

Chapter 4

KINGSHIP OVERLOOKED

THE COURTS OF VIKRAMABĀHU (1111–1132) AND GAJABĀHU II (1132–1153)

THE PRECEDING CHAPTER largely focused on contestations in the political landscape outside Poḷonnaruva's royal palace: from the Sacred Quadrangle, within the citadel walls; to the farther-flung regions of Ruhuna and Māyāraṭa. This follows a more general trend in histories of the “inter-regnal” period to set aside the internal machinations of Poḷonnaruva's court as something alien or even inimical to the properly Buddhist culture of the island. Vikramabāhu I and his son Gajabāhu II are frequently regarded by modern historians, again following the lead of the *Mahāvamsa*, as being “non-Buddhist” or even “Śaiva” kings.¹ In this view, the transition from Gajabāhu II to Parākramabāhu I is therefore characterized—in an echo of the Vijayabāhu narrative—as a triumph of Theravāda Buddhism over its others.

In this chapter I argue instead that the Poḷonnaruvan court between the reigns of Vijayabāhu and Parākramabāhu was, in fact, far more religiously dynamic than these accounts might let on, and that we exclude it from our historical narrative to our detriment. In the first section, I show that—leaving aside later textual accounts—there is little evidence for the supposedly Śaiva status of either king, and none at all for the repression or neglect of Buddhism under their reigns. On the contrary, we have considerable evidence for Gajabāhu, in particular, patronizing Buddhist institutions and even drawing on Pali Buddhist textual sources in his inscriptions. Specifically, I argue that his use of the title *aṇasakviti* (Skt. *ājñā-cakravartin*, P. *āññā-cakkavattin*) in a Sinhala-language inscription—the earliest extant instance of a royal *cakravartin* claim in the Sinhala language on the island—may be a reference to Buddhaghosa's distinction between the monastic *dharmacakka* (Skt. *dharmacakra*, the wheel or “sphere” of *dharma*) and the royal *āññā-cakka* (Skt. *ājñā-cakra*, the sphere of command).

¹ Kiribamune, “Royal Consecration”; Pathmanathan, “Hinduism,” 58–60; Paranavitana, “Religion, Literature, and Art,” 566.

The possibility that Buddhism—and, more specifically, the Pali-language Buddhism of Buddhaghosa—was of interest in Gajabāhu’s court offers us new insights into the development of Buddhist institutional history during this “interregal” period. In particular, this allows us to more closely interrogate the connections between Gajabāhu’s court and the Diṃbulāgala (P. Udumbaragiri) monastery, some sixteen kilometres south of Poḷonnaruva. It was from this community, as discussed in the following chapter, that Parākramabāhu selected the monk Mahākāśyapa to oversee his historical intervention into the *saṅgha*, and so arguably set the course of Buddhist history in Southern Asia. As I discuss further below, existing explanations for Parākramabāhu’s choice (as ever, mostly derived from retrospective textual accounts) are unsatisfactory, necessitating further consideration of how Diṃbulāgala and its chief monk Mahākāśyapa came to prominence. I point to a factor, until now largely overlooked, in the rise of the Diṃbulāgala’s fortunes: the patronage of the Great Lady Sundarā (Sundaramahādevī), consort of Vikramabāhu and mother of Gajabāhu, as documented in her two extant inscriptions. These inscriptions suggest, I argue, an enduring interest in Pali-oriented monastic communities, and the Diṃbulāgala monastery in particular, unusual among royal patrons to this point. Sundarā’s patronage may therefore represent a watershed moment in Theravāda history—a moment which has gone underappreciated due to (1) our assumption that Theravāda Buddhism had *always* been closely entangled with Lankan royalty, rendering her specific engagement un-novel and un-interesting, and (2) the ease with which both later monastics and modern historians have dismissed the agency of women from histories of Buddhism.

In the final part of the chapter, I turn to the “treaty inscription” at the Saṅgamu Vihāra (IC 6.11), created in the names of both Gajabāhu and Parākramabāhu together. From this inscription, I suggest that there may have been more continuity between the two monarchs than the retrospective accounts—which overwhelmingly position them as bitter rivals—may have let on. This allows us to construct an alternative genealogy of Parākramabāhu’s eventual intervention into the *saṅgha*. His selection of a Mahāvihāra-aligned monk, Mahākāśyapa, to lead his reforms may be traced back to the court of his uncle Gajabāhu, and perhaps even to the influence of Gajabāhu’s own mother Sundarā.

Against “Non-Buddhist” Kingship

In this section, I push back against the characterization of Gajabāhu II—and, to a lesser extent, his father Vikramabāhu I—as “inadequately Buddhist,” and therefore against the supposedly stark division between the reigns of these kings and that of Gajabāhu’s nephew and political rival Parākramabāhu I. I first review the evidence for Gajabāhu’s supposed Śaiva leanings, primarily as presented by Sirima Kiribamune.² In a contrast to Kiribamune’s wider corpus of writings about the period, which is meticulous and compelling,³ I show that the evidence marshalled in support of the Śaiva hypothesis is late and generally unconvincing. I then turn to evidence from Gajabāhu’s own inscriptional record, which suggests considerable engagement with both Buddhist institutions and Pali Buddhist textual sources.

The first body of evidence for Gajabāhu’s supposed non-Buddhism comes from retrospective narratives. Most frequently cited is the *Mahāvamsa*’s condemnation of Gajabāhu for having brought “princes of sinful view” (*rājakumare pāpadiṭṭhino*) from abroad, generally understood to mean Śaivas from South India.⁴ This occurs, however, in the midst of the narrative valorizing Parākramabāhu’s great victory over Gajabāhu, and even those historians who otherwise hew closely to the *Mahāvamsa*’s account treat this reference as an “excuse” and “pretext to justify [Parākramabāhu’s] aggression into [Gajabāhu’s] territory.”⁵ After this point, as Justin Henry has shown, Gajabāhu’s memory was completely excised from Sinhala-language texts (beginning with the *Pūjāvaliya*, near-contemporary with the *Mahāvamsa* extension).⁶ Some later Tamil-language accounts, primarily the *Śrītaḥṣiṇakailācapurāṇam* (“History of the Auspicious Southern Kailāsa”) and the *Kōṇēcar Kalveṭṭu* (“Inscription of [Tiruk]kōṇēsva[ram Temple]”), have been interpreted as identifying Gajabāhu II as a Hindu.⁷ However, Henry dates these works to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively,

2 Kiribamune, “Royal Consecration”; Kiribamune, “Buddhism.”

3 See particularly Wickramasinghe, “Sources” (under her maiden name); Wickramasinghe, “The Age of Parākramabāhu I”; Kiribamune, “The Mahāvamsa.”

4 *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, ch. 70, vv. 53–55; cited in Kiribamune, “Royal Consecration,” 26; Gunawardana, “People of the Lion,” 64.

5 Liyanagamage, “Decline,” 97.

6 Henry, “Distant Shores of Dharma,” 125.

7 See the respective discussions in Gunawardana, “People of the Lion,” 64; Pathmanathan, “Hinduism,” 58–60.

long past our period.⁸ At least in the case of the *Śrītakṣiṇakailācapurāṇam*, it is not clear that it is even Gajabāhu II intended here. The context makes it more likely that this is a legend of the second century monarch Gajabāhu I, who by this point was well-enmeshed in the Tamil historiographic tradition.⁹ The *Kōṇēcar Kalveṭṭu* seems to more clearly focus on Gajabāhu II.¹⁰ However, its (seventeenth century) concern is so explicitly on providing a string of patron monarchs for its titular temple's credentials we ought to take it extremely cautiously as evidence for the religious orientation of a twelfth century king.

