of fragmentation, and then reunited the three *nikāyas* under Mahāvihāra-oriented leadership. The *Mahāvaṃsa*'s androcentric focus is echoed in two Sinhala-language texts also frequently consulted for information about Poḷonnaruva: the thirteen-century *Pūjāvaliya*, also composed under Parākramabāhu II; and the fourteenth-century *Nikāya-saṅgrahaya*, which elaborates on the *Pūjāvaliya* account.[15] These texts are firmly the product of later periods, and reflect those periods' concerns. These concerns resulted in a very particular narrative of the Poḷonnaruva period: a narrative of heroic and pious kings who fought back Tamil and Sanskritic heresies to "restore" the Sinhala-speaking, Pali-oriented Buddhism of the Mahāvihāra to its "proper" dominance over the island.[16] Like other *vaṃśa* texts, in other words, the *Mahāvaṃsa* extension was:

> composed not as neutral accounts of the *sāsana*'s unfolding, but in the explicit or implicit service of a particular monastic group, generally in the context of a competitive local and/or regional monastic conversation (or debate) about the purity and authenticity of various lineages and their practices.[17]

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the historical events related in the *Mahāvaṃsa* were invented wholesale: Vijayabāhu I *really did* expel his Cōḻa overlords to declare his independent kingship; Parākramabāhu I *really did* unite the island and then initiate monastic reforms which would forever influence Buddhism across the Indian Ocean region; later monarchs like Niśśaṅka Malla and Līlāvatī *really did* struggle to maintain control while the kingdom splintered and ultimately fell apart around them. However, even if we accept the veracity of these historical events we must acknowledge the interpretive choices which the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s author made in narrativizing

15 On the historical production of the former, see Blackburn, *Buddhist-Inflected Sovereignties*, 54–61; on the latter, Bretfeld, "Theravāda."

16 Very often, "Sanskrit Buddhism" is assumed to be Mahāyāna (and therefore antithetical to the "proper" Theravāda of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia); the Tamil language and the Tamil country are assumed to be devoted almost exclusively to the worship of Śiva. Neither of these assumptions is true. On Tamil-language Buddhism in particular see Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism*; Schalk and Vēluppiḷḷai, *Buddhism among Tamils*.

17 Blackburn, "Sīhaḷa Saṅgha," 316.

them. Here I am following Hayden White's insights that no "historical writing" is truly objective, but is—necessarily—a subjective "emplotment" of past events in ways sensible to the author's own social and intellectual context.[18] The extent to which we have accepted the narrativization of Poḷonnaruva contained within the *Mahāvaṃsa*, *Pūjāvaliya*, and *Nikāya-saṅgrahaya* as historical fact has skewed our understanding of the period, and therefore, crucially, of the circumstances under which the Mahāvihāra's version of Buddhism eventually became dominant across the Indian Ocean.

This book therefore constitutes a radical revision of Poḷonnaruva's history, eschewing entirely these later accounts in favour of *only* those sources which we know to have originated from within the period: primarily, and most reliably, the inscriptional record (discussed further below). On the basis of these sources, I make a range of arguments intervening in broader scholarly debates. At the broadest level, I demonstrate that the intellectual and institutional histories of "religion," "gender," and "politics" were fundamentally entangled in the Poḷonnaruva period, and that we therefore cannot adequately study any one without also attending closely to the others. The following sections lay out more specific arguments: about the intellectual dynamism of Buddhist kingship; about the overlooked significance of noblewomen in Poḷonnaruva's political culture; and about the methodological and evidentiary foundations on which we can build more detailed intellectual histories.

Buddhist Kingship

Central to these histories are shifting ideas about what it meant to be a "good king." We have assumed for far too long that the answer to this remained more or less static and self-contained over time: that the ideals of "Buddhist kingship" were both (1) narrowly confined to only those phenomena we today consider "Buddhist" (primarily in contrast to "Hindu kingship"); and (2) more or less contiguous from the earliest "canonical texts" down to the violent imposition of colonial governance and Christian proselytization. In other words, any "Buddhist king" from Aśoka to Ayutthaya worked from within the same strictly limited political *imaginaire*: an ahistorical construct we refer to as "Buddhist kingship."

18 White, *Metahistory*. While White is concerned exclusively with "modern" historical writing, his insights have been productively applied to *vaṃśa* texts: see Berkwitz, *Buddhist History in the Vernacular*; Scheible, *Reading the Mahāvamsa*.

This neat construct is tested, however, by the sheer abundance of evidence of historical Buddhist kings acting in ways apparently contrary to our idealized "Buddhist kingship." These monarchs' "failure" to live up to the standards we have set them, based on *our* readings of canonical Pali literature, has led some modern historians to question whether these individuals were "really" Buddhist kings at all. Rather, they must have been waylaid by the "influences" of some external force: theist practices; Mahāyāna heresies; local or populist superstitions. Such critiques have been levelled at Poḷonnaruva's monarchs. In particular, as discussed in Chapter Five, Vikramabāhu I and his son Gajabāhu II are both routinely characterized by modern historians as Śaiva (Śiva-worshipping), rather than Buddhist, kings. It is certainly true that Poḷonnaruva's kings looked to wider models of kingship. As I argue throughout this book, they found the ideals and practices of kingship circulating in Sanskritic and Tamil worlds at least as influential as they did those laid out in "canonical" Pali texts. Given this, we might validly wonder whether these monarchs truly are best considered "Buddhist kings," and whether this book is really a study of "Buddhist kingship" after all.

A valid scholarly response to ahistorical notions of "Buddhist kingship" is to discard the concept altogether. Thus Anne Blackburn, for example, argues that later polities across Southern Asia are best regarded not as "Buddhist kingdoms," but as "Buddhist-*inflected* sovereignties."[19] This move shifts our focus firmly onto the transcultural connections underlying these polities' ideals of kingship, and so displaces the narrow insistence on representations of kings in the Pali canon which has so distracted past generations of scholarship. Such an approach is, clearly, extremely productive, and offers us new and more nuanced ways of conceptualizing kingship's contingent relationship(s) to Buddhism. However, I remain convinced that there is some heuristic value to be found in the concept of "Buddhist kingship"—if it can be reconciled with the more capacious and cosmopolitan practices of kingship found in premodern Southern Asia.

I am motivated in this defence of "Buddhist kingship" by an emic invocation from within Poḷonnaruva itself. As many scholars have noted, the concept of "Buddhism" in use today—as a "religion," as an "identity," as an "-ism"—is a decidedly modern construction without a one-to-one equivalent in the premodern period.[20] The closest emic term from medieval Southern

19 Blackburn, *Buddhist-Inflected Sovereignties*.

20 The modern origin of "religion" is a well-worn path to tread. Key landmarks include Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious"; Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*; McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*.

