

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF KINGSHIP

SANSKRIT, PALI, SINHALA, AND TAMIL POLITICAL THOUGHT

IF “RECONSTRUCTION” IS the central metaphor of this book, then it is worth beginning our discussion with the materials of construction—both metaphorical and edificial. One of the most distinctive features of Poḷonnaruva’s built landscape is its three monumental vaulted image-houses (P. *paṭimāghara*, Sin. *pīlimagē*), located respectively in the Sacred Quadrangle (called today the “Thūpārama”), the Āḷāhana monastic complex (the “Laṅkātilaka”), and north of the Galvihāra complex (the “Tivaṅka,” likely constructed by Parākramabāhu I himself).¹ In an early Archaeological Survey report, these structures were described as a distinct “class of sacred edifice...a triplet of structures unique to Poḷonnaruva. No building of [their] sort exists at Anurādhapura; nor, as far as is known, anywhere else in Ceylon.”² The basic groundplan follows those of earlier Anurādhapuran image-houses: an image of the Buddha is displayed in a square central shrine (*garbha*), which is accessed through a rectangular antechamber (*antarāla*).³ What distinguishes the three great Poḷonnaruvan image-houses from others on the island is their elaborate external moulding, their entrance pavilions (*maṇḍapas*), and the vaulted ceilings—only preserved intact in the Thūpārama—which once supported their distinctively domed roofs. These features place the three vaulted image-houses firmly within the “Drāviḍa” architectural style otherwise typical of South Indian temples. More specifically, they appear to be modelled closely on the small shrines (*devālayas*) to Śiva and other deities located throughout the city, founded during the

1 None of the three structures carries an inscription indicating its original name, and modern designations have shifted confusingly over time: see further the discussion in Chapter Five. On the architectural history of the image-house in Sri Lanka see Meegama, *Temples to the Buddha and the Gods*.

2 Bell, *ASCAR 1903*, 28.

3 Bandaranayake, *Sinhalese Monastic Architecture*, 189–213.

Cōla regime in the first half of the eleventh century.⁴ The crucial difference—other than the choice of a Buddha-image over Śiva, of course—is that the *devālaya*, like most other Drāviḍa-style buildings, was constructed out of cut stone, while the vaulted image-houses are made entirely from brick.

From this variation in construction material, a vast cultural difference has been demarcated by modern archaeologists and art historians: Sinhala Buddhists built in brick and wood; Indian theists built in stone.⁵ And so while the influence of South Indian architecture on the vaulted image-houses is hard to deny,⁶ Senake Bandaranayake has argued that this is limited only to their “superstructure,” while the choice of brick as a building material makes the buildings “distinctly Sinhalese.”⁷ As Sujatha Meegama has argued, such a divide has its heuristic merits. We cannot study connections to South India without first identifying markers of those connections. But it also risks, when overzealously applied, maintaining an ahistoric dichotomy which ultimately only limits our understanding of historical architectural practices.⁸ In a recent close examination of architectural practices across second-millennium Sri Lanka, she argues that the “Drāviḍa” architectural style is best understood not as a foreign import at all, but rather a transnational phenomenon in which Sri Lanka-based architects and patrons were participants alongside South Indians.⁹ Efforts to recognize an enduring Sinhala and Buddhist foundation to Poḷonnaruva’s built landscape, in other words, cannot be allowed to mask our appreciation of the novel architectural forms only made possible by the transcultural combination of materials, techniques, and aesthetics.

I take Meegama’s critical analysis of the art historical dichotomy—“stone or brick”—as both an organizing principle and a caution for this chapter, which examines the more metaphorical “materials” out of which Buddhist kingship was reconstructed in Poḷonnaruva. I outline four distinct traditions of political thought, each articulated and communicated within

4 Bandaranayake, *Sinhalese Monastic Architecture*, 353; Meegama, *Temples to the Buddha and the Gods*, 42–45. Meegama shows that the terms *devālaya* and *kōvil*, later used exclusively for “Buddhist” and “Hindu” shrines, were interchangeable in the Poḷonnaruva period.

5 See most influentially Coomaraswamy, *Mediæval Sinhalese Art*, 114.

6 Although cf. Paranavitana, “The Art and Architecture of the Polonnaruva Period,” 73–75.

7 Bandaranayake, *Sinhalese Monastic Architecture*, 353.

8 Meegama, “South Indian or Sri Lankan?”

9 Meegama, *Temples to the Buddha and the Gods*.

a single language. None of these traditions was static and unchanging, but each maintained at least some degree of shared referents throughout. All four provided models of idealized kingship on which Poḷonnaruva's monarchs could draw. Existing studies of "Buddhist kingship" in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia have tended to emphasize just one of these models: that found in the *Sutta-piṭaka* of the Pali canon, the collection of texts believed by Theravāda Buddhists to record the sermons given by the Buddha in his own words.¹⁰ These studies have often been extremely productive, and it is certainly true that certain narratives from the *Sutta-piṭaka*, including narratives about kings, have been influential in various parts of the Theravāda world at various times. However, in assuming the eternal primacy of "what the Buddha taught"—and, therefore, our own modern ability to read such teachings and deduce "what the Buddha meant"—we have set ourselves up for historical confusion. Very often, the historical "Buddhist kings" of Theravāda Asia have acted in ways totally unlike the idealized Buddhist kings of the Theravāda canon: one apparent contradiction among many which have, in the words of Donald Swearer, "long perplexed Western scholars."¹¹

This contradiction is readily dissolved if we recontextualize the Pali canon, and even the influential fifth-century commentaries of Buddhaghosa, as only one thread—albeit an important thread—in the weft and warp of Buddhist intellectual history, itself part of the yet-broader tapestry of Southern Asia. Buddhist thought on the political did not ossify at the closing of this canon; nor did historical Buddhists refuse to engage with the many other ideas about the political with which they came into contact. These included ideas about kingship transmitted primarily in languages like Sanskrit, in which hereditary priests carried out rituals on the king's behalf, and in which the king was increasingly presented as either a model devotee or even a human embodiment of a tutelary deity—ideas often segmented off, in other words, as a distinctly "Hindu" model of kingship. Even within first-millennium Sri Lanka—often understood to be a Buddhist bastion, holding out

10 The *Sutta-piṭaka* ("basket of sermons") constitutes one of the three traditional divisions of the canon, alongside the *Vinaya-piṭaka*, which contains monastic rules and regulations, and the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, which contains discussions of ontological theory. The *Sutta-piṭaka* is further divided into five collections (called, like monastic ordination lineages, "*nikāyas*"): the *Dīgha-nikāya* (hereafter DN); *Majjhima-nikāya* (MN); *Saṃyutta-nikāya* (SN); *Āṅguttara-nikāya* (AN); and *Khuddaka-nikāya* (KN).

11 Swearer, *The Buddhist World*, 1.

against an increasingly theistic South Asia¹²—Pali-canonical models of kingship were not mechanically reproduced. The kings of Anurādhapura developed their own distinctive ways of presenting themselves as ideal kings, articulated primarily in the Sinhala language, and grounded in distinctive ways of conceptualizing kingship. And when the Anurādhapuran kings were overthrown at the end of the tenth century, and Sri Lanka was annexed into the powerful Cōḷa Empire, a fourth tradition of political thought, articulated primarily in Tamil, was introduced to the island.

In outlining these four intellectual traditions—the Sanskrit, Pali, Sinhala, and Tamil—I do not intend a return to the tired notion of distinct “models” of kingship blindly imitated by later monarchs on sectarian (let alone “ethnic”) lines. Rather, my purpose here is to outline, in admittedly broad strokes, the “materials” which these later monarchs had to hand. Just as Sri Lankan architecture from the Poḷonnaruva period onwards was constructed from timber, brick, *and* stone, so too did Poḷonnaruva’s monarchs draw on multiple materials in constructing their versions of Buddhist kingship.

Sanskrit Political Thought

The historiography of political thought in Sanskrit often begins—often critically—with Max Weber.¹³ Weber’s analysis may have grossly simplified many key points, but his key insights are nonetheless still useful as a point of departure. The *Vedas*—the earliest extant liturgic texts of Southern Asia—enjoin a series of ritual sacrifices (*yajñas*), to be carried out by hereditary Brahmin priests on behalf of wealthy patrons.¹⁴ Later auxiliary texts of the core *Vedas* described increasingly conspicuous ways for those patrons, particularly kingly patrons, to demonstrate their piety and largess. These included the *rājāsuya* and *abhiṣeka* rituals to consecrate a monarch into kingship, and the elaborate *aśvamedha* horse sacrifice, intended to inaugurate a new dynasty.¹⁵ For Weber, these rituals formed the basis of a symbiotic

¹² See, e.g., Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 138–39; de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 50.