Putting aside later retrospective narratives, much of the argument for Vikramabāhu and Gajabāhu's status as Śaivas rests on the fact that both monarchs seemed to tolerate, or perhaps even patronize, "Śaiva temples." As discussed in previous chapters, however, such starkly dichotomous accounts of sectarian patronage are an ill fit for the reality of Poḷonnaruva, and more typically reflect colonial and post-colonial attitudes towards religious difference. We see a useful illustration of this dynamic in a pillar-inscription of Gajabāhu's found in Matale District (IC 6.9), recording a donation to a religious official named Mihindu (P. Mahinda). Mihindu is described as having created painted images for a Lakṣmī *pūjā* (possibly, although readings of the key word are contested, images of Kṛṣṇa). But he is also called the "leader" (*nā*, Skt. *nāyaka*) of the Tooth-Relic Procession (*perāra*, mod. Sin. *perahāra*) and of the Tooth Relic itself. This hybrid patronage—of an individual who seems to be simultaneously involved in Vaiṣṇava and Buddhist ritual practices—is, certainly, what Henry calls "religiously eclectic."¹¹ But this was hardly unusual for Poḷonnaruva-period monarchs, who as we have seen in earlier chapters continued to tolerate or even support theist shrines throughout the royal capital.¹²

Beyond this conceptual rejection of the "theist patronage" argument, however, we can also turn a critical eye to more specific claims. A frequent argument rests on Gajabāhu's "retirement" to Kantale after his surrender to Parākramabāhu. We know from earlier inscriptions at Kantale that it was a *brahmadeya*—a community of Brahmins supported by royal land grants, characteristic of the Cōḷa imperial apparatus—established during the period

8 Henry, "Distant Shores of Dharma," 95, 115.

9 Obeyesekere, "Gajabāhu."

10 Henry, "Distant Shores of Dharma," 120, 123.

11 Henry, "Distant Shores of Dharma," 122.

12 See further Meegama, *Temples to the Buddha and the Gods*.

of Cōḷa rule.¹³ Gajabāhu's retirement to Kantale is reported primarily in the *Mahāvamsa*, but two extant inscriptions recording Gajabāhu's intervention into boundary disputes do support the notion that he had a particular interest in this settlement.¹⁴ We might add to this an inscription found within Kantale Śiva Temple (*TISL* 29). The donor is not named, but based on the date (ca. 1145, well within Gajabāhu's regnal years) and the honorific plural verb used to mark the donation (*iṭṭār*), it has been tentatively assigned to Gajabāhu.¹⁵ This is all at least *suggestive* of a link between Gajabāhu and Kantale. However, nothing in these inscriptions—shorn of the *Mahāvamsa*'s account—can be taken as evidence that he later dwelled there himself. It certainly cannot allow us to conclude, as does Kiribamune, that Gajabāhu chose to retire here specifically *because* the town itself was “clearly a Hindu centre.”¹⁶ Even if we did have strong evidence that Gajabāhu eventually settled down in Kantale, this seems to be to be rather shaky grounds on which to base an exclusive religious identity.

Kiribamune's arguments regarding the religious identity of Vikramabāhu I, Gajabāhu's father, are even more insistent—despite the fact that, “for some unknown reason, the [*Mahāvamsa*] is reluctant to make this admission.”¹⁷ She presents two pieces of evidence in support of this claim. First, she notes that the Śaiva temple patronized by Cundhamalli (discussed in the preceding chapter) was named for a Vikrama Calāmēka (Skt. Vikrama Śalamegha), whom she identifies as Vikramabāhu I. Pathmanathan, however, has argued that the placename predates even Vijayabāhu I, and so this was likely a throne name used by a Cōḷa governor.¹⁸ Second, Kiribamune argues that Vikramabāhu's sole extant inscription (*IC* 6.6) compares him (indirectly) to both Śiva and Viṣṇu, but not to any specific “Buddhist” parallels.¹⁹ However, as we have seen in the inscriptions of Vijayabāhu I discussed in the previous chapter, such parallels were commonplace even among kings now heralded as adequately “Buddhist.” We have little evidence, in other words, for the supposedly “Śaiva” affiliations of either father or son. We have *no* evidence

13 *TISL* 19. On the *brahmadeya* see Hall, *Trade and Statecraft in the Age of the Colas*, 6.

14 *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, ch. 71, v. 1; *TISL* 28a and b.

15 See discussion in Pathmanathan, *Tamil Inscriptions in the Colombo National Museum*, 329.

16 Kiribamune, “Royal Consecration,” 27.

17 Kiribamune, “Buddhism,” 122.

18 Pathmanathan, “Vikramabāhu and Vikrama Salamevan.”

19 Kiribamune, “Royal Consecration,” 25.

from the period itself that Gajabāhu was in any way inimical to the Buddha-*śāsana* in the manner described in the *Mahāvamsa*.

In contrast, the inscriptional record provides us with fairly solid evidence for Gajabāhu's ongoing support of Buddhist religious institutions. Perhaps the most explicit of these is an inscription carved on a stone pillar near Anurādhapura, which reads:

Svasti! Śrī! May the merit in the "Gajabā Embankment"—donated to the Ruvanmāli *mahasā* ("Great Reliquary," Skt. *mahācaitya*), established for five thousand [years], by the auspicious Lord Gajabāhu born from the solar lineage—be rejoiced at by [other] kings as though they had made it themselves. One who protects this, without doing harm [will have] success! (IC 6.10).

This is a difficult inscription to reconcile with the popular image of Gajabāhu as a "non-Buddhist" king. Here he tells us that he has made a significant donation to a Buddhist institution: the Great Stūpa of the Mahāvihāra complex (here called the Ruvanmāli), first built by the semi-mythical king Duṭṭugāmuṇu.²⁰ The inscription is capped with a small carved image of a reliquary, flanked by the sun and moon to symbolize the longevity of the grant. The donation is also explicitly framed as an act of merit (*pin*, Skt. *punya*), which is then dedicated to Gajabāhu's rival monarchs "as though they had made it themselves." The verb translated here as "rejoiced at," *anumo vā* (from P. *anumodanā*), makes it clear that this is a ritual transference of merit, a core devotional act in Sri Lankan Buddhism, in which:

the recipient of the transfer becomes a participant of the original deed by associating himself [sic] with the deed done. Thus, this identification of himself with both the deed and the doer can sometimes result in the beneficiary getting even greater merit than the original doer.²¹

Gajabāhu's transference of that merit to "other kings" is therefore munificent indeed. But it is perhaps a double-edged benediction. Implicit in this dedication is the reminder that *only* Gajabāhu, who controlled Rajaraṭa, had the opportunity to actually make such munificent transferees of merit at Anurādhapura's sacred structures, let alone to generate merit for his own right. Such merit-making opportunities were often regarded highly by Buddhist rulers across the Indian Ocean world. As Anne Blackburn has argued,

20 The name in modern Sinhala is Ruvanvāli, but in inscriptions of this period it is consistently called Ruvanmāli. I use "Great Stūpa" throughout to avoid confusion. On Duṭṭugāmuṇu and the Great Stūpa, see Berkwitz, *Buddhist History in the Vernacular*.

21 Malalasekera, "'Transference of Merit' in Ceylonese Buddhism," 85.

A ruler's power resulted from, and depended upon, merit-making that accrued from acts of Buddhist devotion to traces of a Buddha, to the *dhamma*, and to the *saṅgha*. Royal ritual traffic with Buddha relics was part of the public performances of rule—it affirmed a right to kingship even as it enhanced this right by adding to the ruler's stock of merit. In addition, according to an implicit hierarchy of potency, the relics most closely associated with a Buddha offered the richest storehouse of magical power that could be deployed to protect the royal person, his family, and his realm.²²

Through his donated embankment, in other words, Gajabāhu is able to leverage his control over the religious sites of Rajaraṭa to publicly perform the duties of a pious Buddhist monarch. Then, by selflessly directing the resulting merit towards other kings, he becomes yet more pious in turn. This is a savvy political move. But it is one articulated, and only sensible within, a decidedly Buddhist context.

It is certainly true that Gajabāhu left behind more Tamil-language inscriptions than any other post-Cōḷa monarch, and that this language therefore dominates his inscriptional corpus. This linguistic trend, combined with his interest in the Kantale *brahmadeya* discussed above, does suggest a more extensive engagement with Cōḷa-style rule than other monarchs of Poḷonnaruva. We should note, however, that a preference for Tamil-language inscriptions seems to have been the norm for monarchs in the “interregional” period, as shown in the preceding chapter. Further, when Gajabāhu *did* inscribe in Sinhala, he seems to have modelled his style very closely on that of his grandfather Vijayabāhu I—with the notable inclusion of a claim to *cakravartin* status, so far only witnessed in Sri Lanka's Tamil-language inscriptions.

This appears in the more substantial pillar-inscription IC 6.9, found at Kapuruvāḍu-oya near the modern city of Matale. The inscription is undated, which makes it difficult to juxtapose the grandiose stylings of this inscription against the more frequent use of “*deva*” in other inscriptions of the period, discussed in the preceding chapter. It is tempting to imagine that this inscription was created later in Gajabāhu's career, as he attempted to position himself in a more hegemonic position over his rivals in Māyaraṭa and Ruhunu. If so, this would perhaps explain the elaborate genealogy it provides for Gajabāhu:

Born from the royal lineage of Okā (Skt. Ikṣvāku); lord by descent of the earth-maiden [which is] the island of Lanka, the primary consort to the best of the Kṣatriya; who has attained kingship: the *aṇa-sakviti* Gajabāhu *rajaṇa vahanse* (IC 6.9, ll. a1–8).