Asia is Buddha-*śāsana*: literally "the teachings of the Buddha." This term was often also used to refer to the institutions which preserve and promote those teachings, but (unlike modern "Buddhism-as-religion") not to individuals, much less non-monastic individuals. Some individuals are, however, referred to with the adjective *bauddha*: an abstractive meaning something like "of the Buddha" or simply "Buddhist." We see this most frequently in Sanskrit philosophical literature, in which proponents of a distinctly *bauddha* epistemology distinguish themselves from their Mīmāṃsikā and Nyāya rivals.[21] It also occurs, however, in a relatively small number of royal inscriptions, including one from Poḷonnaruva: the Galpota inscription of Niśśaṅka Malla (*IC* 6.24).[22] As discussed in Chapter Seven, here Niśśaṅka Malla juxtaposes himself—an explicitly "Buddhist king" (*bauddha rājan*)—against his non-*bauddha* rivals in the Cōḻa and Pāṇḍya polities, suggesting that such a distinction was indeed meaningful in medieval Sri Lanka.[23]

Niśśaṅka Malla may have been the only Poḷonnaruvan monarch to explicitly refer to his rivals as un-Buddhist (*abauddha*), but he was far from alone in expressing a particular affinity for the Buddha-*śāsana*. The majority of royal figures discussed throughout this book describe themselves as engaged in acts of worship (*pūjā*) oriented towards the Buddha or his relics (*dhātu*s), or express an understanding that as monarchs they are in some way obligated to protect, preserve, or make prosper the *śāsana*. We are told that Vijayabāhu declared himself king in order "to protect the Buddha-*śāsana*" (*TISL* 42, l.8); that Parākramabāhu desired to personally serve the Buddha-*śāsana* (*IC* 4:13, l.8) and "further the world and the *śāsana*" (*IC* 6.15, l.13); and that Līlāvatī's

21 These rivals are often grouped, by modern scholars and practitioners alike, under a general heading of "Hinduism." On the complex history of the various sects, movements, and philosophical traditions which later became "Hinduism" see Nicholson, Unifying Hinduism; cf. Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism*. In brief: rather than a singular theistic institution, we see more frequently instead sects oriented towards individual deities as the supreme godhead (Śaivas for Śiva; Vaiṣṇavas for Viṣṇu; less frequently in this period Sauryas for the sun god Sūrya), alongside other philosophical/soteriological movements like the functionally atheistic Mīmāṃsā—all of which clashed philosophically with, and competed for patronage amongst, one another at least as often as they did their Buddhist and Jain rivals.

22 Beyond Sri Lanka, we see this term most frequently in Pāla inscriptions, which routinely contain the epithet "Best of Buddhists" (*paramabauddha*).

23 By "meaningful" here I intend only that the terms *bauddha* and *abauddha* could be uttered with the expectation that the distinction was intelligible to at least some audiences. Whether those audiences would have themselves agreed with Niśśaṅka Malla's implicit arguments about who "ought" to sit on Sri Lanka's throne is another question.

reign "brought peace to the world and the *śāsana*" (*IC* 6.90, ll. 10–11). Such references, I demonstrate in the following chapters, are not incidental to how these individuals understood themselves as monarchs. Rather, their various engagements with the Buddha-*śāsana* represented a crucial arena for the performance of kingship. With this term "performance" I invoke contemporary theories of social performativity, and particularly Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, to which I return below. When monarchs engaged with this arena of Buddha-*śāsana*, through public and often monumental displays of support, it therefore provided them with opportunities to act out the role of a virtuous Buddhist monarch. What interests us, of course, is not merely the fact that Poḷonnaruva's monarchs professed obligations towards Buddhism. Rather, we are concerned with the considerably varied actions which they describe themselves as carrying out in fulfilment of these obligations, and how these actions in turn shaped the development of Theravāda Buddhism throughout the Poḷonnaruva period. What form or forms of "Buddhism" are considered worthy of such support? What forms of relationship with the *saṅgha* are enabled or even necessitated by such obligations: respect for their institutional autonomy; or interference intended to rectify internal disciplinary lapses? If a king does *not* seem well-placed to protect the *śāsana*, should they be replaced—and who has the authority to make such a decision? Such questions were heatedly contested throughout the period.

References to *bauddha-rājan*s and obligations to the Buddha-*śāsana* allow us to take "Buddhist kingship" as a valid subject of analysis. We should not extrapolate out from such references, however, a starkly dichotomous account of "Buddhists" on the one hand and "non-Buddhists" on the other. Such an account poorly fits the evidence from Poḷonnaruva, which suggests a more inclusive and fluid set of soteriological practices. While certain professionals—Buddhist monks, Śaiva priests, hereditary Brahmins—were certainly oriented towards very particular "religious" institutions, this only rarely resulted in an outright rejection of alternatives. As discussed in Chapter Five, a procedure for royal consecration (*abhiṣeka*), first laid out in the *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* but later repeated verbatim by Parākramabāhu's monastic grandmaster Śāriputra, calls for the royal *purohita* (hereditary priest) to represent the wider community of Brahmins, while Buddhist monastics are nowhere to be seen in the ritual. A mural in the Mahiyaṅgana *stūpa*, dated to the latter half of the first millennium, shows Viṣṇu and Śiva attendant on the Buddha;[24]

24 Ward, "Recently Discovered Mahiyangana Paintings."

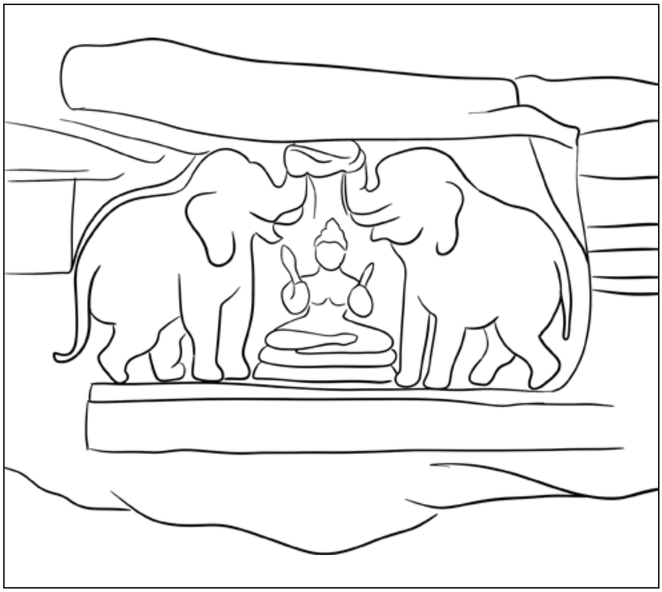

Figure 4. The carving of Gaja-Lakṣmī on the southern face of the Galpota inscription. Illustration by Natalia Lopez-Barbosa, after a photograph by Tyler A. Lehrer. Used with permission.

Buddha-centric poetry, such as the *Muvadevdāvata*, freely used Śaiva iconography to construct aesthetically pleasing metaphors.[25] Śaiva *bhakti* (devotional practices) may also have played a part in the emergence of what Charles Hallisey calls *mamāyana* ("the Vehicle of 'Mine'"): the identification of the Buddha as "*our* Buddha" (*apē budu*, a term which recurs frequently in inscriptions of the period).[26] And, most tellingly, the very same inscription in which Niśśaṅka Malla claimed to be a "Buddhist king" prominently features a figure of Gaja-Lakṣmī (Fig. 4), the consort of Viṣṇu and embodiment of prosperity (*śrī*).[27] To be "Buddhist" in medieval Sri Lanka, in other words, did not necessarily mean to be "not non-Buddhist," or *vice versa*.