¹³ Weber, *The Religion of India*; see further Gellner, *Anthropology*.

¹⁴ The four core Vedic texts are the *samhitās* (collections of hymns) themselves called the *R̥g-veda*, *Yajur-veda*, *Sama-veda*, and *Atharva-veda*. Each of these acquired a series of what I call throughout this chapter “auxiliary texts,” namely the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Āraṇyakas*, and the *Upaniṣads* (sometimes also called *Vedānta*, “the end of the *Vedas*”). Each *samhitā* has varying numbers of auxiliary texts, all of which can also be collectively referred to as the respective *Veda*.

¹⁵ See Walser, *Genealogies*, 256–59.

relationship between Brahmins and their patrons. As Johannes Bronkhorst puts it,

Brahmins did not try to convert anyone in the usual sense of the term. All they did was remind their interlocutors of some, for them, elementary facts. The hierarchical division of society was one of them; the role of Brahmins as natural counsellors to kings another; the natural place of Sanskrit—the only true and correct language—in matters relating to the state a third...If rulers wanted to get the best out of Brahmins in their kingdom, they might donate settlements (*agrahāras*) to them: the Brahmin inhabitants of those *agrahāras* would be able to spend their time performing rites for the benefit of the king and his kingdom.¹⁶

It is perhaps no surprise that by the time Aśoka (r. ca. third century BCE) carved his inscriptions across Southern Asia, he tells us that Brahmins were present in every land he knew of other than those of the Greeks.¹⁷ We should not think, however, that Brahmanical attempts to position themselves at the right hand of power were internally homogenous and conflict-free. Different *Vedic* texts offer conflicting procedures for key royal rituals, and we can easily imagine the priests who were hereditary specialists in these respective textual traditions competing to prove the efficacy of *their* version (and, therefore, the efficacy of patronizing *them* as court priests).¹⁸ Likewise, we should not imagine that Buddhists—and members of other heterodox movements, such as the Jains, Cārvākas, and Ājīvikas—let these arguments for political efficacy go uncontested. Joseph Walser has argued, for example, that both the philosopher Nāgārjuna and the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* scripture sought, in their own ways, to displace Brahmanical claims to socio-political primacy.¹⁹ As we will see both in the following section, on Pali conceptions of ideal kingship, and in later chapters, this contest was very much still ongoing during the Poḷonnaruva period.

Outside of the world of textual scholarship, Sanskrit gained increasing relevancy as a language of political expression. This took some time: the inscriptions of Aśoka mentioned above were written in a dialect of Middle

¹⁶ Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*, 44.

¹⁷ Cf. the reading of Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*, 31–36.

¹⁸ Joseph Walser has suggested, in a yet-unpublished paper, that *Chandogya-upaniṣad* 6.2 (part of the *Sāma-veda* tradition) is a critical response to *Taittirīya-upaniṣad* 7.2 (part of the *Yajur-veda*), and that this disagreement had political implications. I am grateful to Prof. Walser for sharing his thoughts with me in personal communication.

¹⁹ Walser, *Nagarjuna*; Walser, *Genealogies*, particularly ch. 10.

Indo-Aryan (MIA) often called Prakrit; later dynasties like the Sātavāhanas (early first century BCE through early second century CE) produced inscriptions in a more self-consciously literary variant of this same language.²⁰ In the early first millennium CE, however, rulers across Southern Asia began to almost exclusively inscribe in Sanskrit, making this the sole language for the expression of royal power from Kashmir to Java.²¹ These inscriptions typically followed a strict formula, called the *praśasti*:

A typical inscription of this class would begin with an auspicious sign or invocation such as *svasti* followed by one or more *maṅgala* (invocatory) verses, and then an account of the ruling king's lineage, full of lavish praises of his own and his ancestors' physical power and beauty, moral qualities and reputation, just rule, conquests, learning and artistic skills, and so on. The actual purpose of the inscription, namely, the dedication or memorial, is typically mentioned only at or near the end of the text. This is often followed by concluding, benedictory, and/or signature verses giving the composer's name.²²

The formulaic opening verses of the *praśasti* were often the central focus of royal inscriptions, as much so as the purported occasion of the inscription (such as a donation to a religious institution).²³ From reading these *praśasti*, and noting subtle shifts over time, we therefore gain considerable insights into how first-millennium monarchs presented themselves as ideal rulers: which genealogies were invoked or downplayed; which physical qualities were valorized; which deeds were given the most lavish attention.²⁴

Alongside the inscriptions created by monarchs themselves, first-millennium scholars produced a number of textual sources *about* monarchs and monarchy which provide us with further insights into Sanskrit political culture. The most commonly-cited of these texts is the Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* ("The Treatise on Success"), which explicitly aims to advise kings on ideal kingship.²⁵ The *Arthaśāstra* has been long noted as espousing a pragmatist or even *realpolitik* outlook, warning kings against the ambitions of their own sons and maintaining that the enemy of one's enemy is, at least temporarily,

20 Ollett, *Language of the Snakes*.

21 See generally Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*.

22 Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, 112.

23 Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*, 140.

24 See, e.g., Ali, "Royal Eulogy"; Talbot, "Rudrama-Devi, the Female King"; Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State*, ch. 1.

25 Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India*; see further McClish, "Political Brahmanism and the State."

a friend.²⁶ Other *śāstras*, even those not directly addressed to kings, are far from apolitical. Often, they seek to articulate an idealized social order, and so necessarily reflect on an idealized *political* order. Thus modern scholars have productively read political themes in *Dharmaśāstras* (“Treatises on [Religio-social] Duty”);²⁷ *Śilpaśāstras* (“Treatises on Artisanry”) and *Vāstuśāstras* (“Treatises on Architecture”);²⁸ and even *Kāmaśāstras* (“Treatises on [Sexual] Desire”).²⁹ Very often, these texts describe an orderly hierarchy of kingship descending from a world-ruling *cakravartin* at the apex down to more local rulers, each court a microcosm of those above.³⁰ Other genres, such as the aphoristic texts concerned with *nīti* (“Statecraft”), also explicitly offer political advice to their readers.³¹ It seems that there was no shortage of Sanskrit-language texts which outlined ideal ways of doing politics—even if it is not always clear how strictly historical kings in Southern Asia necessarily modelled their behaviour on those texts.

Sanskrit literary sources, too, provide useful information about idealized visions of the political. Narratives of perfect rulers, upon which historical kings might model their own self-representation, are central to the very earliest literary epics in Sanskrit. The first of these, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, presents the titular incarnation of the god Viṣṇu as both the ultimate prince and the ultimate man: the entirety of its first *sarga* (“chapter”) consists of praise for Rāma as an exemplar for all others to follow. It is no surprise, therefore, that many later kings across Southern Asia modelled themselves on Rāma,³² or that *rāmarājya* (“the kingship of Rāma”) came to signify political utopia.³³

26 Boesche, *The First Great Political Realist*; Dar, “Beyond Eurocentrism”; Misra, “The Indian Machiavelli”; Prasad, “Politics and Ethics in Kautilya’s Arthashastra”; cf. Shahi, *Kautilya and Non-Western IR Theory*.

27 Eltschinger, “Aśvaghoṣa on Kings and Kingship”; McKnight, “Kingship and Religion in the Gupta Age”; Olivelle, “Manu and the ‘Arthaśāstra.’”

28 Inden, “Hierarchies of Kings”; Mills, “The Master May Wander into Servanthood.”

29 Ali, *Courtly Culture*.

30 Inden, “Hierarchies of Kings”; cf. Shirley, “Towards an Intellectual History of *Cakravartin* Kingship.”

31 Narayana Rao and Subrahmanyam, “An Elegy for Niti.”

32 Rao, “A New Perspective”; Sahgal, “Situating Kingship.” Rāma became a particularly important referent for Thai kingship: the Ayutthaya kingdom was named for Rāma’s royal city Ayodhya, and Thai kings have historically adopted “Rāma” as (part of) their regnal names. See further Singaravelu, “Rāma in the Thai Cultural Tradition.”

33 Menon and Schokker, *Conception of Rāma-Rājya*; Skaria, “Relinquishing Republican Democracy.”

The second great epic, the *Mahābhārata*, again presents us with an ideal king, Yudhiṣṭhira, and devotes an entire *parva* (“book”) to a lecture on kingship itself, delivered by the dying statesman Bhīṣma.³⁴ In addition to their exemplary status, Rāma and Yudhiṣṭhira are presented as members of, respectively, the Solar and Lunar Dynasties (the *śūrya*- and *candra-vaṃśas*), and so would feature heavily in the genealogical claims of later monarchs.³⁵ The scope of these epics cannot be reduced to politics alone, of course. But the visions of kingship outlined therein continue to reverberate throughout Southern Asia today.