22 Blackburn, “Buddha-Relics,” 328.

This is a far cry from the modest title of “Lord” (*devaya*, *devār*) with which Gajabāhu is addressed elsewhere. Instead, he refers to himself with both the title *rajapā*—an epithet used previously in inscriptions of Vijayabāhu and Jayabāhu, as well as by the later Anurādhapura-period kings—and the rather more novel title *aṇa-sakviti* (Skt. *ājñā-cakravartin*). As discussed in the preceding chapters, *cakravartin*ship was a particularly elevated form of “wheel-turning” kingship, once reserved (in earlier textual sources, both Buddhist and theist) only for the most superhuman of mythical kings. Claims to *cakravartin*ship appear to have entered the inscriptional practices of more “earthly” kings only in the 1170s, beginning with the Cōḷa monarchs and possibly emulated soon after by Vijayabāhu. But while Vijayabāhu is called a *cakravartin* in the posthumous Vēḷaikkāra inscription, and officials of Mānābharaṇa II also refer to Jayabāhu by this title (TISL 51b), Gajabāhu’s inscription here is both the earliest extant in which a monarch claims the title for himself, and the earliest use of this title in the Sinhalese language.

It also seems to be the earliest use of the prefix *aṇa* (Skt. *ājñā*, T. *āṇai*, P. *āṇā*), “command,” with the title *cakravartin*. This together reads, therefore, as “He who turns the wheel of command.” “Wheels of command” (usually in some mixture of Sanskrit and Pali loanwords) have since become so ubiquitous across Southeast Asia that it is impossible to discuss politics without referring to them. In modern Thai, they distinguish the “secular sphere” (Thai *āṇācākr*) from the “religious sphere” (*śāsana**cākr*, from Skt. *śāsana**cakra*).²³ They demarcate the limits of political power (*āṇācākr*) in Burmese *Dhammasattha* literature.²⁴ And, of course, they are in the very name of the modern Kingdoms of both Thailand (*rāja-āṇācākr Daiy*) and Cambodia (*braḥ rājāṇācākr Kambujā*). It would therefore be easy to overlook the significance of Gajabāhu’s title *aṇasakviti*. But I have found no earlier witnesses, in textual or inscriptional sources, of this particular combination of terms. This seems to have been the first moment in which a monarch specifically associated themselves with such a “wheel of command.” What might the motivation have been, and what can this tell us about Gajabāhu’s religious orientations?

23 Reynolds, “Buddhist Monkhood,” 5; Swearer and Premchit, “Religious and Political Orders.”

24 Lammerts, “Buddhism and Written Law,” 483.

In the preceding chapters, we noted that few “earthly” kings in Southern Asia seem to have claimed the title *cakravartin* until the early second millennium. The Sanskrit hagiography *Aśokāvadāna*, likely composed in the early centuries CE, does give this title to Aśoka, and this influenced uptake of the title in East Asia. But the Sri Lankan literary tradition, despite its general praise for Aśoka, seems to have been reluctant to follow suit. The title *cakravartin* is not associated with Aśoka (or any other “historical” monarchs) in any Sri Lankan text prior to the fourteenth century.²⁵ Instead, the only *cakravartin* present in these texts is the Buddha himself, called *saddharmacakravartin* (“He who turns the wheel of the true *dharma*”), often by Aśoka himself.²⁶ That these texts place these words in Aśoka’s mouth, while denying him the title *cakravartin* for himself, was perhaps an ideological move. It suggests that Aśoka, as a mere earthly monarch, himself bowed down before a higher sovereign. The depiction of the Buddha as a *dharmacakravartin* is so ubiquitous, in art and literature alike, that we scarcely question it now. But it is worth remembering that according to the Pali Canon, the choice prophetically placed before any Great Man is to become either a Buddha or a *cakravartin*. Explicitly calling the Buddha a *dharmacakravartin* is, once again, to subordinate the latter choice to the former. To choose *cakravartinship*, these texts seem to be telling us, is to choose *cakravartinship* alone. To choose Buddhahood is to become a Buddha and also a *dharmacakravartin*.

Gajabāhu’s novel self-reference as an *aṇa-sakviti*, rather than as a regular, unmarked *cakravartin*, might be productively read in light of these textual referents. Even if Lankan monarchs had begun to emulate their Cōla rivals by calling themselves *cakravartins* in their Tamil-language inscriptions, there may well have been some hesitancy to declare themselves full *cakravartins* in languages more cognate with Pali and Sanskrit. This may have been out of deference for the Buddha-as-*saddharmacakravartin*, or—as John Strong has suggested for other contexts—a more general anxiety about the smaller scale on which earthly *cakravartins* operated compared to the superhuman examples found in Sanskrit and Pali literature.²⁷ In response to this anxiety, multiple “hierarchies” of greater and lesser *cakravartins* seem to have emerged across Asia. Strong discusses

25 Cf. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*.

26 See *Samantapāsādikā*, ed. Takakusu and Nagai, 43; *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, ch. 5, v. 90; *Mahābodhivamsa*, ed. Strong, 82.

27 Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, 50–56.

the *balacakravartin* (“*cakravartin* by force”) in the *Aśokāvadāna*; this same title appears in the eleventh-century inscriptions of Kyanzittha, roughly contemporaneous with both the Cōla *cakravartin* inscriptions and with the nascent use of the term in Poḷonnaruva’s Tamil-language inscriptions. In the fourteenth-century Thai-language *Tebhūmikathā* of Mahādharmarāja I, Aśoka is called—likely on a similar impulse—a *cūlacakravartin* (“lesser *cakravartin*”).²⁸ Gajabāhu’s self-identification as an *aṇasakviti* seems to be another example of this same trend.

But why this particular qualification *aṇa*? Tracing the genealogy of this term is made easier by its rather unusual etymology. The verbal root in Sanskrit is literally “to perceive” or “to comprehend,” but has an applied sense of “an order,” as something to be perceived or understood. These two meanings became bifurcated in Pali: the more expected form *aññā* preserves the verbal meaning of “to perceive” in reference to the perfected perception which characterizes enlightenment; a distinctive “western Middle Indic” formulation, *āṇā*, takes over the sense of an order or command.²⁹ Thomas Oberlies has suggested that some of these “doubled” terms, specifically including *āṇā/aññā*, are no grammatical accident, but rather an attempt to differentiate mundane from more technical or soteriologically significant meanings.³⁰ In other words, it seems that Buddhists were discussing *aññā* (“perfected perception”) in Pali at a very early stage; the term *āṇā* (“order”) was then subsequently added to the language in order to discuss authority and command. This is of particular interest because it allows us to better track when historical individuals, or even linguistic groups, were thinking about such matters of authority through a Pali lens. In Tamil, for example, the term for “order” is not only *āññai*, the expected Sanskrit loanword, but also *āṇai*, which must be borrowed from another intermediary language—very likely Pali.³¹ One of the earliest witnesses of this term in Tamil comes from the *Maṇimēkalai*, an explicitly Buddhist epic. We might therefore suspect that this term *āṇai* entered Tamil from Pali *āṇā*.

28 Note, however, that despite the text’s clear interest in *cakravartin*ship, Mahādharmarāja himself “disclaims any pretensions to *cakravartin* status” in his inscriptions: Andaya, “Statecraft,” 13. I first noticed this reference in Reynolds and Reynolds, *Three Worlds*, 188; I am grateful to Siriethorn Siriwan and Manasicha Akepiyapornchai for guiding me through the original Thai.

29 Oberlies, *Pāli*, 3.

30 Oberlies, *Pāli*, 101.

31 Anavaratavinayakkam Pillai, “Sanskritic Element,” 10.

Gajabāhu's use of *aṇa* as a prefix suggests, like the Tamil *āṇai*, a Pali influence. This is supported by the fact that while some Sanskrit texts do use the term *ājñācakra*, this is only ever in mystical or alchemical contexts, and never in any sense which might plausibly relate to kingship or political power. But Pali sources—and, more specifically, the works of Buddhaghosa—are rife with *āṇācakkas*, used in two distinct contexts. The first of these is in reference to the Buddha's own commands, and has no clear association with kingship.³² We might well take this as the “command of the Triple Gem” (*tunuruvan ājñā*) invoked in the treaty inscription of Gajabāhu and Parākramabāhu discussed below (IC 6.11). The second instance of this term *ājñācakra* in Buddhaghosa's writings, however, seems to be directly concerned with the relationship between the “authority” of the Buddha and that of temporal kings. It is from this instance which I suspect Gajabāhu drew his inspiration.