All of the above suggests the necessity of a more capacious understanding of the "Buddhist" in our Buddhist kingship. Poḷonnaruva's kings were not, I argue in the following pages, "deviating" from a predetermined ideal

25 Shirley, "Buddhist Poetics."

26 Hallisey, "Devotion," 178–86.

27 The image is carved on the southernmost vertical face of the Galpota, above a short colophon relating the details of the inscription's construction. The apparently documentary nature of this colophon has led to it being interpreted as a postscript in modern critical editions, in which it is usually printed *after* the main text of the inscription. However, the location of the Galpota within the Sacred Quadrangle necessitates that viewers approach it from the south: the colophon and Lakṣmī are, in fact, the first part of the inscription with which one engages.

laid out in the Pali canon; rather, they were actively *constituting* "Buddhist kingship" through their selective engagement with models available to them in a wide variety of canons and contexts. That engagement was made most visible in acts of royal patronage of Buddhist institutions, which provided both an opportunity to perform certain practices of kingship and—vitally, for our purposes—to record that ephemeral performance in the inscriptional form still available to us today. Tracing the history of those engagements—and the manifold ways in which these visions conflicted with one another—helps us better understand what it *could* mean to be a "Buddhist king" at this historically vital moment.

Finally, it is important to note that my focus on "kingship" should not be taken as a return to the "great man" model of history, in which we focus primarily on individual kings and their actions. As Daud Ali argues, "kingship" as both a concept and a practice transcends the figure of the individual king.[28] Nor do I take the view that discourses of idealized kingship were cynically manipulated in order to "legitimize" either individual kings or the entire institution of autocratic rule. The "legitimation" approach has been much critiqued in recent years.[29] Rather, I align this work with more recent scholarship that interrogates the varied and highly contextual intellectual histories of "kingship" in second-millennium Sri Lanka,[30] across Southern Asia,[31] and throughout the wider Buddhist world.[32] These works together orient us towards more nuanced histories of political thought in Asia: not a brittle edifice of "Buddhist values," cast in unyielding iron from supposedly authoritative texts; but an intricate mesh of steel links, each forged in context and interwoven with those before, after, and adjacent.

28 Ali, *Courtly Culture*, 5.

29 See most influentially Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*, 514–23; for Sri Lanka specifically see Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning*, 90; but cf. Gellner, "Sheldon Pollock and Max Weber"; and McCrea, "In the World of Men."

30 Particularly Berkwitz, "Reimagining Buddhist Kingship"; Berkwitz, "Divine Kingship"; Berkwitz, "Strong Men and Sensual Women"; Berkwitz, "Men of Virtue"; Friedrich, "Merchants, Ministers, and Monks."

31 Blackburn, *Buddhist-Inflected Sovereignties*; Cox, Politics, *Kingship, and Poetry*; Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*; Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State*.

32 Abe, *The Weaving of Mantra*; Balkwill, *The Women Who Ruled China*; Bryson, "The Great Kingdom"; McBride, "Buddhist Kingship"; and the essays in Balkwill and Benn, *Buddhist Statecraft*.

Engendering Buddhist History

My pointed references to "kingship" (rather than the gender-neutral terms "monarchy" or "sovereignty") above orient us towards what is perhaps the most significant finding of this work: the desperate need to reconsider the contested relationship(s) between gender and power in Poḷonnaruva, and the implications for our understanding of Buddhist history more generally.[33] Most immediately, this reconsideration involves the recovery of historical actors beyond the normatively masculine. These actors' acts are often obscured by our over-reliance on later texts written by certain elite men (particularly monastic literati) who devote much of their efforts to valorizing the deeds of other elite men (male monarchs). Recovering their stories is a necessary corrective to the androcentric approach taken in these monastic writings and uncritically reproduced in modern historiography. As Barbara Andaya points out, such recovery is made particularly challenging in premodern Southern Asia by the relative lack of alternative voices available to us.[34] However, this situation is far from unique to our region, and we can benefit here from the pioneering work done by feminist scholars of the more global medieval. Kathleen Nolan's description of the difficulties of "reading women's lives, especially powerful women's lives, through the words of suspicious male monastics, [which] requires careful sorting through the biases and motivations of the author" sounds all too familiar to those of us working on premodern Southern Asia, despite the geographical and cultural distance from her Capetian France.[35] Nolan's response—which I enthusiastically emulate throughout this work—is to focus instead on material culture, which she argues often allowed powerful women more direct expression of their own agency.

A pattern is evident amidst this material evidence: the visibility of powerful women—specifically, royal consorts—seems to be inversely related to the centralization of political control under "strong kings." During the reigns of Vijayabāhu I and Parākramabāhu I, two of the longest-reigning and (as far as we can tell) most politically centralized monarchs, no inscriptions

33 The English language is unusual, but by no means unique, in its sharp etymological and semantic distinction between "king" (always signifying a man in power) and "queen" (from a proto-Germanic root meaning "wife" or "woman," and referring to either a woman in power *or* the wife of a powerful man). See further Earenfight, "Without the Persona of the Prince"; Woodacre, *Queens and Queenship*, 6–7.

34 Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*, 52–55.

35 Nolan, *Queens in Stone and Silver*, 13.

are extant that can be attributed to royal consorts, and consorts are very rarely mentioned in the inscriptions of others. It is only in periods of relative "instability" that we see clear references to these women's status in their husband's inscriptions; have evidence of these women patronizing Buddhist institutions; and ultimately see two of these women—Kalyāṇavatī and Līlāvatī—sit on the throne themselves. That two of Sri Lanka's five pre-colonial female monarchs ruled in such close proximity suggests that something rather unusual took place in the political landscape of Poḷonnaruva, necessitating a structural explanation.

I advance such an explanation in the following chapters. In Chapters Four and Five, I argue that the status of royal consorts, particularly their connections to powerful mainland dynasties, gained greater discursive significance during the power struggles which marked the period between the reigns of Vijayabāhu and Parākramabāhu. While male monarchs likely intended their consorts' pedigrees to shore up their own claims to power, the consorts' increased prominence seems to have also afforded them more autonomy in their own deeds, allowing women like Sundarā to patronize *Mahāvihāra*-affiliated monasteries. During the political instability following Parākramabāhu's death, I argue in chapters Six and Seven, anxieties about dynastic security led to monarchs like Niśśaṅka Malla explicitly including royal consorts in the line of succession. He seems to have intended that these women would safeguard the throne for future (male) heirs, but this may well have provided the precedent for Līlāvatī and Kalyāṇavatī to eventually be crowned. I argue, in other words, that political instability provided *opportunities* for royal women, not available to them under the rule of powerful men.