Later works of Sanskrit literature, particularly those in the *mahākāvya* (“epic poem”) genre, continued to develop these themes. The earliest extant *mahākāvya* are, interestingly, both explicitly Buddhist texts: the *Buddhacarita* (“Deeds of the Buddha”) and *Saundarananda* (“Handsome Nanda”) of Aśvaghoṣa. The *Buddhacarita* in particular, the first complete hagiography of the Buddha in Sanskrit, has been read as a Buddhist response to the socio-political visions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*.³⁶ As the Buddha himself rejected kingship in favour of enlightenment, here the Buddha’s father Śuddhodana is presented as the ultimate literary king, complete with an elaborate genealogy traced back to the Solar Dynasty. Later Sanskrit-language Buddhist literary works, such as the influential *Aśokāvadāna*, seem to inherit their visions of kingship from these early precedents.³⁷

The idealized kingship described in these early poems was later formalized by works of literary theory (*sāhitya-śāstra* or *alankāra-śāstra*), which strictly prescribed how Sanskrit literati *ought* to describe kings and kingship. Daṇḍin’s ca. seventh-century *Kāvyaadarśa* (“Mirror of Poetry”)—perhaps the most widely influential of these works—illustrates this in its example of the “Virile” poetic mood (the *vīra-rasa*):³⁸ “Having not conquered

34 On Yudhiṣṭhira see Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*. On Bhīṣma’s sermon in the *Śāntiparva* see Fitzgerald, “Negotiating the Shape of Scripture”; Pollock, “Divine King,” 523. On political themes in a later adaption of the *Mahābhārata* narrative, Māgha’s *Śisupālavadha*, see McCrea, “Lord of Glory.”

35 On the elaboration of these dynasties in the *purāṇas*, see Inden, “Imperial Purāṇas”; Thapar, “Historical Traditions,” 567–68.

36 Eltschinger, “Aśvaghōṣa on Kings and Kingship”; Hiltebeitel, “Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita*”; Olivelle, “Aśvaghōṣa’s Apologia.”

37 Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, ch. 2.

38 On Daṇḍin’s influence see the essays in Bronner, *A Lasting Vision*; particularly Hallisey et al., “Beauty to Beauty.” On my translation of *vīra*, usually “Heroic,” as “Virile,” see Hansen, “Heroic Modes of Women,” 1.

the earth with its oceans, having not honoured [the gods] with various sacrifices, and having not given to beggars that for which they beg—how would I be kingly?”³⁹

In this verse, Daṇḍin equates the satisfactory performance of kingship with military conquest, the performance of ritual sacrifice (aided by court Brahmins), and the donation of alms (*dāna*) to supplicants. It is significant that Daṇḍin’s earliest commentator, the Lanka-born Ratnaśrījñāna, specifies that these rituals include the Vedic *aśvamedha* horse sacrifice and *rājāsuya* consecration.⁴⁰ Even for a Buddhist monk like Ratnaśrījñāna, this is still a thoroughly Brahmanical vision of ideal kingship. Other parts of Daṇḍin’s work, and Ratnaśrī’s commentary thereon, provide us with other insights into the social ideals of Sanskrit poetry. We are told elsewhere, for example, that a manly literary hero can only feel pleasure (*ratī*) and passion (*ānuraktī*), emotions suitable for the “Erotic” mood (*śṛṅgārarasa*), towards women, whereas similar feelings towards other men are best understood as platonic “affection” (*preyas*).⁴¹ Of course, we should not misread literary advice as a social norm. But equally, we should not underestimate the importance of such advice. If a king wanted to be portrayed in some literary eulogy as a “good king”—one approaching Rāma or Yudhiṣṭhira, perhaps—then he would do well to have his court poet describe him as engaged in these activities endorsed by Daṇḍin.

One major development of the first millennium which significantly influenced Sanskrit visions of kingship was the emergence of the *bhakti* (devotional) movement.⁴² As the *Vedas* and the ritual sacrifice they enjoined became less prominent in public ritual, personal devotion to a tutelary deity—such as Śiva, or Viṣṇu, often in the form of his avatars Kṛṣṇa or Rāma—became central. Monarchs increasingly fashioned themselves as model devotees of their chosen deities, adopting titles in their inscriptions which declared them foremost among the followers of Viṣṇu (with epithets like *paramavaishṇava* or *paramabhāgavata*) or Śiva (*paramamāheśvara*). It is important to note that this royal style was not limited to theist devotees: some monarchs of the Bengali Pāla dynasty declared themselves

³⁹ *Kāvyaḍarśa*, ed. Tarkabāgīsā, ch. 2, v. 284. This verse is repeated, nearly verbatim, in the ca. tenth-century Sinhala *Siyabaslakara*, ed. Jayatilaka, ch. 2, v. 277.

⁴⁰ *Ratnaśrī-ṭīkā*, ed. Tarkabāgīsā, 264, commenting on *Kāvyaḍarśa* ch. 2, v. 284. On Ratnaśrījñāna generally see Pollock, “Ratnaśrījñāna.”

⁴¹ See the discussion of *Kāvyaḍarśa* ch. 2, v. 279 and *Ratnaśrī-ṭīkā* thereon in Shirley, “Beyond Masculinity,” 491.

⁴² On which see generally Venkatkrishnan, *Love in the Time of Scholarship*.

paramasaugata, “Foremost Among Those of the Sugata (i.e., the Buddha).”⁴³ In some cases, monarchs began to increasingly identify themselves as representations or even human incarnations of those deities. This phenomenon is particularly well-documented in pre-Buddhist Angkor,⁴⁴ but was a widespread phenomenon throughout the Sanskrit world.⁴⁵ There is textual support for such royal claims to divinity. The *Ahīrbudhnya-saṃhitā*, in Pollock’s translation, tells us that:

The king is the ultimate being, a lord consisting of [parts of] all the gods. He is the locus of the effective energy of Viṣṇu, he consists of the Blessed One himself. The Lord God created the king long ago, emitting him from His own head: consecrated on the head, therefore, the king is placed far above other creatures...the wise man who seeks earthly and heavenly prosperity will esteem the king, the supreme deity of all worlds.⁴⁶

This is a significant shift from the position of the king as sacrificial patron as described in the earliest *Vedas*.

Nonetheless, the wide range of kingly models represented in the first-millennium Sanskrit world—from the literary exemplars of Rāma and Yudhiṣṭhira, through the stylized *praśasti* inscriptions, down to claims to literally embody divinity—share certain commonalities. Kings in the Sanskrit imaginaire won victories in war, and used the spoils to patronize Brahmanic rituals. They embodied literary qualities like the *vīra-rasa*, and amassed ranks of consorts and courtesans to demonstrate their exemplary masculinity. Above all, they expressed their ideal kingship through inscriptions, and through courtly poetry under their patronage, always written in Sanskrit: the premier language of power and prestige throughout first-millennium Southern Asia. However, Sanskrit was not the only language in which ideals of kingship could be described. Alternative discourses emerged from an early period, articulated in other closely related languages (“Prakrits”) and often associated with particular religious movements. These included discourses associated with Jainism, and with Buddhism.⁴⁷

⁴³ Shirley, “Towards an Intellectual History of *Cakravartin* Kingship,” 198.

⁴⁴ Cœdès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*; Kulke, *The Devarāja Cult*.

⁴⁵ Gonda, “The Sacred Character of Ancient Indian Kingship”; Pollock, “Divine King.”

⁴⁶ *Ahīrbudhnya-saṃhitā* ch. 16, vv. 14–19, translated in Pollock, “Divine King,” 526.

⁴⁷ On Jaina ideals of kingship, beyond the scope of this chapter, see Taylor, “Aesthetics of Sovereignty.”