The term appears in a line of dialogue which Buddhaghosa attributes, in the introduction to his various commentaries, to the canonical King Ajātaśatru. Ajātaśatru is a villainous figure in most Buddhist literature, and so an unlikely exemplar of idealized kingship.³³ He is a patricide, allied with the Buddha's cousin/antagonist Devadatta, who only later in life sees the error of his ways and becomes a lay devotee. Unsurprisingly, he is therefore never assigned *cakravartin* status in canonical texts.³⁴ In Buddhaghosa's fifth-century commentaries, however, Ajātaśatru is given a partial redemption, and attributed a wheel of a different kind. The historical introductions to the *Vinaya* and *Dīgha-nikāya* commentaries, attributed to Buddhaghosa, provide a new account of the First Dharma Council (*P. dhammasaṅgīti*) following the Buddha's death. At this event (Buddhaghosa tells us), King Ajātaśatru places himself at the monks' disposal with the words, “I have the wheel of command (*āṇācakka*), you have the wheel of *dhamma*. Command me (*āṇāpetha*), sir! What do I do?”³⁵

32 See, e.g., Buddhaghosa's commentary on the *Alagaddūpama-sutta* (MN 22), in which a monk's transgressions of the Buddha's orders (*āṇāvītikkamantarāyikā*) “strike a blow at the Conqueror's Wheel of Command” (*jinassa āṇācakke pahāraṃ adāsī*).

33 For his post-canonical adventures, particularly in East Asia, see most comprehensively Radich, *Ajātaśatru*.

34 Jaina works are even more explicit. They tell us that Ajātaśatru (under his Jain alias Kūṇika) once *claimed* to be a *cakravartin*, only to be firmly rebuked by Mahāvīra. Wu, “Buddhist Salvation,” 99–101.

35 *Samantapāsādikā*, ed. Takakusu and Nagai, 1:10; *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, ed. Rhys-Davids and Carpenter, 1:8–9.

This *āṇā/dhamma-cakka* formulation, particularly in the mouth of the unlikely figure of Ajātaśatru, appears to have been entirely Buddhaghosa's invention. I have found no earlier accounts of the life of Ajātaśatru, or of the First Dharma Council, which include any variant of this line.³⁶ I read this as an attempt to reiterate the proper relationship between royal and monastic authority. Buddhaghosa is taking a clear stance on this matter: the deliberate repetition of *āṇā*, "command," in the imperative verb seems intended to rather unsightly subordinate the domain of kings to that of monks. Even the kingly "wheel of command" is commanded by the wheel of *dharma*.

To be clear, we cannot be certain that Gajabāhu had a Pali referent in mind in his choice of the title *aṇasakviti*. Given the close association of Lankan *cakravartin* claims and the Tamil language up to this point, we might suspect that he was drawing on the similarly cognate Tamil *āṇai*. However, based on the relevance of the subject matter, it seems most likely that Gajabāhu was drawing on Buddhaghosa's discussion of royal *āṇacakkas* in his choice of the title *aṇasakviti*. If so, this would suggest a considerable degree of interest in Pali textuality within Gajabāhu's court. We see further evidence for such interest in the inscriptions of Gajabāhu's mother, the Great Lady Sundarā, discussed below. First, however, it is worth considering the status of monastic institutions in Poḷonnaruva's hinterland during the reigns of Vikramabāhu and Gajabāhu, and the circumstances under which the Mahāvihāra-aligned Diṃbulāgala monastery rose to prominence.

The Great Lady Sundarā at Diṃbulāgala

In Chapter Two, I questioned the narrative of Vijayabāhu's "revival" of monastic ordination, which would likely have resulted in a single unified *nikāya*, on the grounds that many monks and institutions post-Vijayabāhu continued to identify themselves with the three *nikāyas* of Anurādhapura: the Mahāvihāra, the Abhayagiri, and the Jetavana. Notably, this included the monk Mugalan of the Abhayagiri Uttaromūla, discussed in the preceding chapter. In this section, we turn to another community of monks, associated with another Anurādhapuran *nikāya*: the Diṃbulāgala monastery, who would later be described as "monks dwelling in [the legacy] of the Mahāvihāra" (IC 6.13, l. 10).³⁷ We have good reason to think that these

36 I am grateful to Liyu Hua for checking the Chinese parallels.

37 The term used is *mahāvihārādhivāsibhikṣu*. The literal meaning of *adhivāsin* is simply "one who dwells in," but in both Pali and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit it can also have the sense of "consenting to" or "agreeing with." To combine both meanings, I

Diṃbulāgala monks took their Mahāvihāran credentials seriously. As discussed further in the following chapter, Parākramabāhu's Galvihāra inscription tells us that he invited their chief incumbent Mahākāśyapa (P. Mahākassapa, Sin. Mahākāsup) to preside over his purification and unification of the *saṅgha* (IC 6.13, ll. 9–10). Mahākāśyapa would later be praised by Śāriputra, Parākramabāhu's first grandmaster (P. *mahāsāmi*), in his various writings, all of which are firmly in the Mahāvihāran intellectual tradition. These events, as discussed in the Introduction, were pivotal to the establishment of the Mahāvihāra's legacy as authoritative within Lanka and, eventually, across the Indian Ocean region.

The significance of Diṃbulāgala, and its chief incumbent Mahākāśyapa, is apparent. What is less apparent is *why* these Diṃbulāgala monks, with their Mahāvihāran leanings, were approached by Parākramabāhu in the first place. Existing explanations of this choice have suggested that the Diṃbulāgala monks distinguished themselves through particularly rigorous practice. Specifically, they are frequently called “forest-dwelling” (Skt. *araṇyavāsin*, P. *araññavāsin*) monks, in reference to the common Buddhist trope pitting such valorized asceticism against the cushier lifestyle of city-dwelling (*grāma*vāsin, *gāma*vāsin) rivals.³⁸ Many Buddhist monks, past and present, did indeed adhere to such strict practices, and ascetic practice may well have provided the social context for significant innovations in wider doctrine and practice.³⁹ In other cases, however, claims to *araṇyavāsin* status seem less reflective of social reality than they are a rhetorically invoked ideal. Anne Blackburn argues, for example, that eighteenth century leaders of the Siyam-*nikāya* were frequently described as “forest-dwellers” to ward off potential criticisms of excessive scholasticism.⁴⁰ Presumably the Diṃbulāgala monks are assumed, by modern scholars, to have observed such ascetic practices because of the relatively remote location of their monastery—the mountain is, indeed, covered in forests, and the trail to the caves discussed below is perilous even today—and because of the praise lavished

therefore translate this as the metaphorical “monks who dwell in [the legacy of] the Mahāvihāra.”

38 Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*, 23; Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*, 46, 350; Lagamuva, *Madhyakālina Rājadhāniya Poḷonnaruva*, 38; Paranavitana, “Religion, Literature, and Art,” 566; Yabuuchi, “Kingship and the Sangha,” 6.

39 Most notably, the emergence of the early Mahāyāna: Boucher, *Bodhisattvas*; Harrison, “Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna,” 65–66; Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, 93–96.

40 Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning*, 94–95.

on them for their “discipline” (*śīla*) in both Poḷonnaruva-period inscriptions and retroactive narratives. However, we have no evidence from the period itself that the Diṃbulāgala monks considered themselves to be *araṇyavāsins*. The term does not appear in either of the inscriptions which mention them by name (*IC* 6.8 and 13). By the later Daṃbadeṇiya period, it seems as though the *araṇyavāsin*/*grāma**vāsin* split had become institutionalized within the *saṅgha*’s internal structure.⁴¹ Even in texts composed in this later period, however, I have not found references to the Diṃbulāgala as being a particularly ascetic or forest-dwelling monastery. Nor, crucially, is this explicitly linked in these sources to their leader’s selection by Parākramabāhu as a leader of his unification project. If the monks at Diṃbulāgala were “forest-dwellers,” in other words, it was only on the most literal level: that they did not dwell in urban areas (*grāmas*). They may well have also engaged in ascetic practices. But we cannot take this alone as an explanation for why they might have been so singled out by Parākramabāhu I, given that none of our sources seem to even mention it.

What I am suggesting is that we are missing a chapter in the story of the Theravāda’s eventual ascendancy. If we accept that the appointment of a Diṃbulāgala monk to oversee Parākramabāhu’s purification and unification led, more or less directly, to the widespread acceptance of Buddhaghosan thought and monastic identification with the legacy of the Mahāvihāra—in other words, to the ascendancy of the Theravāda in Sri Lanka and across Southeast Asia—we need to better understand the circumstances under which this particular monastery came to prominence.