Why have these opportunities, and the women who took them up, gone overlooked for so long? I have suggested above that one cause of this historiographic exclusion is the relative paucity of non-male voices from medieval Southern Asia. This paucity is, in turn, partly the result of a historical attitude: what Kashi Gomez describes as "a ubiquitous sentiment in the Sanskrit tradition: that women cannot or should not speak Sanskrit."[36] However, it is not only (some) premodern Sanskritists who are averse to female voices. In every public presentation I have given on the inscriptions of Līlāvatī and Kalyāṇavatī, Poḷonnaruva's two regnant monarchs, I have received at least one question about these women's direct involvement in the crafting of their epigraphic self-presentation. This is, in some ways, a fair question: a host of officials, literati, and artisans would have been involved

36 Gomez, "Ghanaśyāma and His Co-Wives," 6.

in the production of Līlāvatī and Kalyāṇavatī's inscriptions.[37] However, it is telling that I have never been asked this question of the period's *male* monarchs, who are generally referred to as having "written X inscription" with no further need for qualification. Similarly, as Ashley Thompson has critically discussed, while George Cœdès accepted that the famous Phimeanakas inscription of Indradevī (ca. twelfth century) was indeed written by Indradevī herself, his only comment on its unique nature—the only Sanskrit-language inscription attributed to a woman in the entire Cambodian corpus!—is that the grammar is "remarkably correct, while nonetheless written in a language much more simple than the productions of the prince-authors of [other inscriptions]."[38] In other words, modern scholars have accepted the medieval assumption that literary production was the realm of men. Before accepting that a premodern text genuinely does reflect a non-masculine voice, we require more definitive evidence of personal involvement, and we then consider it "remarkable" that such voices can express themselves "correctly" in such fundamentally masculine languages as Sanskrit.

Our uncritical acceptance of essentialized gender binaries, in other words, has blinded us to key evidence of historical actors on the "wrong side" of those binaries (let alone those who transcended such binaries altogether). This uncritical acceptance of masculinist ideologies risks not only inaccurate depictions of historical pasts; it naturalizes binary essentialism, and so can inadvertently justify patriarchal oppression as a "universal norm."[39] To counter this bias, I therefore draw heavily—if cautiously, bearing in mind its overwhelmingly Western and modern origins—on contemporary gender theory, which I argue provides us with the most powerful tools available to simultaneously (1) accurately identify the influence of historical

37 Those familiar with the historiography of Poḷonnaruva will recall at this point the presence of powerful men in the courts of Līlāvatī and Kalyāṇavatī, generally understood to have been the real power behind the throne with the women themselves as mere "puppet queens." As I discuss in Chapter Seven, this perspective is based primarily on, again, the descriptions of these courts in literary texts which sought to maintain kingship's inherent masculinity.

38 Quoted and discussed in Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State*, 122–23, 184.

39 To take a particularly pointed example, Blake Wentworth tells us that a constant premise of premodern India was that "Womanhood is a nature that responds to the bewitching radiance of power, instinctively yielding its promise of a nourishing fertility to a display of might experienced as natural, total, and right. Across its vast sweep of regions, eras, and cultures, India has always maintained a tightly welded bond between the sexual and the political." Wentworth, "Yearning for a Dreamed Real," 2.

women on the history of Buddhism, and (2) track the discursive construction of "womanhood" itself, and its supposed limitations. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, attending to inscriptional discourses about "femininity," *and* the actions of women recorded in those inscriptions, allows us to identify parallel developments throughout the period. To do so is not to dismiss "social reality" in favour of an abstract history of ideas; rather, it is to acknowledge that the discursive and the social are necessarily entwined and mutually constitutive.

It is worth expanding on this intertwining. A growing number of scholars have cautioned us against assuming that not only the specific genders of "man" and "woman," but the very ontological category of "gender" itself, are to be found in every historical context. Very often, these scholars argue, the mapping of "gender" and genders onto those contexts was a vital part of the colonial mission of categorization and control.[40] Such an understanding of "gender's" historical contingency necessitates that we embark on our study of gender from first principles: approaching our historical context *on its own terms*, and beginning from what we find there rather than from what we expect to be gendered. It is worth noting that none of Sri Lanka's medieval languages had a single conceptual term for which we can simply substitute "gender." Nonetheless, the social ontologies of medieval Sri Lanka do present us with a clear analogue for modern conceptions of "gender." Textual sources from the period maintained a strict ontological distinction between "men" (*puruṣa*) and "women" (*strī*), as well as other categories such as *ubhatobyañjanaka*s ("those with both signifiers") and the untranslatable *paṇḍaka*. These categories were understood to arise from essentialized *dharma*s (the *puruṣendriya* and *strīndriya* respectively), which resulted in strictly binarized physiologies (*liṅga*, *nimitta*) and psychologies (*ākalpa*, *kḷpta*).[41] This is, I suggest, at least *analogous* enough to modern gender ontologies to benefit from the application of modern gender theory.

In particular, I draw on Butler's arguments for the "performativity" of gender: the notion that genders are the contingent result of "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."[42] Such a focus on performativity lends itself well to a study of gender's connection with kingship, particularly in a premodern

40 Lugones, "Gender and Universality"; Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women*.

41 Shirley, "Wrestling with Essentialism."

42 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 43–44.

Asian context; we might well recall here Clifford Geertz's notion of the "theatre state," in which such stylized repetition played a central role. He tells us, for example, that:

> The state cult was not a cult of the state. It was an argument, made over and over again in the insistent vocabulary of ritual, that worldly status has a cosmic base, that hierarchy is the governing principle of the universe, and that the arrangements of human life are but approximations, more close or less, to those of the divine.[43]

As Andaya has more recently argued, in such argumentative performances of power "women were indispensable, usually in supporting roles but at times as directors and lead actors."[44] We might here productively turn to Loos's argument that the political culture of later Siam "encompassed the accumulation of women as a necessary expression of masculine power, not solely a mode of creating political alliances";[45] or, looking further afield, Patricia Ebrey's argument that *realpolitik* alone cannot explain the sheer numbers of women accumulated in Northern Song palaces.[46] The discursive history and performative construction of gender difference underlies the social strictures applied to specific genders; attending to this discursive history therefore *sharpens*, rather than distracts from, our sense of the social. Rather than only laying out the historical actions of "women"—actions subsequently obscured by inherently patriarchal "men"—this book therefore attends closely to shifting understandings of what, exactly, it meant to be a "man" or a "woman" in this period; how men and women were expected to perform their masculinity or femininity with respect, particularly, to Buddha-*śāsana*; and, crucially, how the subversion of these expectations by some individuals fundamentally altered both the construction of gender and the nature of Buddhism itself.