Pali Political Thought

Multiple corpora of texts claim to accurately record the teachings of the historical Buddha. These corpora vary considerably in their contents, in the practices they enjoin, and of course in the languages in which they were and are transmitted.⁴⁸ The Pali canon presents itself as a complete and accurate record of what was recited by the Buddha's foremost disciples immediately after his death, at the First Dharma Council (P. *dharmasaṅgīti*). Later (we are told) some groups of monks deviated from the precedent of these elders, and so formed their own ordination lineages (such as the Mahāsāṅghika and Dharmaguptaka) with faulty disciplinary procedures and corrupted recitation traditions, necessitating censure and correction in the Second and Third Dharma Councils. Others, however, remained true to the teachings (*vāda*) recited by the elders (P. *theras*) at the First Dharma Council, and so became known as adherents to the *thera-vāda*.⁴⁹

The Theravāda ordination lineage (*nikāya*), with its orally preserved canon in Pali, arrived in Sri Lanka in the third century BCE; that canon was first written down in the first century BCE.⁵⁰ At some point after this, the Sri Lankan monastic community trifurcated into three rival sub-*nikāyas* centred on the Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri, and Jetavana monasteries in Anurādhapura.⁵¹ In around the fifth century CE, the Mahāvihāran monk Buddhaghosa completed a set of commentaries on the *Sutta-piṭaka* ("Collection of Teachings") of the Pali Canon, as well as a meditation manual (the *Visuddhimagga*)

48 We have available full canons in Pali, Tibetan, and Chinese, alongside less complete corpora in Sanskrit and Gāndhārī. The Pali canon has also been fully translated into a number of modern languages, including both Sinhala and English.

49 This account largely follows the *nidāna-kathā* of Buddhaghosa's *Pañcappakaraṇa* commentary on the *Kathāvatthu*. On the firmly partisan nature of this account, in Buddhaghosa's writing and in later texts, see e.g., Bretfeld, "Theravāda"; Gethin, "Was Buddhaghosa a Theravādin?"; Skilling, "Theravāda in History."

50 See generally Collins, "On The Very Idea," 74–80. There is a long-standing academic debate regarding whether the version of the Pali canon to we have access can be taken as an accurate reflection of "what the Buddha taught." Some argue that, while minor alterations may have taken place before the canon's writing-down, these were the exception rather than the rule, and its veracity is generally reliable: see, e.g., Anālayo Bhikkhu, "Historical Value"; Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 21–22; Wynne, "Oral Transmission." Others maintain that we cannot be sure about the contents of the canon until, at the earliest, the fifth-century commentaries of Buddhaghosa: Norman, *A Philological Approach*, ch. 8; Schopen, "Two Problems."

51 On this schism see the Introduction, and more generally Walters, "Mahāyāna Theravāda."

which synthesized the totality of Mahāvihāran thought. Commentaries on the remaining sections of the Canon were later attributed to him.⁵² Two highly literary histories of Buddhism on the island, from the Mahāvihāran perspective, were respectively composed in the fourth and fifth centuries: the *Dīpavaṃsa* (“Lineage of the Island”) and the original *Mahāvamsa* (“The Great Lineage”).⁵³ While other Pali texts were composed after the fifth century—some of which will become very relevant to the discussion of later chapters—we might, cautiously, take the canon, Buddhaghosa’s writings thereon, and the early histories of that canon in Lanka as together representative of the first-millennium Pali worldview.

Pali-canonical texts about kings and kingship are hyper-aware of Brahmanical norms, and often explicitly subvert or even satirize them.⁵⁴ The nature of these responses, however, seem *prima facie* to vary radically from *sutta* to *sutta*, and perhaps even contradict one another. Matthew Moore has attempted to overcome these apparent contradictions by distinguishing between the *political system* endorsed by the Pali canon and its more general *theory of politics*. The political system is, in his reading, an “enlightened monarchy based on a primal social contract.”⁵⁵ Underlying this political system, however, Moore discerns what he sees as a rather radical political theory, which he synthesizes from more general ethical and soteriological Buddhist positions.⁵⁶ I am less convinced that such a neat synthesis is possible. Instead, I read the Pali canon as responding, in various places and in various ways, to a range of different internal needs and external interlocutors. We can heuristically group these in three distinct—if overlapping—modes of discussing the political, which I call the “elective mode,” the “critical mode,” and the “ideal mode.” These modes cannot be easily assigned to neat chronological order. Even if we accept that some sections of the Pali canon were in fact composed or compiled later than others, multiple modes

52 Buddhaghosa presents his commentaries as “translations” back into Pali of Sinhala texts, themselves translations of the Pali-language discussions of monks at the First Dharma Council. This claim to commentarial originality is apparently unique in the Buddhist world. Skilling, “Scriptural Authenticity,” 11.

53 Buddhaghosa knows and cites the *Dīpavaṃsa* but not the *Mahāvamsa*. Scheible, *Reading the Mahāvamsa*, 130.

54 On such satire in the *Aggañña-sutta* see Collins, “Discourse on What Is Primary,” 317–22; see further McGovern, *The Snake and the MongOOSE*.

55 Moore, *Buddhism and Political Theory*, 23.

56 This theory is outlined in brief at Moore, *Buddhism and Political Theory*, 28–30; see further his chs. 4–6.

can be read within singular *suttas*, weaving together with varying degrees of grist and give.

By the “elective mode” I refer to those Pali texts, and sections of Pali texts, which can be read as presenting the ideal form of governance as something almost akin to republicanism. Two passages are frequently cited in support of this reading. The first is the advice that the Buddha claims to have given to the Vajjians on good governance (*Dīghanikāya* 16; *Āṅguttaranikāya* 7.22), which Moore reads as at least “quasi-republican” and even “implicitly criticizing monarchy.”⁵⁷ The second passage is the mythical *election* of the primordial king Mahāsammata (*Dīghanikāya* 27), long discussed in terms of social contract theory.⁵⁸ A long-standing theory holds that the Buddha himself, although valorized in later hagiographies as the son of a mighty king, may actually have been born into a republican society, and that this influenced his advice to the Vajjians in particular.⁵⁹ If so, this would make this “elective” mode of political thought representative of the actual thought of the historical Buddha (as opposed to the accretions and amendments potentially made by later redactors): a boon to scholars, like Moore, who see such republicanism as more aligned with the posited “core principles” of Buddhism. If so, this had little impact on later Buddhist political thought. Later references to Mahāsammata (particularly royal claims to belong to his family) rarely dwell on his elected status.⁶⁰ I know of no later invocations of the Vajjian advice, let alone calls for its practical implementation. These few texts aside, Buddhist political thought therefore assumes hereditary monarchy to be the norm.

This is the case for both the “critical” and “ideal” modes of talking about politics in the Pali canon, both of which take hereditary monarchy for granted. Following Steven Collins, among others, I read these two modes as decidedly reflective of an ongoing engagement with wider social and political circumstances, including the Brahmanical conceptions of kingship described above.⁶¹ In the “critical” mode, emphasis is placed on the coercive

57 Moore, *Buddhism and Political Theory*, 22; see further Collins, *Nirvana*, 443–48.

58 Collins, “Discourse on What Is Primary”; Huxley, “The Buddha and the Social Contract”; see further the response in Collins, “The Lion’s Roar”; Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, ch. 2.

59 Gokhale, “Early Buddhist Kingship,” 15; Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 48.

60 Collins and Huxley, “Post-Canonical Adventures”; Huxley, “When Manu Met Mahāsammata.”

61 Collins refers to these as “two modes of [kingly] *dhmma*”: Collins, *Nirvana*, ch. 6.

and punitive violence (*daṇḍa*, literally “the rod”) necessarily part of a king’s duties. This contradicts the more general ethical imperative to avoid such violence (*ahiṃsa*). As Collins neatly summarizes it, “The only advice possible for kings in [the critical mode] is ‘Don’t be one!’”⁶² Thus a number of canonical texts, as Collins shows, recount the cunning ways in which those in line for the throne manage to dodge the ethical bullet, such as feigning disability. However, such explicit critiques of kingship are relatively uncommon among Pali writings, particularly later Pali writings. The “critical mode,” for all its apparent harmony with deontological readings of Buddhist ethics, is simply not representative of how most Pali scholars have written about kingship.

Far more frequently, scholar-monks have attempted to articulate an “ideal” form of kingship: a king (*rājan*) who ascends the throne and then rules by exemplary *dharma* (here perhaps “morality”) alone, and so has no need for the ethically dubious coercion of *daṇḍa*.⁶³ *Dharmic dharmarājans* are mentioned throughout the Pali canon; Buddhaghosa supplements this with a list of ten *rājadharmas*, moral duties incumbent on kings.⁶⁴ The most exemplary form of *dharmarāja* is a *cakravartin* (“wheel-turning”) monarch, the classic description of which is:

a *cakravartin*, *dharmic*, a *dharma*-king, whose domain extended to the four directions, who had achieved stability within the kingdom, who had received the seven treasures. These seven treasures were as follows: the wheel-treasure, the elephant-treasure, the horse-treasure, the jewel-treasure, the woman-treasure, the householder-treasure, and it is the the leader-treasure which is the seventh. He had over a thousand sons, heroic and well-built,

⁶² Collins, *Nirvana*, 420.