While our knowledge of the monastery’s longer history is murky, it does not seem to have been the focus of much royal intervention prior to the period under discussion. Cave inscriptions on the mountain tell us that monastics have dwelt there, not necessarily continuously, since as early as the second century before the Christian Era.⁴² Among these pre-Christian Era inscriptions we do see some evidence of royal interest in the site: we have mentions of an *aya* (likely Skt. *āryya*, “prince”; *IC* 1:272); we also see donations by two *parumakas* (Skt. *pramukha*; *IC* 1:273, 279), an honorific used by high-ranking individuals sometimes associated with royal courts. More immediately prior to the Poḷonnaruva period, however, the history of this site becomes hazier. A tenth-century inscription (*IC* 5.i.109) found somewhere near Paṇḍuvasnuvara (in what is now Kurunegala District)

41 Bechert, “Theravada Buddhist Sangha,” 765; Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*, 44–45.

42 Nicholas, “Historical Topography,” 40.

refers to villages in “Diṃbuḷa,” but there is no mention of either the mountain (*gala*, literally “stone”) or a monastery. We do have references in the *Mahāvamsa*—both the fifth-century original and the medieval extension—to a Dhūmarakkhāga mountain which seems, on geographic grounds, to be another name for Diṃbulāgala. The only reference to a monastery at this site, however, appears in the medieval extension, which tells us that King Mahānāma (at the behest of his consort) established some buildings there and donated them to the Theravāda.⁴³ However, this is a Daṃbadeṇiya-period *Mahāvamsa* entry, influenced by the post-Parākramabāhu prominence of the Mahāvihāra and associated sites, and so we should not take these references at face value. In short, there appears to be little evidence for royal interest in this particular monastery at Diṃbulāgala prior to the Poḷonnaruva period. How, then, did this monastery come to be so prominent by the later twelfth century that its leader would be placed in charge of Parākramabāhu’s purification and unification of the *saṅgha*?

In this section I argue that the pivotal factor here is one entirely overlooked in the *Mahāvamsa*: the patronage of the Great Lady Sundarā, consort of Vikramabāhu I and mother of Gajabāhu II. Her absence from our existing histories of the Theravāda is almost certainly a direct result of her absence from the literary sources on which we too often rely. She is mentioned only once in the *Mahāvamsa*: as the sister of Vijayabāhu’s consort, Tilokasundarī, from Siṃhapūra (in Kalinga, likely modern Odisha or northern Andhra Pradesh), whom he had married to his son Vikramabāhu.⁴⁴ As if to illustrate how insignificant a role she plays in this narrative, in almost all extant manuscripts her name has become corrupted to “Sunārī.” She is not mentioned at all in either the *Nikāya-saṅgrahaya* or the *Pūjāvaliya*. She has, in effect, been written out of the story. But her two extant inscriptions suggest a particular orientation towards the Pali language and towards the monastery at Diṃbulāgala, and are, to a degree, exceptional in the extant inscriptional record. Neither of these inscriptions can be dated, but as one mentions only her husband Vikramabāhu, and the other adds a mention of her son Gajabāhu, we might cautiously estimate an active period spanning the two men’s reigns: evidence for the continuing influence of queen mothers in their children’s courts.

⁴³ *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, ch. 37, v. 213.

⁴⁴ *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, ch. 59, v. 49. The *Mahāvamsa* also refers to her very indirectly in a later chapter, when it tells us that Vikramabāhu’s other son Mahinda was of lower status than Gajabāhu because of his mother’s clan (*mātugottena*; *Mahāvamsa* ch. 62, 59).

The first of the two inscriptions is, sadly, fragmentary. The surviving section represents, in Paranavitana's estimation, only one-sixth of the original. The original slab was destroyed, and the surviving section incorporated into the structure of a *maṇḍapa* by some later patron.⁴⁵ The original location of the inscription is entirely unknown. All that we have left to us is an invocatory Pali verse, eulogizing a monk in rather martial terms, and the beginnings of the preamble:

Svasti! Śrī! May the excellent sage known as Ānanda—possessor of supernatural powers, a flag raised in the land of Laṅkā—be victorious; he who, resolute (*dhīra*), became a *thera*...[illegible]...the ascetics of Tambaraṭṭha; who did...[illegible]...the *sāsana* among the Cōḷa.

By the Great Lady Sundarā, best of the Solar Family (*rivikulakot*), the primary consort to the Lord Vikramabāhu; who was born of the Lord Sirisaṅgabo Vijayabāhu, who was born in the royal lineage of Okā (Skt. Ikṣvāku)—who excelled in a collection of auspicious, endless virtues unequalled in the world, and who subjugated the other *kāt* (Skt. *kṣatriya*) families of Dambadivahi (Skt. Jambudvīpa)—who was like a sole refuge for the world and the *sāsana*, and who ruled having united all of Lanka without transgressing the ten *rājadharmmas* (*IC* 6.7).

Paranavitana, and the epigraphists who followed him, considered the contents and form of this inscription to be “nothing worthy of particular attention.”⁴⁶ What seems to have been overlooked is the significance of the Pali verse which opens the inscription: not the identity of the monk Ānanda, which due to the fragmentary nature of the inscription is likely impossible to reconstruct; but the very decision to compose this verse in Pali. As discussed in the Introduction, this is the earliest extant inscription in Sri Lanka to contain original Pali verse. Even if created towards the end of Vikramabāhu's reign (1111–1132), it was within decades of the earliest Pali *ad hoc* inscription, at Myazedi in lower Myanmar (ca. 1113).

This seems, in other words, to be a moment “worthy of particular attention” indeed. Yet, to my knowledge, the only scholar to comment explicitly on this is Alastair Gornall:

Never before had Pali been used as a language of inscriptional encomium, and nor had a member of the royal family treated the monastic community as a political overlord by placing a praise poem to a monk before the traditional eulogy to the monarch.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Likely, Parākramabāhu himself: see discussion in *EZ* 4.9.

⁴⁶ In *EZ*, 4:68.

⁴⁷ Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*, 28.

How could we have overlooked such a landmark moment for so long? The root cause is almost certainly the common assumption that Sri Lankan Buddhism is “properly” Theravāda Buddhism, which means that it is “properly” Buddhism expressed in the Pali language. This assumption is ungrounded. Theravāda Buddhists have long engaged with both Sanskrit and the various “vernacular” languages (Sinhala, Burmese, Thai, Khmer) alongside their liturgical and scholastic use of Pali. Inscriptional uses of Pali prior to the twelfth century were limited to “citational” inscriptions, rather than original verse composition, and even then are only found in the areas surrounding the Irrawaddy River, and in central mainland Southeast Asia.⁴⁸ However, the modern belief that Pali ultimately underlies all non-Pali, but “Theravāda,” literary and inscriptional evidence has distorted the way that we read and even translate them. In the Sri Lankan context, terms relating to Buddhism in Sinhala-language texts, even when clearly derived from Sanskrit, are too-often “corrected” in translations to their Pali equivalents. Thus the Sanskrit title *ācāryayan*, “teacher,” is listed elsewhere under Pali *ācariya*;⁴⁹ while the Sinhala *daham* is consistently “translated” into Pali *dhamma*.⁵⁰ Unwarranted Pali-cizations like these together exaggerate the dominance of Pali in the language order of late first-millennium Lanka, and obfuscate the relatively rare cases in which Pali *does* seem to be on the epigrapher’s mind.