The Language(s) of Politics

The dominant account of language's relation to power in Southern Asia remains that of Sheldon Pollock's first-millennium "Sanskrit cosmopolis," giving way (around the time of the present study) to a "vernacular turn."[47]

43 Geertz, *Negara*, 102.

44 Andaya, "Women and the Performance of Power," 24.

45 Loos, "Sex in the Inner City," 888.

46 Ebrey, "Rethinking the Imperial Harem."

47 Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*. To be more precise, Pollock's focus is on literature's relation to power, with literature defined at points as high poetry (*kāvya*)

This vernacular turn represented, he argues, a self-conscious re-fashioning of vernacular languages on an explicitly Sanskritized model, in order that they could then carry out the functions (both literary and political) previously only possible in Sanskrit. Pollock's model has provoked considerable critical discussion, and so made a lasting and welcome theoretical contribution to our field. His treatment of Sri Lanka is nuanced, as it builds on the ever-insightful work of Charles Hallisey. Pollock notes several points on which Lankan literary culture challenges his model: critically, including the relative infrequency of Sanskrit-language royal inscriptions from the first millennium.[48] Unfortunately, his explanation for this divergence is misled by the common, but false, assumption of Pali's eternal relevance to Sri Lankan royal culture. He incorrectly suggests that earlier inscriptions were written in a "prosaic Pali," and that later Sinhala poets only accessed Sanskrit literary theory as "mediated through Pali."[49] Neither was the case, as we will see in subsequent chapters. An alternative model for understanding the linguistic choices made in royal inscriptions of the Poḷonnaruva period is clearly necessary.

Here I find it useful to turn to Pocock's concept of a "political language," as a shorthand for the linguistic context in which a given utterance is made and the range of intelligible meanings which could therefore have been intended by it.[50] Individual words never have fixed meanings; rather, they have subjective and ever-varying frames of reference, specific ways in which they can be used to communicate specific and intelligible meanings. This frame of reference constitutes the language-system of a given utterance, which both (1) demarcates the conceptual world by determining the range of conceivable and intelligible utterances, and (2) lends a certain authority to utterances which *are* so meaningful: utterances which we might call, following Blackburn's invocation of Derrida, "citational."[51] Importantly, such systems are to be understood as neither closed nor static. Rather, any given utterance can seek to shift the underlying paradigm—the range of

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but elsewhere (particularly in his Chapter Three) also encompassing inscriptional culture.

48 Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*, 386–87; building on Hallisey, "Works and Persons." Other points of divergence include the extremely early use of Sinhala-language Brahmi inscriptions, and the early evidence of poetic Sinhala in the Sīgiri inscriptions.

49 Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*, 387.

50 Pocock, "Languages."

51 Blackburn, *Buddhist-Inflected Sovereignties*, 177–81.

intelligible meanings—by conforming to (other elements of) the existing paradigm closely enough to borrow its authority.

A concrete example may help to illuminate this rather abstract discussion. Let us say that an individual makes the claim "I am a good Buddhist king." To understand what it means to be "a good Buddhist king," we must first consider how both that individual and others in their immediate intellectual context elsewhere describe goodness, Buddhist-ness, and kingliness. These descriptions may be indirect: the statement "As a good Buddhist king, I routinely read *sūtra*s" is, implicitly, an argument that "reading *sūtra*s" is a behaviour expected of such kings; the statement "Behold that good Buddhist king, respectfully asking monks to recite *sūtra*s in his presence," meanwhile, may constitute a counterargument that kings ought *not* to read *sūtra*s themselves. Any of these statements in isolation may be taken as merely expressing a general admiration for a particular monarch; read together, however, a conceptual tension begins to emerge: ought a "good Buddhist king" read, or listen to the monastic recitation of, *sūtra*s?

What this means for us, methodologically, is that we cannot simply assume that even a concept as apparently self-evident as "protecting the Buddha-*śāsana*" maintained a stable referent throughout Buddhist history. We must carefully attend to the circumstances under which such terms were uttered; to other contemporary uses of the same term to which the utterer might be responding; and to *their* circumstances of utterance, and so on, before we can begin to suggest what might have been intended by such an utterance. Such an approach is particularly relevant to a study of Poḷonnaruva precisely because of the more literal "languages" in use at the time. Rather than the Sanskrit term *buddhaśāsana*, one might choose instead to utter the Pali cognate *buddhasāsana*—indicating, perhaps, a proclivity towards the Mahāvihāra's Pali-oriented Buddhism over its more cosmopolitan rivals. Alternatively, the *eḷu* ("pure") Sinhala cognate *budusasun* was also available, which might speak to yet a different set of concerns. The choice between these three alternatives was not merely determined by which language one happened to be operating in (itself, of course, a choice); all three, and various combinations thereof, were available as loanwords when writing or speaking Sinhala. Yet further choices were available in the Tamil language, in which the cognate term could be written in Grantha script as *buddhaśāsaṉam*, or in Tamil script as *puttarcācaṉam*. Paying close attention to which of these variants are deployed in any given text therefore provides us with useful clues about the author's wider linguistic context: they may be writing in Sinhala, but are they "thinking" in Sanskrit or in Pali?

These linguistic choices are often obscured by the tendency, in Theravāda Studies, to standardize all terms in the Pali spellings: the pure Sinhala *daham* and Sanskrit loanword *dharmaya* are both often "translated" into Pali *dhamma*. I reject this approach, attempting instead to reflect as accurately as possible the terms actually used in my sources. This should not be taken as a dismissal of Pali's significance in the history of Theravāda Buddhism. Rather, it is an argument against presupposing that significance, for two crucial reasons. First, attending only to Pali impoverishes our understanding of the motivations of monarchs who, ultimately, set up the conditions under which Pali flourished. Second, and relatedly, it blinds us to the significance of moments in which technical language expressed in Pali *does* appear in royal discourses. If we suppose Pali to have always been *the* prestige language of Buddhist kings in Sri Lanka, it is easy to dismiss such moments as everyday and insignificant. Instead, I demonstrate throughout this book that such engagements with Pali shed new light on the circumstances under which Pali-language texts and ritual practices came to dominate Buddhism in Sri Lanka and, eventually, across the Indian Ocean. Tracing the trajectories of certain words and phrases across the period's inscriptions, noting both continuities and points of disjuncture, offers us a more nuanced sense of who was emulating or critiquing whom, or reading what, or listening to whose preachings. I show that these trajectories are not always, as scholars like Pollock have assumed, direct routes from the Pali canon into political discourse. Rather, they wend more circuitous routes: through Tamil and Sanskrit, through literary manuals and poetry, and—sometimes—only subsequently into the rarefied realm of Pali scholastic writing.