⁶³ In personal communication, Alastair Gornall has suggested that *dharmika* refers to a king’s moral status, while *dharma-rājan* is best interpreted as king *by dharma*, i.e., rightful ascent to the throne (rather than patricide or usurpation). *Dharmika dharmarājan* could therefore best be glossed as “a king both righteous [in action] and rightful [in claim].”

⁶⁴ These ten *dharmas* are, as enumerated by Buddhaghosa in Pali, charity (*dāna*), discipline (*sīla*), generosity (*pariccāga*), forthrightness (*ajjava*), mildness (*maddava*), asceticism (*tapa*), non-anger (*akkodha*), non-violence (*avihiṃsā*), quiescence (*khantī*), and non-adversity (*avirodhana*). It is frequently claimed that the ten *rājadharmas* are listed in the *Jātaka*. However, they do not appear in the canonical verses, only in Buddhaghosa’s prose commentaries thereon. In fact, I have found no reference to *rājadharmas* in any Theravāda canonical materials. It therefore seems likely that Buddhaghosa took the term—although not the specific list, which is decidedly Buddhist—from Sanskrit texts such as the *Rājadharmaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, and interpolated it into canonical sources.

crushing his enemies' armies. He ruled having conquered this ocean-bound earth without rod or sword.⁶⁵

The *cakravartin* seems, as Collins has shown, to neatly sidestep the critique levelled at the coercive violence usually necessary of kingship. This is a king so thoroughly ethical that he has no need to punish criminals or even conquer other kingdoms by force.⁶⁶ We might take this, in many ways, as an extension of the elective model: here, however, the people "elect" to follow the *cakravartin* by sheer force of his merit, rather than to serve a social good. This is clearly a very *aspirational* model, one far out of reach for most monarchs. But it is nonetheless a rejection of the "critical mode" outlined above, which holds that *no* form of kingship should be aspirational. At least two, mutually compatible, factors might help to explain this radically different view of kingship.

First, the *dharma*-king and *cakravartin* may well represent attempts by early Buddhists to appeal to kingly patrons: decrying all kings as fundamentally morally flawed would hardly win support for a growing religious movement. The model of the *dharma* king may therefore be a Buddhist alternative to the sacrificial patron of Brahmanic texts: an alternative way for kings to perform "good kingship," opening a space for Buddhist monks and Buddhist ritual practices at royal courts. If so, this model (transmitted through Sanskrit texts, not Pali) was extremely successful in East Asia, where Buddhist *cakravartin*ship was repeatedly invoked as a royal ideal.⁶⁷ Despite common assumptions, *cakravartin*ship was claimed far less frequently in first-millennium Southern Asia.⁶⁸ As we will see in subsequent chapters, it was only in the Polonnaruwa period that this became a standard component of Buddhist kingship in Sri Lanka.

Second, the hyper-idealized kingship of the *cakravartin* king allowed Buddhists to hagiographically associate the Buddha himself with the trappings of kingship, without compromising his perfect moral standing. This is particularly evident in stories about the Buddha's various past lives as

⁶⁵ *Cakkavatti-sutta* (*Dīgha-nikāya* 26), ed. Rhys-Davids and Carpenter, 3:59. The passage is repeated verbatim elsewhere in the canon.

⁶⁶ Collins, *Nirvana*, ch. 6. See also Vessantara as another kind of exemplary king at Collins, *Nirvana*, ch. 7.

⁶⁷ Balkwill, *The Women Who Ruled China*. On the Sanskrit texts from which these Chinese monarchs drew their own *cakravartin* ideal see Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*.

⁶⁸ See particularly Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*; cf. Shirley, "Towards an Intellectual History."

a king, which often position him in this exemplary mode. Even in his final life as the Buddha, he was born with the bodily markings of a “Great Man” (*mahāpuruṣa*), destined to become either a Buddha or a *cakravartin*. Much has been made of this parallel.⁶⁹ Pali-language texts from first-millennium Sri Lanka, interestingly, seem to have taken a “have your *cakra* and eat it too” approach to this prophecy, referencing the metaphor of the Buddha’s teachings as a “Wheel of *Dharma*” to designate him as a *dharma-cakravartin*.⁷⁰

What is crucial here is that these ideal representations of kingship in Pali writings rarely seek to directly challenge the Brahmanical *status quo*. Far more frequently, they adopt something of a conciliatory stance. They seek to open a space for Buddhist rituals (and Buddhist monks) in kingly procedure, while largely leaving the wider “apparatus” (to borrow Walser’s terminology) intact.⁷¹ This is a theme we will see repeated throughout the following chapters: to be “Buddhist” does not necessarily mean “to *not* be theistic”; to deny the existence and efficacy of gods like Viṣṇu and Śiva; or to reject the significance of Brahmanical rituals in the performance of kingship. Buddhism offered an alternative soteriology to that of the *Upaniṣads*, of the *bhakti* movement, or of later sectarian developments like the Śaiva Siddhāntas or Śrīvaiṣṇavas.⁷² On an ultimate (*lokottara*) level, it therefore held itself apart; on the level of “this-worldly” (*laukika*) concerns, however, Buddhism has always been open to a large pantheon of gods, protective magic, and Brahmanical rituals.⁷³ This was certainly the case for the Buddhist monarchs of early medieval Sri Lanka.

Sinhala Political Thought

Buddhism came to Sri Lanka (so the story goes) thanks to the intervention of the Mauryan Emperor Aśoka, who sent his own children—the monk Mahinda and nun Saṅghamitta—to the island’s royal capital of Anurādhapura, to convert the monarch and to establish their respective monastic communities (*saṅghas*). From this moment onwards, all evidence (textual and material)

69 Wimalaratana, *Concept of Great Man*; cf. Radich, “The Somatics of Liberation,” section 3.1.

70 See further Shirley, “Towards an Intellectual History of *Cakravartin* Kingship,” 194n23.

71 Walser, *Genealogies*, 249.

72 On Śaiva Siddhāntas see Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism*; on the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, Akepiya-pornchai, “Translation in a Multilingual Context.”

73 On the *laukika/lokottara* distinction in Sri Lanka see Holt, *Buddha in the Crown*.

suggests that Sri Lanka's monarchs were fervent patrons of Buddhist institutions, and sought to present themselves as such in their various inscriptions. As noted above, the monastic community within Sri Lanka eventually trifurcated into distinct *nikāyas* respectively based at Anurādhapura's Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri-vihāra, and later Jetavana-vihāra monasteries. Because of the eventual dominance of the Mahāvihāran legacy, and of the Pali canon they maintained, scholars have tended to assume that these kings (and others across Southern Asia) were naturally oriented towards, and modelled themselves upon, the visions of kingship presented in the Pali canon. A fierce scholarly debate raged, for example, over whether certain monarchs were viewed as *cakravartins*, given their obvious divergence from the superhuman monarchs described in the Pali canon.⁷⁴ However, despite the long association between Sri Lanka and the Pali language, it is not so clear that Sri Lankan monarchs were emulating Pali-canonical examples. Rather, a distinct discourse of kingship emerged in the inscriptional record, almost exclusively expressed in the Sinhala language. It is worth our attending to the specifics of this political discourse.

Until the last decade of the first millennium, Sri Lankan sources describing kings and kingship were strictly divided on linguistic and social grounds. On the one hand, scholar-monks (particularly those associated with the Mahāvihāra-*nikāya*) continued to produce serious theoretical and narrative works in the Pali language. Non-monastic elites, however—meaning, primarily, monarchs—articulated their visions of kingship almost exclusively in Sinhala script and language, only rarely leaving behind records in Sanskrit, and never in Pali.⁷⁵ This does not mean that Sri Lanka's kings were entirely insular in this period, and unconcerned with developments in wider South Asia. Rather, they were fully immersed in a wider political culture which encompassed much of what we now call South India, and deeply connected to wider polities across the Indian Ocean region and beyond.⁷⁶ The effect that these connections had on ideals of kingship, however, has been relatively understudied, with the notable exception of Jonathan Walters's work.⁷⁷

74 Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*; Spiro, "Review of *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*"; Tambiah, "The Buddhist Conception"; Spiro, "The Buddhist Conception"; cf. Shirley, "Towards an Intellectual History of *Cakravartin* Kingship."