Sundarā’s inscription is one such case, the significance of which seems to have been entirely overlooked until now. Pali was, very clearly, on her mind, to (as best we can tell from the incomplete inscriptional record) an unprecedented extent. Unfortunately, the fragmentary nature of the inscription makes it impossible to determine exactly what her intervention was. The inscription likely recorded some form of support given to the monk Ānanda, praised in the opening verse, or to an institution with which he was affiliated. Alternatively, he may have been involved in the recorded transaction only peripherally, but because of some close personal relationship with Sundarā (as a relative, for example, or as a tutor) was worthy of homage at the opening of the inscription. It is likely that Ānanda had some influence in Sundarā’s linguistic choices. The inscription tells us that he is connected in some way with the Cōla country and with Tambaraṭṭha. The location of this Tambaraṭṭha is contested. It may well be a variant of Tambapaṇṇa, a

48 Skilling, “Epigraphic Pāli as a Southeast Asian Geographic Zone.”

49 Compare the text of *IC* 5.ii.41 with the list at *IC* 5.ii, p. xli.

50 Compare the editions and translations of *IC* 5.i.115 and *IC* 5.iii.56.



Figure 10. The remains of Sundarā's cave, looking east, with her rectangular inscription visible on the roof towards the rear. Illustration by Natalia Lopez-Barbosa, after a photograph by the author. Used with permission.

term sometimes used for Sri Lanka itself; other scholars have located this Tambaraṭṭha in Southeast Asia or, most convincingly, Southern India.⁵¹ Without a definitive identification, few conclusions can be drawn from this reference. More is known about Buddhism in the Cōḷa Empire, thankfully. Cōḷa monks seem to have been active participants in Pali literature and scholarship throughout this period and beyond.⁵² Given Ānanda's connection to this community (whatever that connection may have been), we might well speculate whether Sundarā's choice to praise him in Pali was in some way inspired by his own interest in or engagement with that language. All we can say with confidence is that Sundarā was more open to inscribing in Pali verse than were other royal figures, to a degree unprecedented in the extant inscriptional record. This alone is worth noting as a development in Lankan inscriptional culture. Read alongside her later inscription, however, it takes on a new significance.

Sundarā's second extant inscription is found within a cave on Diṃbulāgala itself, part of a system of shallow overhang caves (the "Mārāvīdiye caves")

51 See, respectively, Paranavitana, "Religion, Literature, and Art," 565; cf. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 78; and Tournier, "A Tide of Merit," 24–27, and particularly n102.

52 For a general overview, see Schalk and Vēluppiḷai, *Buddhism among Tamils*, 387–95.

on a cliff-face one kilometre east of the modern Ahas Māligāva. Other cave monasteries in the region feature external walls extending the usable space beyond the natural cave roof. But the Mārāvīdiye caves have only a narrow lip between the overhang roof and the sheer cliff-face, meaning that all built structures are within the caves themselves. Sundarā's cave (Fig. 10) is the last one accessible by a series of metal railings and, at one point, a horizontal rope ladder.

The remains of a brick-and-plaster structure are preserved under the overhang; also preserved, thankfully, is her inscription on the roof of the cave. It reads in full:

Unbroken [in lineage] from the solar clan in the lineage of Sudonā (Skt. Śuddhodana, the father of the Buddha), born from the royal family of Ikṣvāku; who overcame Śrī in bodily splendour; primary consort to the Lord of Men Vikramabāhu, born from the crowned; who gave birth to Gajabāhu: the Great Lady Sundarā *vahanse*, who having seen the suffering of people who clung to the eroded chains on the path between the Great Lunar Cave and the Great Solar Cave at Diṃbulagala, which is home to 500 of the *mahasaṅgana* (Skt. *mahāsaṅgha*) and where are established the bodily relics of Our King of Sages; having had arranged the stones [of the path]; having improved the path; having had placed in the cave [Buddha-]images, reliquaries, and Mahābodhi [trees]; having given it the name "Kaliṅga Cave"; having had made the auspicious wholesome act (*siri-kusala*, Skt. *śrī-kuśala*) of "*demaḷā-pāhā*,"⁵³ on the full-moon *uposathā* day in [the month of] Poson in the twenty-seventh year of Jayabāhu; having offered it for [the provision of] cooked rice; to [witness] the fact of its being given for the duration of the world's existence, I am the Great Lady Sundarā (IC 6.8).

There is much in this inscription which suggests—despite the Sinhala language—Sundarā's "mainland" origins. We have noted that the *Mahāvamsa* describes her as hailing from Siṃhapura, the capital of the Kaliṅga kingdom in (what is now) Odisha or northern Andhra Pradesh. This is supported by her choice of the name "Kaliṅga Cave" for her newly refurbished shrine. She would probably have been a member of the Eastern Gaṅga dynasty, which dominated southern Kaliṅga during the period under discussion.⁵⁴ Although the Eastern Gaṅgas used Telugu in their inscriptions, rather than Tamil, they were closely intertwined (often adversarially) with the political culture of other dynasties further south (including the Cōḷas), and so perhaps shared

⁵³ Wickramasinghe tentatively suggests that this is the name of a monastery (in *EZ*, 2:189). Ranawella takes it instead as the name of a village, gifted to provide cooked rice in perpetuity (in *IC*, 6:21).

⁵⁴ Rao, *Kaliṅga under the Eastern Gaṅgas*.

the expectation of extensive religious patronage by royal women. Sundarā's consistent self-reference with the title "Great Lady" (Sin. *mahadevī*), rather than the more typical *mahiṣī* or *biso*, also accords with South Indian consortial titles like *mahādevī*/*mātēvī*.⁵⁵ At the same time, however, Sundarā is described as a descendant of the Buddha's own father, Śuddhodanā, who is himself a member of Ikṣvāku's Solar lineage. This fusion of Buddhist and *purāṇic* genealogical claims has precedent on Lankan soil. Jonathan Walters has described it as a key intervention made by the ca. fourth-century Mahāvihāran text *Dīpavaṃsa*, and continued in the later *Mahāvaṃsa* (ca. fifth century) and its ca. tenth-century commentary *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*.⁵⁶ Although a direct connection between these specific texts and Sundarā cannot be established—it is possible that the genealogical link was by this point circulating elsewhere—it is nonetheless again suggestive of a particular interest on her behalf in Pali-language textuality.

Beyond the nuances of its text, Sundarā's inscription, and the renovations and additions to the complex it describes, represents the earliest evidence of royal interest in Diṃbulāgala since the BCE Brahmi cave inscriptions. By Sundarā's own account, the site seemed to be a bustling centre of both resident monks and (likely lay) visitors, traversing a difficult path between two auspicious caves. Both communities would have benefitted, however, from the significant additions Sundarā had gifted to (one of) the cave(s), and from the perpetual grant she established through the "*demaḷā-pāhā*." Notably, she appears to have furnished the "Kaliṅga Cave" with three of the four features of the "sacred precinct" which, as discussed in Chapter Two, had come to characterize Lankan *vihāra* design by this period: an image-house, reliquary, and Bodhi tree. Space is limited in the wide, but shallow, cave: if a Bodhi tree was once planted there, it must have been in the narrow lip of earth between the overhanging roof and the sheer cliff beyond. None of the trees growing by the cave today are of the Bodhi species (*Ficus religiosa*). The fourth characteristic of a "sacred precinct," an *uposathaghara*, presumably already existed somewhere nearby, if there were already monks in residence. With these three additional features, Sundarā was therefore converting the "Kaliṅga Cave" into a fully-equipped ritual precinct.

55 On titles for royal women in Sri Lanka see Shirley, "Beyond Masculinity," 492–97. For Tamil titles see Sastri, *The Cōlas*, 188, 228, 332–33. Note that Kulottuṅga's daughter Cundhamalli does not use this title in her own Lankan inscription (*TISL* 51a), discussed in the preceding chapter.

56 Walters, "Buddhist History," 117–18.

It is likely, of course, that other such sacred precincts already existed elsewhere on Diṃbulāgala. The site known today as the Namal Pokuna (“Ironwood Pond”) contains all four components of the sacred precinct, and it is possible that it—or other sites no longer extant—predate Sundarā’s additions to the Kaliṅga Cave. Unfortunately, further archaeological analysis is frustrated by the extensive alterations which have occurred across Diṃbulāgala, both as a result of neglect at some sites and intentional remodelling at others. In Sundarā’s cave today, two weathered Buddha statues are set up within the remains of brick-and-plaster walls. These statues could well be those noted by H. C. P. Bell, in his 1897 visit to the caves, but it is impossible to say whether they date from Sundarā’s time or were a later addition.⁵⁷ Only scant traces of paint survived on the cave walls until the twentieth century. Prior to vandalism by “a religious fanatic,” art historians were able to identify a scene from the *Sasa-jātaka*, and tentatively date it to the twelfth century.⁵⁸ Even if it were possible to date Sundarā’s Kaliṅga Cave relative to other sites at Diṃbulāgala, her contributions cannot be held solely responsible for the flourishing of the monastery in the early twelfth century, and thence to its leader’s eventual appointment by Parākramabāhu I. But her inscription here is certainly indicative of a royal interest in the site which seems unusual for the period, and which comes at a vital moment in the lead up to the 1165 purification and unification of the *saṅgha*.