To be more explicit about the methodological aims of this book: we cannot write histories of medieval Sri Lanka without engaging, to the best of our abilities, with all *four* of medieval Sri Lanka's languages. While Sinhala and Pali have long been a strong focus of epigraphists and textualists alike, sources in these languages have only relatively rarely been read as participant in a wider Sanskritic world. Tamil epigraphy, meanwhile, has been effectively siloed into a discrete field of study. It is indicative, I think, that the recent effort by the Department of Archaeology to republish Sri Lankan inscriptions in a single series (the *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, discussed further below) contains only Sinhala-, Sanskrit-, and Pali-language inscriptions. Tamil-language inscriptions, meanwhile, are collected in a distinct volume (*Tamil Inscriptions in Sri Lanka*) published by the Department of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs. While many scholars, particularly those based in Sri Lanka, have certainly been capable of working in all four of these languages effectively, it is only relatively rarely that we have seen serious efforts to engage with primary sources in their original languages; to critically re-translate key texts and inscriptions in those languages; and to attempt to track between these languages the history of ideas and practices.[52]

Evidentiary Bases

Central to my efforts in tracking these discursive developments is the wider range of evidence on which I draw. As I have suggested above, the present historiography of Sri Lanka closely follows the narratives presented in a limited set of textual sources. These sources are, often, invaluable resources. But a myopic focus on texts alone paints only one side of a multifaceted image. This is particularly the case when we consider questions of gender. In his studies of Indian Buddhist inscriptions, Gregory Schopen has suggested that:

> If, because of an almost exclusive reliance on textual sources, our picture of the actual Indian Buddhist monk is more than a little skewed, the picture of the Indian Buddhist nun—for the same reason—has been almost obliterated.[53]

Historians of Sri Lanka have therefore increasingly turned to material evidence as a valuable counterweight against the biases of these sources. We now have available excellent studies of how art,[54] architecture,[55] landscapes both urban and natural,[56] and even archaeological efforts themselves have operated as sites of discursive production.[57] The present book follows in this "material turn," eschewing later narrative texts almost entirely in favour of a range of data from the Poḷonnaruva period itself: textual, yes; but also architectural, plastic, numismatic, and—above all—epigraphic.

As I have indicated above, inscriptions are far from underutilized in Sri Lankan history. They are primarily read, however, at face value: as sources

52 I am particularly inspired by the multilingual work of S. Pathmanathan and R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, although much of this remains in a firmly positivist historical mode. More recent works, which adopt a text-critical approach to their multilingual sources, include Henry, *Ravana's Kingdom*; McKinley, *Mountain at the Center of the World*; and the unpublished dissertation of Friedrich, "Merchants, Ministers, and Monks."

53 Schopen, "On Monks, Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices," 163.

54 Bandaranayake, *Rock and Wall Paintings*; Holt, *The Religious World of Kīrti Śrī*.

55 Bandaranayake, *Sinhalese Monastic Architecture*; Basnayake, *Sri Lankan Monastic Architecture*; Meegama, *Temples to the Buddha and the Gods*.

56 Duncan, *The City as Text*; McKinley, *Mountain at the Center of the World*.

57 Blackburn, "Early Preservation Efforts"; Jeganathan, "Authorising History."

to be mined for detailed positivist data about the locations of *vihāra*s or the titles of royal officials. This kind of data can, as studies from throughout Southern Asia have increasingly shown, prove extremely effective in challenging the gendered biases of textual sources.[58] But this is not the only way to read inscriptions, or indeed to "read" material evidence more generally. We might turn here to Dominick LaCapra's useful distinction between the "documentary" elements of a given text, which situate it "in terms of factual or literal dimensions involving reference to empirical reality and conveying information about it," from those which are "work-like," which seek to intervene in that empirical reality.[59] LaCapra stresses that all texts—even those which may appear *prima facie* to be merely documentary—contain elements of both the documentary and the work-like, if to varying degrees. This means that "a documentary historiography that tries to exclude interpretation or to see it only in the guise of bias, subjectivity, or anachronism" is therefore necessarily missing half of the point of a given text.[60] For all that inscriptions can, therefore, provide us with positivist data, they are also rich "textual" sources in their own right, which tightly control the manner in which that data is presented.

This kind of approach has been increasingly applied to premodern Asia. Within South Asian Studies, we have been charged by Ronald Inden, Daud Ali, and Jonathan Walters with moving from a "philological to a dialogical" mode of reading: to consider texts (particularly inscriptional texts) not,

> as dead monuments, as mere sources of factual information or the expression of a creative and exotic genius that we can only appreciate in itself for itself, or as the accidental expression/sedimentation of some larger structure or context…[but] as living arguments both in their historic uses and by virtue of our re-enactment of their arguments in our own present.[61]

Once again, this has applications to gender: in studies which particularly inspired my own, Alice Collett, Cynthia Talbot, and Ashley Thompson have demonstrated the benefits of close attention to gendered inscriptional

58 Andaya, "Studying Women and Gender"; Collett, "Women as Teachers and Disciples"; Milligan, "The Economic Power of Women"; Schopen, "On Monks, Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices"; Suprodjo, "Women of the Old Javanese Period"; Talbot, "Temples, Donors, and Gifts."

59 LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History," 250.

60 LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History," 272.

61 Inden et al., *Querying the Medieval*, 14; see further Ali, "Royal Eulogy," particularly 166. I have taken further hermeneutical inspiration from Mucciarelli, "How to Carve a King"; and Olivelle, "Aśoka's Inscriptions."

personae throughout Southern Asia.[62] Within Buddhist Studies, too, a growing number of scholars have moved towards more three-dimensional readings of inscriptions, appreciative not just of what they *say* but also of what they *do*. Most recently, Stephanie Balkwill's project on "Buddhist Epigraphy and Women's History" has explored the possibility that "Buddhist" inscriptions—by which we mean inscriptions which evince a particular dedication to Buddhist ideals or practice, particularly in contexts in which such forms of dedication are not dominant—may have been a particularly useful means of subverting the gendered conventions which dominate other forms of media across the Buddhist world.[63] And more generally, we might also look to exemplars from Classical and Medieval Studies, which have long taken more methodologically interesting approaches to inscriptions.[64]

I therefore emulate in this work a growing body of scholars who take seriously the rhetorical elements of Lankan inscriptions, from differing periods, as engaged with and themselves constituent of Lankan history.[65] In doing so for Poḷonnaruva-period inscriptions, a rather alternative version of events begins to emerge: one which does not consist solely of the actions of masculine kings, which does not presume the eventual and rightful ascendancy of Pali-oriented Buddhism, and which does not take for granted the ahistorical consistency of institutions and concepts such as "kingship" itself. Instead, we see more clearly how the dynamic agencies of noblewomen, monks, ministers, and—yes, still—monarchs together allowed for the contingent emergence of new kinds of Buddhist kingship in medieval Sri Lanka.

The nature of the inscriptional record imposes some caveats onto all the conclusions drawn throughout this book. We are faced not only with the typical restrictions of incomplete and ongoing archaeological surveys, which still routinely uncover previously undocumented inscriptions;[66] the

62 See, respectively, Collett, "Reimagining the Sātavāhana Queen Nāgaṇṇikā"; Talbot, "Rudrama-Devi, the Female King"; Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State*.

63 A forthcoming special issue of *Hualin* 8, no. 2, will, we hope, elucidate further what we have dubbed—tongue firmly in cheek—the "Malibu School of Philology."

64 An exhaustive list is impossible; I will only note that I have found particularly helpful the essays collected in Petrovic et al., *The Materiality of Text*.

65 Berkwitz, "Reimagining Buddhist Kingship"; Blackburn, *Buddhist-Inflected Sovereignties*; Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*; Walters, "Buddhist History."