75 Dias, "Sanskrit and Pali Inscriptions of Ceylon."

76 On which see particularly the essays in Bandaranayake, *Sri Lanka and the Silk Road of the Sea*.

77 Walters, "Buddhist History."

Walters provides a nuanced reading of the relationship between Lanka's kings and *śāsana*, in both literary and inscriptional sources, across an impressive temporal period, and I follow his account closely in my understanding of late Anurādhapuran visions of kingship. From his analysis, supplemented by the subsequent publication of a more complete inscriptional corpus,⁷⁸ we can identify three key developments of late Anurādhapuran inscriptional discourses which would have a clear impact on later Poḷonnaruva-based visions of kingship.

The first of these is the elaboration, from the reign of Udaya II (r. 887–898) onwards, of “work-like” royal biographies preceding the more “documentary” contents of inscriptions. This is usually, and I think accurately, attributed to an emulation of the Sanskrit *praśasti* described above.⁷⁹ This conforms with the broader pattern of “vernacular literarization” occurring across Southern Asia at this time, in which monarchs increasingly turned to their own local languages for inscriptional self-representation.⁸⁰ Because of the clear, and often self-conscious, influence of Sanskrit *praśasti* on these vernacular inscriptions, the term *praśasti* is therefore sometimes heuristically used as a catch-all for any grandiose inscriptional preamble. But this is inaccurate. As described above, the *praśasti* is a highly typified genre, almost always in verse, following a strict formula. This was not the case for the Sinhala royal inscriptional style. As Whitney Cox has argued for the Tamil *meykkīrtti* (discussed further below), we should not overlook the significance of such distinctions by conflating them all under the heading “*praśasti*.”⁸¹

The second development which concerns us is the increasing prevalence of royal promulgations about proper monastic conduct, documented and enacted by inscriptions found within monastic complexes. These promulgations are typically referred to in this period as *sirit* (cf. Skt. *carita*, “[a code of] conduct”).⁸² This term is a clear *tadbhāva* (semantic borrowing)

⁷⁸ I refer here to *Inscriptions of Ceylon* vol. 5, which is vast enough to have been printed in three parts. The numbering of inscriptions between these parts is not continuous, and so I cite from it with part numbers marked in small roman numerals (e.g., IC 5.ii.17, the seventeenth inscription in part two of volume five).

⁷⁹ See, e.g., Berkwitz, “Reimagining Buddhist Kingship.”

⁸⁰ Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*, see particularly 386–87.

⁸¹ Cox, *Politics, Kingship, and Poetry*, 53.

⁸² These promulgations are often called *katikāvata* by modern scholars, following Ratnapala, *The Katikāvatas*. I suspect that this is anachronous for the first millennium, in which the inscriptions usually refer to themselves as *sirit*. The term *katikā* does

from Sanskrit, which may suggest a “mainland” influence behind such royal interventions into monastic conduct. This suggestion is reinforced by one of our earliest examples of this intervention, found in the Anurādhapura Jetavana complex (EZ 1.1), being written in the Sanskrit language with Nāgarī script.⁸³ These *sirit* inscriptions are a direct precursor to Parākramabāhu’s *katikāvata* inscription at the Galvihāra, a central focus of Chapter Five below.⁸⁴ The emergence of this inscriptional genre, I suggest, offered new opportunities for monarchs and monks to work out the parameters of royal obligations to—and authority to intervene in—the affairs of the *saṅgha*, nominally in service of the *śāsana*’s longevity. Careful attention to how these royal inscriptions position their disciplinary interventions therefore offers considerable insights into the self-fashioning of their patrons as “Buddhist kings.”

Perhaps the most notable of these royal self-representations comes from a *sirit* inscription of Mahinda IV (r. 956–972) located at the Jetavana monastery (IC 5.ii.68). This inscription famously concludes with the declaration that “none but a *bodhisattva* should attain sovereignty of Sri Lanka,” frequently cited as evidence that Sri Lankan kings in this period were all understood to be *bodhisattvas*: those on the long, multi-lifetime path to eventual Buddhahood.⁸⁵ Little attention has been paid, however, to the rhetorical effect of the full section as a conclusion to, and *rationale for the maintenance of*, the preceding *sirit* regulations:

By those who have received the eternal prophecy (*viyāraṇa*, Skt. *vyākaraṇa*) of the Omniscient King of Sages, pinnacle of the Śākya family, that “None but a *bodhisattva* shall attain sovereignty in Siri Lakdiv”; who are accustomed to wearing white vestments to serve and attend on the *mahāsaṅgha* on the day of their receiving consecration (*abhiṣeka*), in the moment of attaining royal splendour bestowed by the Great Being (*mahasat*) to protect His Bowl and

appear at least once, in an inscription (IC 5.ii.40) of a King Sena (it is unclear which). I use the term *sirit* rather than *carita* for these inscriptions to avoid confusion with the Sanskrit-language biographical genre of the same name.

83 The section of the inscriptions which would reveal the name of the sponsor is, sadly, irrevocably displaced, and we cannot even be sure that it is truly a “royal” intervention after all. See Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*, 250–55.

84 On the longer *durée* influence of *sirits*/*katikāvatas*, see Blackburn, *Buddhist-Inflected Sovereignties*; Schonthal, “Buddhist Law beyond the Vinaya;” and Schonthal’s forthcoming monograph.

85 Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*, 172–73; Pathmanathan, “Kingship,” 130–31; Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 96–97. Cf. the thoughtful critique in Berkwitz, “Divine Kingship,” paras. 28–35.

Robe (relics); who are born of our lineage; who are devoted to the Buddha; [and] who are best of the *kṣatriyas*, should the above-stated be protected (IC 5.ii.68).

Here the ongoing support for disciplinary purity within the Jetavana-*nikāya* is positioned as central to the duties of kings: explicitly, of good *Buddhist* kings, dedicated to serving the *śāsana* at the moment of their consecration. This is connected, certainly to the prophecy of *bodhisattvahood* which has received so much scholarly attention. But this *bodhisattvahood* does not constitute the *telos* of this paragraph. Nor was it unusual in a period increasingly marked by claims to *bodhisattva* status.⁸⁶ Rather, here Mahinda IV is telling his successors that their kingship is bestowed upon them by, and for the benefit of, the Buddha-*śāsana*. As good kings (who happen to be *bodhisattvas*) they should therefore dedicate themselves towards such service, exemplified in royal attempts to ensure the ongoing disciplinary purity of the Abhayagiri monks.

Throughout these last centuries of the first millennium, in other words, we see simultaneously an elaboration of Sinhala-language royal inscriptions and increasing evidence of royal involvement in monastic affairs (particularly disciplinary affairs). These two developments were not, necessarily, causally linked. Together, however, they provided Anurādhapura's last independent monarchs with opportunities for new forms of royal self-fashioning, in which depictions of idealized kingship were increasingly intertwined with concerns for monastic disciplinary purity.

The third key feature of these inscriptions is their treatment of any individuals who were not normatively masculine. Out of the 367 inscriptions collected in *Inscriptions of Ceylon* vol. 5, only two or three women are recorded as exercising any economic or political agency of their own: a Lady Kitā in 879 CE (IC 5.i.27); another woman who is mentioned in several inscriptions from the 920–930s (IC 5.ii.12, 13, and 32);⁸⁷ and a Lady Vidurā, with some unclear connection to Mahinda IV (IC 5.ii.70).⁸⁸ We also have a mention, in an unfortunately severely damaged inscription, of a monastic college

86 On the frequency of such claims see Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*, particularly 124.

87 Ranawella suggests in *IC* that these women may have been one and the same, on the basis that the only women of this name mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa* are both active in the tenth century (see IC 5.i:70).

88 Vidurā's inscription, marking a donation to the monks at Vessagiri, is carved on the obverse of an inscription by Mahinda IV (IC 5.ii.69). There is clearly some form of connection between the two, and their donations, but neither inscription makes the nature of their relationship clear. See further Shirley, "Donative Inscriptions."