Paranavitana describes this intervention as entirely the result of the “forest-dwelling” monks’ conduct, which “was such as to induce Sundaramahādevī, the Kaliṅga princess who was the consort of the impious Vikramabāhu, to make benefactions for the upkeep of the monastery, and to undertake essential building works at the place.”⁵⁹ Here, once again, we see minimal agency ascribed to historical women. Instead, Sundarā is merely “induced” to act in a certain way. But taken together with her earlier inscription praising Ānanda, I do not think we can so readily dismiss her own agenda. We have here two inscriptions created (presumably, bearing in mind the tentative dating) during the reigns of two different men, her husband and then her son. The first of these inscriptions speaks to an interest in the Pali language which is unprecedented in the extant corpus. The second records extensive works at a monastery which,

⁵⁷ Bell, *ASCAR* 1897, 9.

⁵⁸ Paranavitana, “Religion, Literature, and Art,” 611. The *Sasa-jātaka* would later become the subject of a poem, *Sasadāvata*, composed in the court of Lilāvati, discussed further in Chapter Seven.

⁵⁹ Paranavitana, “Religion, Literature, and Art,” 566.

at least by the time of its later involvement in Parākramabāhu's purification and unification, seems to have identified itself with the legacy of the Mahāvihāra. Sundarā held, in other words, a sustained interest in Pali-language and Mahāvihāra-aligned Buddhism over a period of some years. As the Diṃbulāgala inscription suggests, that interest led to Sundarā mobilizing substantial material support for her favoured institutions. Even in the conservative case—in which the Diṃbulāgala inscription records Sundarā's *only* material contribution to monastic institutions—this would still represent a significant intervention in the trajectory of Buddhist history, given the prominence to which this particular institution would later rise. At *minimum*, Sundarā was an “early adopter” of Mahāvihāra- and Pali-oriented Buddhism in the royal court. She likely offered similar support to the monk Ānanda, eulogized in her earlier extant inscription. We must also account for the possibility that she made other donations, marked by other inscriptions no longer extant (given that at least one of those “extant” seems to have been broken down and reused in later construction projects). These two inscriptions, therefore, suggest a far more prominent role in the rise of the Mahāvihāra for Sundarā, and perhaps also for other royal consorts, than our later literary accounts would admit.

Between Gajabāhu II and Parākramabāhu I

In the preceding sections, I have shown that both Gajabāhu and his mother Sundarā seem to have provided material support for Buddhist institutions and perhaps also drawn on Pali-language Buddhist sources in their inscriptional stylings. In particular, I have argued that Sundarā's substantial patronage to the Diṃbulāgala monastery may have established the conditions of prestige in which its chief monk, Mahākāśyapa, would be chosen to oversee Parākramabāhu's purification and unification of the *saṅgha*: the event which eventually allowed the Pali-oriented Buddhism associated with the Mahāvihāra's legacy to become dominant on the island and across Southern Asia. This is, already, a fairly radical departure from the general treatment of Gajabāhu's court as irrelevant to the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. I further suggest a more direct connection between these developments in Gajabāhu's courts and the events of Parākramabāhu's reign. This argument continues into the following chapter on Parākramabāhu's reign proper; it begins, however, with a re-examination of the two monarchs' joint “treaty” inscription at the Saṅgamu Vihāra (IC 6.11).

According to the *Mahāvamsa*, Parākramabāhu conquered Rājaraṭa but, with the encouragement of the *saṅgha*, magnanimously returned it to

Gajabāhu.⁶⁰ The latter, who had no sons or brothers, then had an inscription made at a “Maṇḍalīgiri Vihāra” guaranteeing that Parākramabāhu would inherit his kingdom after his death, before promptly dying.⁶¹ This episode serves two functions in the overall narrative of the *Mahāvamsa*: it sets up Parākramabāhu as the “rightful” inheritor of Rajaraṭa; it then gives Parākramabāhu a cause for war with Mānābharaṇa II, by then king of Parākramabāhu’s natal Ruhuṇu, who attempts to ignore Gajabāhu’s wishes and “unrighteously” claim Rajaraṭa for himself. Modern scholars have assumed the Saṅgamu inscription to be another copy of Gajabāhu’s Maṇḍalīgiri inscription.⁶² The language of the inscription found at Saṅgamu, however, suggests a rather more egalitarian footing than the one-sided account given in the *Mahāvamsa*:

Svasti! Śrī! Descended in unbroken succession from Mahāsammata; rich in truth: we are Gajabāhu [and] Parākramabāhu, two kinsmen. For the agreement made by us: we [will] not fight until the end of [our] lives; who[ever] is first of us to die... [at least one clause illegible]; if there is a king who is an enemy to one of us, it is to us both that they are an enemy. If one were to contradict this, it would be [as though contradicting] the command (*ājñā*) of the Triple Gem; and they would not be liberated from hell.

[In Sanskrit verse:] May these words protect the world for as long as the Moon and Stars; the union of those whose wealth is others’ success...suf-fused with affection (*IC* 6.11).

At every point, the inscription stresses the equality between the two. There is no hint here of, as the *Mahāvamsa* would have it, Parākramabāhu’s upper hand; instead, the inscriptions repeatedly invokes the language of “we” and “us.” Even the fragmentary Sanskrit verse which concludes the inscription speaks selflessly of *others’* success. The missing second clause of the agreement is almost certainly what would become the focus of the *Mahāvamsa*’s supposed Maṇḍalīgiri inscription, but it is clear that here *both* monarchs promise to leave their kingdom to the other, should they be the first to die. As others have pointed out, Parākramabāhu’s relative youth does mean that this mutual-inheritance agreement was, pragmatically, weighted in his favour.⁶³ But I suggest that we take seriously the self-appellation which Gajabāhu and Parākramabāhu assign to themselves here: they present themselves as

⁶⁰ *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, ch. 70, v. 336.

⁶¹ *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, ch. 71, vv. 4–5.

⁶² Liyanagamage, “Decline,” 99; Nicholas, “Civil Wars,” 454.

⁶³ Codrington and Paranavitana, *EZ*, 4:4–5.

being “rich in truth” (*satyadhana*), anxious perhaps to demonstrate the sincerity of their promise to one another. Let us therefore assume at least some sincerity in this language of “us,” and read this as a text crafted by uncle and nephew together: a *joint* vision of what kingship over Lanka could be.

Doing so makes us more receptive to the potential influence of Sundarā, Gajabāhu’s mother, both on this inscription and those of Parākramabāhu’s later reign. I have argued that Sundarā seems to have held an unusual, perhaps unprecedented, interest in supporting monks working in the Pali language and monasteries which (would eventually) align themselves with the legacy of the Mahāvihāra. I have also pointed to her interest in genealogical claims linking together the Buddha’s own family with the Solar lineage of Ikṣvāku. We have a hint in the treaty inscription, too, of an interest in such genealogical claims. This is the invocation of Mahāsammata as the common ancestor of Gajabāhu and Parākramabāhu.

As discussed in Chapter One, Mahāsammata is presented in the Pali canonical *Aggañña-sutta* as the first king, elected by his peers to solve societal ills. Mahāsammata appears in other Buddhist traditions,⁶⁴ but his shadow is cast longest in the Theravāda world. The fifth-century *Mahāvamsa* presents an elaborate genealogy for Mahāsammata, tracing his lineage down to Ikṣvāku (P. Okkāka, Sin. Okā), the progenitor of the Solar Dynasty;⁶⁵ to the Buddha himself;⁶⁶ and eventually to the Lankan king Paṇḍukābhaya.⁶⁷ This genealogy is elaborated on in the ca. tenth-century *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*, a commentary on the *Mahāvamsa*. Jonathan Walters has shown how this was part of a series of rhetorical moves intended to establish that “only the Sri Lankan kings were entitled to claim overlordship among the Okkākas and Kṣatriyas of Jambudīpa.”⁶⁸ By the mid-second millennium, claims to descent from Mahāsammata and his illustrious heirs had become commonplace throughout the Theravāda world. As Collins and Huxley note, “claims by real, historical kings to be descended from Mahāsammata are ubiquitous in Sri Lanka, standard in Burma, and somewhat rarer in—but by no means absent from—Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.”⁶⁹ This ubiquity, however, is complicated by Collins and Huxley’s conflation of any claim in a Buddhist context to

64 Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, 69; Simpson, “Like a Fierce God.”

65 *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, ch. 2, v. 11.

66 *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, ch. 2, v. 22.

67 *Mahāvamsa*, ed. Geiger, chs. 8–9.

68 Walters, “Buddhist History,” 129.

69 Collins and Huxley, “Post-Canonical Adventures,” 631.

be descended from Mahāsammata himself, *or* to be descended from Ikṣvāku, *or* to be a member of the Buddha's own Śākya clan. A closer inspection of the Lankan inscriptional corpus reveals a more staggered introduction of such genealogical claims.