66 A recent archaeological survey reports an additional 335 inscriptions, yet to be edited and published, found within a 50km radius of Poḷonnaruva, 62 of which appear to be within the temporal scope of the present study. Manuel et al., "Low Density Urbanism in Medieval Sri Lanka."

repurposing of some inscriptions in the works of later monarchs and then colonial administrators, disguising their original locations and context;[67] and, of course, weather damage which leaves sections of text entirely unreadable. Additionally, Sri Lankan inscriptions are particularly plagued by incomplete *publications* even of those inscriptions which are known, and by the extremely limited access offered to researchers (particularly, but not exclusively, foreign researchers) to unpublished estampages and records.[68] The majority of those inscriptions which have been edited and published appeared in volumes of the *Epigraphia Zeylanica* (*EZ*); others, however, appeared elsewhere, and until recently no attempt had been made to take stock of all published Lankan inscriptions (let alone index them with adequate metadata).

Several decades ago, the Department of Archaeology set out to correct this. A series of volumes—the *Inscriptions of Ceylon* (*IC*)—aimed to bring together all previously published inscriptions, plus additional materials made available to the editors from the Department's archives, in chronologically arranged volumes. Unfortunately, there have been several setbacks in this project. Most crucially, *IC* vols. 3 and 4, which together should have covered the first half of the first millennium CE, have yet to be published. Thankfully, *IC* 6, which covers the Poḷonnaruva period, was published in 2007; all translations of Sinhala-, Pali-, and Sanskrit-language inscriptions in the present work are based on these editions. However, this volume entirely excludes inscriptions published in Tamil, without any explanation or indeed acknowledgement of their absence. I therefore supplement this volume with Pathmanathan's *Tamil Inscriptions in Sri Lanka* (*TISL*), published not by the Department of Archaeology but by the Department of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs.

Between these two volumes, 141 inscriptions fall within the temporal span of this study. While not all are in their original location—and early colonial archaeologists are often frustratingly vague about the exact findsites—

67 Blackburn, "Early Preservation Efforts."

68 COVID-19 related disruptions to fieldwork prevented me from attempting to access these archives myself. Here I follow anecdotal remarks made in confidence by colleagues, corroborated by published remarks like those of ven. Dehigapse Pannasara, who writes of inscriptions relevant to his research "in the possession of the Archaeological Department, still unpublished. But, unfortunately, students of research are precluded from making any use of them, owing to the attitude of the officials": Dehigapse Pannasara *thero*, *Sanskrit Literature*, 55.

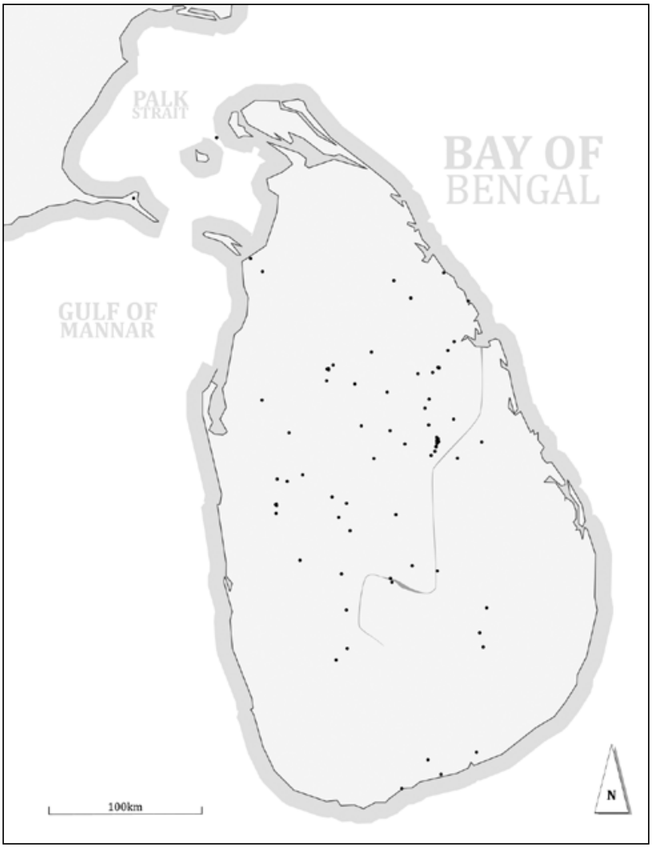

Figure 5. A map of known inscriptional findsites. Map by the author, using geospatial data from OpenStreetMaps, available under an Open Database Licence.

I have been able to geolocate, with varying degrees of accuracy, 121 of these inscriptions. These are plotted in Figure 5.

Before turning to the close readings which constitute the methodological core of this book, it is worthwhile attending to some features of the corpus as a whole. We might begin by observing that the distribution of findsites is strongly clustered around Poḷonnaruva itself, with several smaller clusters further afield, particularly at the key ritual site of Anurādhapura. Several factors again limit any conclusions we might draw from this distribution. Once again, we face the issue of an incomplete inscriptional record: we do not know what data we might be missing for any number of reasons. When it comes to geographical distribution, this risk is particularly heightened. Inscriptions located within areas already known to have historical significance (i.e., Poḷonnaruva and Anurādhapura), which have therefore received focused archaeological attention, are simply more likely to have been found than those inscriptions dispersed throughout the wider island. We must therefore read the distribution pattern shown above with some caution.

We might also note the distribution of languages across Poḷonnaruva's inscriptions. As discussed above, studies of the Poḷonnaruva period, particularly when focused on Buddhism, have tended to draw primarily on Sinhala- and Pali-language sources. We have already noted that Pali is poorly represented in the corpus, appearing in only two inscriptions (both by royal consorts). Sinhala, on the other hand, does indeed dominate the corpus. 114 of the 141 inscriptions are written mostly or entirely in Sinhala language and script (80.9 percent). But to focus exclusively on Sinhala-language production in our period would be to overlook the twenty-six inscriptions (or 18.4 percent of the total corpus) which deployed Tamil. While no inscriptions from the period were created solely in Sanskrit, sixteen (11.3 percent) did use at least some Sanskrit (typically in opening or closing summative verses).

One final trend which emerges from the corpus as a whole is its gendered dynamics. Only eleven out of the 141 inscriptions (7.8 percent) are attributed to female donors or dated in a female monarch's regnal year. This may seem a slim foundation for a book focused on gender. We must bear in mind, however, that inscriptions by, or recording the activities of, women constitute only five of the 367 inscriptions included in *IC* vol. 5, covering the late Anurādhapura period (1.3 percent). Something has clearly shifted. The late Anurādhapuran corpus differs, in turn, from the *earliest* corpus of Sri Lankan inscriptions—cave inscriptions from the early centuries BCE—which contain a relatively high proportion of inscriptions by women (both monastic and lay). In the absence of *IC* vols. 3 and 4, and therefore of a comprehensive inscriptional record of the earlier first millennium, it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the circumstances under which this shift took place. Nonetheless, a general trend is evident. Women were active donors, and epigraphers, in the earliest stages of Buddhism on the island, only to fade into the background by the late Anurādhapuran period. This reflects a broader trend in early South Asian Buddhism, in which women are often heavily represented in early corpora of donative inscriptions.[69] However, unlike in mainland South Asia, Poḷonnaruva's royal women begin to reverse this trend, and to reassert themselves in the inscriptional record. That this occurred in the same period in which not one but two royal women sat on the throne requires historical explanation.