(Sin. *piriveṇa*) constructed by both a (grammatically masculine) *vat-himi-yan* and (grammatically feminine) *vat-hāmbuvan* together (*IC* 5.iii.110); these titles are only applied to either royalty or monks. Beyond these brief glimpses, “women” (understood broadly) were invoked in royal inscriptions in two only ways, both found in the inscriptions’ stylized introductions. These introductions routinely mention the mothers of kings, sometimes stressing their high status (often in the formulation “born equal [to the king’s father],” Sin. *samadā*). Clearly, matrilineal status was important to kingly self-representation. The only consort ever mentioned, however, was the island of Lanka itself, anthropomorphized in the following stock phrase: “Master (*himi*, Skt. *svāmin*), by descent, of the young woman, the earth of the island of Lanka, who is the primary consort (*agamehesu*, Skt. *agramahiṣī*) to the best of the Kṣatriya.”⁸⁹

This imagery is taken to its furthest extreme in a section of the ca. tenth-century *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*, in a section translated and discussed by Jonathan Walters.⁹⁰ Here, the island is described in lavish (and increasingly erotic) detail as a beautiful woman, with the city of Anurādhapura as her face, the Mahavāli River her girdle and so on. Walters draws several productive links between the specific terms used in this poem and the inscriptional and edificial output of Anurādhapura’s kings, demonstrating the extent to which the island was both anthropomorphized and sexualized across genres and media. Together, these references suggest that (human) royal consorts were entirely peripheral to the inscriptional performance of kingship in the later Anurādhapura period; it was only if a consort’s son attained the throne himself that she became “worthy” of epigraphic mention. Royal *daughters*, perhaps unsurprisingly, are even more absent from the inscriptional record. This is worth mentioning here both for how this attitude was continued by Vijayabāhu, as described below, but also for the dramatic contrast in attitudes towards royal consorts (and even, fleetingly, daughters) we will see evident in Chapters Four, Six, and Seven.

All three of these features—elaborations of inscriptional prose, royal intervention into monastic affairs, and the exclusion of women—would prove influential on Poḷonnaruva’s monarchs. Before this period, however, another kingly paradigm became dominant in Sri Lanka: one articulated in the Tamil language, and developed in the South Indian courts of the Cōḷa monarchs.

⁸⁹ This particular phrasing is taken from *IC* 5.ii.66, but variations occur throughout nearly all royal inscriptions of the later Anurādhapura period.

⁹⁰ Walters, “Lovely Lady Lanka: A Tenth Century Description.”

Tamil Political Thought

Tamil is a Dravidian language, cousin to Malayalam, Telugu, and Kannada, and therefore linguistically very distinct from Sanskrit, Pali, and Sinhala. Tamil has a venerable literary tradition to rival Sanskrit, including religious poetry (such as the Śaiva *caṅkam* poems) and prose (the Buddhist *Maṇimēkalai*) from the early centuries of the Christian Era. Scholars in the Tamil country (T. *nāṭu*) worked in Sanskrit for much of the first millennium, until the development of a hybrid script (Grantha, capable of expressing both Sanskrit and Tamil phonology) and dialect (Maṇipravāḷam, which draws its vocabulary primarily from Sanskrit but its grammar from Tamil) allowed for increasingly sophisticated philosophical writings in Tamil.⁹¹ This meant that, despite the linguistic gulf between Tamil and Sanskrit, many of the ideals of Sanskrit kingship described above also circulated and were generally accepted in South India. From an early period, kings in the Tamil country claimed *kṣatriya* caste status, and descent from either the Solar or Lunar lineages described in Sanskrit *purāṇas*.⁹²

Among these claimants to Solar and Lunar heritage were the three great dynasties (the *mūvēntar*, “Three Kings”) whose rivalry constitutes a recurring theme in Tamil history: the Pāṇḍya, the Cōḷa, and the Cēra.⁹³ Literary epics and archaeological evidence together document the rise and fall of their respective fortunes (or, at least, the fortunes of those claiming to be the rightful heirs of one of the *mūvēntar*) throughout the medieval period. In the early second millennium, it was the Cōḷa who were ascendant. A series of military victories against the Pāṇḍya, and the Andhra-based Pallava kingdom, allowed Vijayālaya (r. ca. 850?–870) and his son Āditya I (870–907) to claim both territory and descent from earlier Cōḷa monarchs; later monarchs expanded Cōḷa influence further, both northwards by land and across the maritime Bay of Bengal. There is a long-standing academic debate regarding the extent to which the Cōḷa monarchs directly administered these lands, or whether the vassalage of other kings was purely symbolic and/or intended to support the commercial interest of merchant guilds.⁹⁴ Even in the latter

91 Akepiyapornchai, “Translation in a Multilingual Context.”

92 Veluthat, “The Status of the Monarch.”

93 The early history of these dynasties has been reconstructed primarily from *Caṅkam* literature: Abraham, “Chera, Chola, Pandya”; Sastri, *The Cōlas*, ch. 3. Herman Tieken has argued that this literature was composed as late as the ninth century CE, and so represents only a nostalgic imagination of early Tamil history. Tieken, *Kāvya*.

94 See the discussion in Hall, *Trade and Statecraft in the Age of the Colas*.

case, the Cōla facilitated the spread of Tamil language, literary, and intellectual culture outwards from their capital, Kaṅkaikoṇḍa Cōlapuram, across Southern Asia on a scale unprecedented in earlier periods.

Particularly significant in this dissemination—both for its facilitation through military victories, and for his own innovations in kingly self-representation—was the monarch Rājarāja I Cōla (r. ca. 985–1014), who in ca. 993 captured the Lankan capital of Anurādhapura, exiled the then-monarch Mahinda V, and so annexed Sri Lanka into the Cōla imperial apparatus. This conquest seems to have been hugely important to Rājarāja, who thereafter mentions it at the very opening of his own Sanskrit *praśastis*.⁹⁵ But Rājarāja's royal self-fashioning was not limited to the Sanskrit-language texts and genres described above. He was the first Cōla monarch known to have opened his inscriptions with a *meykkīrtti*: a stylized poetic eulogy, comparable to the Sanskrit *praśasti* but written in a decidedly un-Sanskritized dialect of Tamil.⁹⁶ Rājarāja's own *meykkīrtti* was likely composed by his court poet, Karuvūrttevar—a man so important to Rājarāja's kingly self-representation that the two appear together in the king's only extant portrait, plastered on the wall of the Br̥hadiśvara Temple in Tanjore.⁹⁷

Later Cōla monarchs developed further ways of describing kingship unique to Tamil literary culture. Particularly important among these early second-millennium literary developments was the *ulā* ("Procession") genre of poetry, in which a (male) hero promenades through a city, causing all of the women who witness him to fall madly in unrequited love. The earliest *ulā* was Cēramāṇ Perumāl's eighth-century *Tirukkayilāyañṇavulā*, which long pre-dates the period of our study. But it was Cōla court poets who turned this genre into a vehicle of royal praise. The most notable among these poets was Oṭṭakkūttar, who composed *ulās* dedicated to his successive patrons Vikrama (r. 1118–1135), Kulottuṅga II (1135–1150), and Rājarāja II (1146–1173).⁹⁸ Oṭṭakkūttar's poems, in David Shulman's reading, represented a "self-conscious contribution to the essential visibility of the king and patron."⁹⁹ To Oṭṭakkūttar was also (incorrectly) assigned the

95 Sastri, *The Cōlas*, 172–73.

96 On the *meykkīrtti* generally see Cox, *Politics, Kingship, and Poetry*.

97 See discussion in Shulman, *King and Clown*, 16–18.

98 Shulman, *King and Clown*, 312–24; Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature*, 198–99. Cōla monarchs often practised co-rulership with designated successors, hence overlapping regnal dates.

99 Shulman, *King and Clown*, 313.

Kaliṅkattupparaṇi, now known to be the work of Cayaṅkoṇṭār, court poet of Kulottuṅga I (r. 1070–1120). This *paraṇi* poem glorified its patron not as the impassive subject of his subjects' desire, as in the *ulā* genre, but as a heroic warrior, through juxtaposition of the gruesome bloodiness of his battlefield; the delight of his victorious soldiers' wives on their triumphant homecoming; and the distress of the enemy's widows.¹⁰⁰ By patronizing these courtly poets and their works, the Cōla monarchs developed an impressive corpus of literary portraits of idealized kingship entirely discrete from the otherwise dominant Sanskrit models.

The centrality of women to both *ulās* and *paraṇis* orients us towards a key feature of South Indian political culture, also distinct from the traditions described above: the prominence of women, particularly royal women, in both depictions of royalty and in the performance of politics. Unlike in Anurādhapuram inscriptions, South Indian monarchs frequently mentioned their principal consorts in their own *meykkīrttis*, with elaborate praise which celebrates "their illustrious character and independent sovereignty."¹⁰¹ Macro-level studies of inscriptional corpora suggest that these consorts were frequent and high-profile donors to temples and other religious institutions, (literally) carving out distinctive inscriptional personae for themselves in the process.¹⁰² Very often, and in a complete inversion of the Anurādhapuram dynamic described above, these royal women were more active donors to temples than were their husbands. As a result, we know far more about individual consorts in South India than we do about those in Anurādhapura. The names of fifteen consorts of Rājārāja I, for example, are known to us; his primary consort, Dantiśakti Viṭankiyār, even left behind a sculpture of herself and her husband engaged in worship.¹⁰³ This pattern seems to hold from the highest-status "dynastic queens," like Dantiśakti Viṭankiyār herself, down to far more local "chiefly queens."¹⁰⁴

Tamil political culture at the turn of the first millennium was therefore entirely distinct—in its literary expressions and in its gendered practices—from the Sanskrit, Pali, and Sinhala traditions described above. Separated

100 Cox, *Politics, Kingship, and Poetry*, 153–71; Shulman, *King and Clown*, 276–92; Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature*, 207–12.