As Walters notes, Udaya II (r. 887–898) was the first monarch to claim an Ikṣvākan genealogy. Walters takes this as a reference to the *Vamsatthappakāsinī*'s genealogical arguments, a crucial moment in “the emergence of the Okkāka imperial imaginary.”⁷⁰ However, we must remember that Ikṣvāku was by this point a decidedly transregional figure, every bit as central in *purāṇic* genealogies as he was in the *Mahāvamsa*'s. Even the Cōlas, from the reign of Rājendra I (1014–1044) onwards, claimed Ikṣvāku as an ancestor in their own Sanskrit *prāśastis*.⁷¹ As discussed in Chapter One, the inscriptions of Udaya II are among the earliest to exhibit the marked influence of the Sanskrit *prāśasti*, including the elaborately genealogical opening. We therefore cannot assume that Udaya's claim to an Ikṣvākan lineage, or those claims made after him, were *necessarily* a reference to the specific lineage articulated in the *Mahāvamsa*, and so a claim to descent from Mahāsammata in particular: this may instead have been a response to mainland genealogies articulated in Sanskrit, both in *purāṇas* and *prāśastis*.

Claims to Śākyan descent are considerably less standardized, but are still present in pre-Poḷonnaruvan inscriptions. The earliest of these appears to be in the inscriptions of Kāśyapa V (r. 914–923), who frequently refers to himself as a descendant of Ikṣvāku, a member of the Śākya clan (as Sin. “Sāhā”), and a descendant of Paṇḍukābhaya, the first Lankan king said in the *Mahāvamsa* to be of this same lineage (see, e.g., *IC* 5.i.104). One of Kāśyapa's sons similarly refers to himself as a “*tilaka*-mark” for the Sāhā clan and as a descendant of Paṇḍukābhaya (*IC* 5.i.110). These references to Paṇḍukābhaya provide strong support to Walters's argument that the *Mahāvamsa*'s genealogy lay behind late Anurādhapuran inscriptional claims to descent from the Buddha's own clan. Mahinda IV (r. 956–972) refers to himself as being “best of the Sāhā family” (*sāhākulakot*) in several inscriptions, including those found at Mahāvihāran (*IC* 5.ii.69) and Jetavānan (*IC* 5.ii.65) monastic complexes, but this does not seem to be a consistent feature of his inscriptional

70 Walters, “Buddhist History,” 135.

71 Ali, “Royal Eulogy,” 195. Earlier *purāṇas* tended to list the Cōlas (and other southern dynasties like the Pāṇḍya, Kerala, and Cālukya) not among Ikṣvāku's “Solar” descendants, but as members of the (perhaps less prestigious) “Lunar” lineage. Rājendra was therefore articulating, in Ali's reading, a novel genealogy for his dynasty.

self-presentation.⁷² Claims to descent from the Buddha's father Śuddhodana (usually as Sin. Sudonā) are even rarer: we see this in inscriptions of Dappula IV (r. 924–935) (*IC* 5.ii.18; 37); in an inscription by Mahinda IV (*IC* 5.iii.26);⁷³ and, of course, the inscription of Sundarā discussed above. Nonetheless, it seems that by the end of the Anurādhapura period there certainly was a widespread dissemination of the notion that Lanka's kings were descended from the Buddha's own clan, as suggested in the fifth-century *Mahāvamsa*, and these claims of descent appeared frequently enough in inscriptions.

What appears to have considerably less precedent are explicit claims to descent from Mahāsammata. Collins and Huxley themselves suggest that the earliest of these claims is made by Parākramabāhu himself, in the Galvihāra inscription discussed in the following chapter.⁷⁴ But, as we have seen above, that claim appears even earlier: in the treaty inscription created in union with Parākramabāhu's uncle Gajabāhu. Those who maintain that this treaty was a record of generous concessions made by Parākramabāhu might, of course, respond that the text itself (and therefore this reference to Mahāsammata) was solely, or at least primarily, the product of the victor. Any proclivity towards the Mahāvihāra and its textual products might therefore merely foreshadow Parākramabāhu's eventual religious restructuring in that institution's favour, rather than reflect dynamics within Gajabāhu's court. However, the body of evidence examined throughout this chapter suggests otherwise.

We have established that Gajabāhu's mother, Sundarā, patronized Pali-oriented and Mahāvihāra-aligned Buddhist monks and monasteries. I have further suggested that this reflected a particular interest on her behalf in the form of Buddha-*śāsana* represented by the legacy of the Mahāvihāra. This interest seems to have been sustained throughout the life of her husband, Vikramabāhu I, and into the reign of her son Gajabāhu, despite these monarchs' supposedly "non-Buddhist" tendencies (for which our evidence

72 Compare particularly *IC* 5.ii.72, which opens with the very similar *kātakulakot*, "best of the Kṣatriya families." This wording is so similar that we might suspect a transcription error, but the estampage provided in *EZ* 1.8 (plate 16) very clearly reads *kāta* rather than *sāhā*. The motivation behind this variant claim is unclear to me.

73 Note, however, that Ranawella considers his own transcription, from which I make this identification, to be "extremely tentative." Ranawella also criticizes Paranavithana's earlier, and more confident, attempt at translation (in *EZ* VI, 39–58) as "imaginary and questionable."

74 Collins and Huxley, "Post-Canonical Adventures," 631.

is late and spurious). It therefore seems to be at least *plausible* to suggest that Sundarā's religious orientations influenced Gajabāhu's in turn. It would be a further stretch, given the scanty nature of the evidence, to suggest that Gajabāhu in turn influenced his nephew Parākramabāhu. But this is not impossible. The *Mahāvamsa* tells us that Parākramabāhu spent time in Gajabāhu's court as a youth. It paints this time, naturally, as a devious stratagem on Parākramabāhu's behalf, to ingratiate himself with his uncle while secretly spying out weaknesses for his future war of conquest. But, if we are inclined to read any truth into this youthful sojourn, we might equally see this as a period in which Gajabāhu, and his pro-Pali, pro-Mahāvihāran mother Sundarā, might have genuinely engaged the young Parākramabāhu on the finer points of Buddhist doctrine, and on the royal genealogies laid out in Mahāvihāran texts. If so, perhaps we see some echoes of this years later, when the two kinsmen created their joint treaty inscription, positioning themselves as Mahāsammata's heirs on the island.

This is, at this stage, still a tentative argument. In the following chapter, however, we turn to the inscriptions of Parākramabāhu himself: first, and most significantly, his *katikāvata* inscription at the site now known as the Galvihāra. Throughout these inscriptions, I demonstrate further evidence of both (1) an interest in the textual tradition of the Mahāvihāra, particularly the commentaries of Buddhaghosa and (2) what appear to be further echoes of inscriptional moves first made by Gajabāhu. I suggest, in other words, that this *katikāvata* inscription was not the product of Parākramabāhu's mind alone, but rather that the seeds might have been sown much earlier: in the court of his cousin and erstwhile rival Gajabāhu, thanks to the influence of his aunt Sundarā.

Conclusions to Chapter Four

The court of Poḷonnaruva between the reigns of Vijayabāhu and Parākramabāhu has been overlooked for far too long. On the rather tenuous basis that Vikramabāhu and his son Gajabāhu were "inadequately Buddhist," we have assumed that they have little to offer historians of Buddhism. But, as I have shown in this chapter, this is not the case. We have little evidence of their supposedly non-Buddhist status, and some significant evidence for Gajabāhu's patronage of Buddhist institutions like the Ruvanmāli *stūpa*. The Great Lady Sundarā—consort of Vikramabāhu and mother of Gajabāhu—seems to have been particularly consistent in her patronage of Buddhist monks and Buddhist institutions, with inscriptional evidence from within the reigns of both men.

Sundarā seems to have been particularly invested in the Pali language, evidenced by her articulation of the earliest extant Pali-language inscription by a Sri Lankan royal, and in a monastery, Diṃbulāgala, which we know was affiliated with the legacy of the Mahāvihāra. This latter patronage in particular, I have argued, constitutes an important (but until now overlooked) chapter in the history of the Theravāda, as it was from this monastery that Mahākāśyapa, appointed by Parākramabāhu to oversee his great intervention into the *saṅgha*, rose to prominence. This was not the only link between the court of Gajabāhu and the rise of Parākramabāhu: the joint “treaty inscription” created by the two men together, I suggest, speaks to a more mutually respectful relationship than that suggested in retrospective narratives like the *Mahāvamsa*, allowing us to speculate about continuities, rather than hostile disjuncture, between their reigns. We take this argument yet further in the following chapter.