69 Milligan, "The Economic Power of Women"; Tournier, "A Tide of Merit," 25.

Outline of the Book

The above arguments are laid out in the following chapters, which proceed in a generally chronological order.

Chapter One outlines, for those unfamiliar with the history of Sri Lanka or of South Asia more generally, the four main bodies of "political thought" available to Poḷonnaruva's monarchs: those communicated in Sanskrit, Pali, Sinhala, and Tamil languages. This distinction is heuristic and tenuous. The point is not to define, in rigid terms, what a "Pali version of kingship" *should* look like, against which we can judge later monarchs; but rather to give us the conceptual tools to identify when these monarchs (or others) draw on and intertwine multiple discursive traditions.

Chapter Two focuses on the overthrow of Cōḻa governance by Vijayabāhu I, and his establishment of an independent kingdom at Poḷonnaruva. Later narrative accounts, from the *Mahāvaṃsa* onwards, portray Vijayabāhu's rise as a rejection of Tamil-speaking and Śiva-worshipping Cōḻa rule in order to "return" to Sinhala- and Pali-oriented Buddhist kingship. I argue, however, that Vijayabāhu's reign is best understood as a localization of Cōḻa institutions of rule. In particular, I suggest that Vijayabāhu's inscriptional practices were deliberate emulations of earlier inscriptions (particularly those of Mahinda IV) informed by literary manuals like the *Siyabaslakara* (itself modelled on Daṇḍin's Sanskrit *Kāvyālaṅkāra*). The "Sinhala Buddhist kingship" inaugurated by Vijayabāhu, in other words, represents a moment of re-constitution, informed by wider Tamil and Sanskritic models, rather than a simple "return" to a pre-Cōḻa *status quo*.

Chapters Three and Four cover the period between Vijayabāhu I and Parākramabāhu I, characterized by political division and fraught intradynastic conflict. A central problematic of this period is the apparent lack, for long periods of time, of any claims to total kingship over the island. While earlier historians have attempted to explain this by recourse to unmet ideals of kingship, I suggest in Chapter Three that it is best understood as an intentional power-balancing arrangement entered into by the island's political leaders, as they cautiously jockeyed for position. In this unstable balance of power, greater emphasis was placed on the dynastic pedigrees of consorts and wives brought to the island from powerful mainland kingdoms, from which Lanka's kings could borrow prestige, and on whom they could potentially call for military support. Once on the island, however, it seems that many of these women were not content to merely be accessories to their husbands' claims to power. Their inscriptions speak to the considerable economic, political, and religious influence they wielded throughout the interregnal period.

Among these women was the Great Lady Sundarā: consort of Vikramabāhu I and mother of Gajabāhu II. These men's courts are often excluded from histories of Buddhism in Sri Lanka on the grounds of their supposed "non-Buddhist" or even Śaiva affiliations: I show, in Chapter Four, that our evidence for such affiliations is late and tenuous, and argue that we ought to reconsider their place in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism. In particular, I show that Sundarā's inscriptions represent both the earliest known use of Pali in a royal inscription, and the first evidence of sustained royal patronage of a particular Mahāvihāra-affiliated monastery, the Diṁbulāgala Vihāra. This monastery would later provide the leaders for Parākramabāhu's "purification" of the *saṅgha*, the central focus of Chapter Five: a position of prominence likely made possible thanks to Sundarā's patronage.

Sundarā's inscriptions are far from the only connection between Parākramabāhu and the court of Gajabāhu. I further show that Gajabāhu's inscriptions, including his joint inscription with Parākramabāhu I, were concerned with several of what would come to be central features of the post-reform *saṅgha*: specifically, the cult of the Buddha's Tooth Relic and the royal descent from Mahāsammata laid out in the Mahāvihāra's *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*. The influence of Gajabāhu and his mother Sundarā on the eventual form of the post-reform *saṅgha*, I suggest, therefore merits reconsideration. This then necessitates reconsideration in turn of the nature of Parākramabāhu's intervention into the *saṅgha* itself. In Chapter Five, I suggest that millenarian concerns, in a Buddhaghosan chronology, provided a central motivation here. Finally, I demonstrate a sustained influence of Sanskrit and Tamil political culture on Parākramabāhu's self-representation as a monarch, which has been systematically downplayed in modern scholarship.

Chapters Six and Seven deal with figures often overlooked in the extant historiography, due to their coming to prominence in the tumultuous period after Parākramabāhu's death. These figures, however, both left behind significant material evidence which allows us to further probe the development of "Buddhist kingship" in the later Poḷonnaruva period and so merit more sustained attention than they have been afforded in the extant historiography.

Chapter Six turns to Niśśaṅka Malla (r. ca. 1187–1196), the most prolific inscriptionist of any Sri Lankan monarch. In his vast inscriptional corpus, I identify a recurring focus on his immediate family—including consorts, a daughter, and possibly also his mother—as vital extensions of his kingly persona. The shifting configuration of this family over the course of his reign suggests a consolidation of his vision of kingship as exclusively and emphatically high-caste and Buddhist. This was an attempt, I suggest, primarily to secure the future dynastic claims of his son, Vīrabāhu I. But they also covered the possibility that female family members may need to take the throne, to protect the dynasty's legacy. This resulted in the most explicit theorization of the possibility of female regnancy (albeit in a wording which more suggests *regency*) in premodern Sri Lanka—a possibility which would prove necessary after Vīrabāhu's unexpectedly early death.

Finally, Chapter Seven turns to the inscriptions of three royal women: Līlāvatī, a former consort of Parākramabāhu who would later rule herself in three separate periods (1197–1200, 1209–1210, and 1210–1211); Kalyāṇavatī, a widow of Niśśaṅka Malla who ruled 1202–1208; and Candavatī, another former consort of Parākramabāhu I, with those inscription we opened this Introduction. Their inscriptions together, I argue, provide a powerful challenge to established gender politics. Līlāvatī in particular is noteworthy both for the central role she clearly played in the period's power struggles (evidenced by her repeated depositions and reinstatements), and for her consistent policy across these reigns of patronizing new forms of Buddhist literature in both Pali and Sinhala. Contrasting her portrayal in these patronized literary works with her inscriptional self-representation allows us, I argue, to critically reflect on assumptions of kingship's inherent masculinity—assumptions which Līlāvatī's regnancy necessarily challenged. I conclude by returning to the inscription of Candavatī, which I argue represents an attempt on her behalf to leverage Līlāvatī's unsettling of the gendered social order to her own advantage. Together, the inscriptions of these women illuminate the extent to which even the most apparently self-evident features of medieval Lankan political culture were in fact contingent, and therefore contestable.