101 Orr, "Women and the Gift in Medieval South India," 178.

102 See particularly the work of Talbot, "Temples, Donors, and Gifts"; Orr, *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters*; and Venkataraman, *Temple Art Under the Chola Queens*.

103 Sastri, *The Cōlas*, 186.

104 Orr, "Chiefly Queens." See further Orr, "Women and the Gift in Medieval South India."

only by the narrow stretch of water called today the Palk Strait, and with people and ideas moving frequently back and forth between the island and the mainland, Lanka's kings must have been at least passingly familiar with Tamil-language ideas and practices of kingship throughout the first millennium. But it was with the tenth century Cōla conquest that these ideas and practices were fully imposed on the island.

Several inscriptions bearing the *meykkīrtti* of Rājendra I (r. 1012–1044) have been found within Lanka, including at least one at a Buddhist *vihāra* at Periyakulam (*TISL* 20; see also *TISL* 13b, original findsite unknown). We also have extant a large corpus of Tamil-language inscriptions produced by junior members of the royal family or its cadet branches, who, as Indrapala notes, were positioned as something like “royal governors” of the island (as in other non-core regions of the Cōla empire).¹⁰⁵ These governors were invested with kingly stylings, effectively replacing earlier independent monarchs with new “kings” subordinate to the Cōla overlord. The inscriptions of these governors, even at their most eulogistic, are stylistically distinct from the formal *meykkīrtti* of the Cōla emperors. The imperial *meykkīrtti* were composed in an “austere, self-consciously ‘classical’ diction,”¹⁰⁶ and could therefore be inscribed entirely in Tamil script. Gubernatorial inscriptions in Lanka, however, often heavily rely on Sanskrit loanwords, and therefore required the use of Grantha script (which can express both Tamil and Sanskrit phonemes), often alongside the Tamil. Central to Indrapala's analysis is an inscription found near Trincomalee, created by local officials but dated to “the tenth year of *kō śrī* Caṅkavarmarāṇa (Skt. Saṅghavarman) *uṭaiyār*, Cōla Ilaṅkēsvaratēvar (Skt. Lankeśvaradeva)” (*TISL* 19).¹⁰⁷ This title “Cōla Ilaṅkēsvaratēvar,” borrowed from the title “Lankeśvara” (“Lord of Lanka”) long used by Anurādhapura's monarchs, is suggestive of the extent to which Saṅghavarman positioned himself as their rightful successor—rearticulated in the Tamil language, and firmly yoked to the Cōla imperial apparatus.

These inscriptions are far from outliers. In the period between Rājārāja Cōla's defeat of Mahinda V in the last years of the first millennium, and the rise of Vijayabāhu I in ca. 1070, Tamil inscriptions proliferated throughout Lanka: marking private donations to religious institutions (predominantly, but not exclusively, Śaiva temples); adjudicating on matters of taxation and

105 Indrapala, “An Inscription.”

106 Cox, *Politics, Kingship, and Poetry*, 54.

107 Both *kō* and *uṭaiyār* are standard epithets for powerful men with no direct equivalents in English; I therefore leave them untranslated (as I do elsewhere for Sinhala *vahansē*).

administration; or marking the growing power of merchant-mercenary corporations like the Veḷaikkāra, who would remain influential throughout the Poḷonnaruva period and beyond.¹⁰⁸ However, we should not over-emphasize the Cōḷa conquest as a moment of total disjuncture, or as a totally unprecedented shift in royal discourses. The Tamil language had long been present in Lanka,¹⁰⁹ and Lankan kings in the late Anurādhapura period were keenly aware of the inscriptional moves made by their cross-straits rivals. In an inscription of Kāśyapa V (*IC* 5.i.104), for example, he refers to himself by the rather distinctive title *maharajyutār*, likely influenced by the Tamil honorific suffix *-ār*. Nor did this period signal anything like a repression of Sinhala-language inscriptional practices. On the contrary, local governors seemed at pains to co-position themselves both within the wider Cōḷa imperial apparatus and more locally recognizable power structures.

One representative example—marking a donation to the Tirukkētiśvaram temple in Mannar, sometime during the reign of Rājārāja I—opens:

Tāḷikumaraṇ, the *kiḷavan* [of] Cīrūkūrṇanalluṛ in Vēḷārṇātu in the *vaḷanātu* called “Kṣatriya-śikamāna” in the Cōḷa-*maṇḍala*, having established [this temple] in Rājārājapura, called Mātōṭṭam, in the Mummuṭi-Cōḷa-*maṇḍala* called Īlam, establishes [the following grant] for the duration of the sun and moon for the *mahādeva* of the Rājārāja-Īśvara temple (*TISL* 12, ll. a1–20).

We see here a careful mapping of the administrative language of the wider Cōḷa empire—a *maṇḍala* divided neatly into sub-*maṇḍalas* and then again into *vaḷanātus*—onto more localized, and likely pre-existing, placenames, each diligently marked off with the adjectival suffix *-āṇa*, translated here “called.” Tāḷikumaraṇ’s doubly-toponymic self-positioning would have been sensible to audiences from both anywhere throughout the Cōḷa polity and within the local area (as long as those audiences could read Tamil, of course). His grant to a local temple, forever immortalized in lithic form, represents an engagement with Lanka far from a mere “occupation” or military “pillage”: this was a serious attempt to subsume kingship of Lanka into an imperial apparatus, attentive to the specifics of Lankan power relations but re-contextualized as part of the broader Cōḷa Empire.

Tāḷikumaraṇ’s inscription was hardly the only marker of serious Cōḷa engagement with Sri Lanka. At the outset of this chapter, we noted that

108 See further Friedrich, “Merchants, Ministers, and Monks.”

109 The first inscription in *TISL* is written in Brahmi characters, tentatively dated to the fourth or fifth centuries CE, and seems to acknowledge the authority of a Jain nun (*kuratti*) named Vēmi.

Poḷonnaruva's three vaulted image-houses seem to have been modelled closely on the small Śiva *devālaya* ("No. 2") northeast of the citadel walls. Fragmentary inscriptions on the walls of this temple date it to the reign of Rājendra I Cōḷa (r. 1012–1044); a later inscription, dated to the reign of Adhirājendra Cōḷa (1067–1070), tells us that the temple's original name was Vāṇavaṇ-mātēvi-iśvaram ("[Temple of] the Deity of the Great Lady Vāṇavaṇ"), almost certainly named for one of Rājendra's consorts.¹¹⁰ We have already noted that Cōḷa consorts engaged in extensive temple patronage as a public performance of royal largess. It is therefore tempting to wonder whether Vāṇavaṇ herself had anything to do with the establishment of this small temple on the island; the alternative explanation is that she was so well-known as a patron that the island's governors established a temple in her name in their new capital. In either case, the Śiva *devālaya* named for the Great Lady Vāṇavaṇ seems to have made an indelible mark on the architectural history and ongoing religious practices of Poḷonnaruva: an apt metaphor, perhaps, for the gendered and cultural influences on Poḷonnaruva's discursive history, traced in the following chapters.

Conclusions to Chapter One

At least four distinct political cultures—sets of ideas and practices which were primarily transmitted and expressed in their own linguistic traditions—were known in early second-millennium Sri Lanka. Sanskrit texts, inscriptional genres, and ritual practices offered a way of being "kingly" which would have been intelligible anywhere from Kashmir to Java. The Pali Canon and its commentaries describe other kinds of kingship—sometimes at odds with one another, but doubtless compelling for a Buddhist monarch who wanted to demonstrate their piety and munificence. A long-standing tradition of Sinhala-language inscriptions provided a uniquely Lankan way of expressing kingship, in continuity with the earlier Anurādhapura kingdom. The Tamil-language innovations of the Cōḷa court, meanwhile, provided another set of kingly ideals—the dispassionate subject of desire in the *ulā*, the conquering hero of the *paraṇi* and the *meykkīrtti*—an aspiring monarch might choose to emulate.

It would be easy to assume that, once the Cōḷas were overthrown, and an independent Lankan kingdom was established at Poḷonnaruva, this last tradition in particular was simply rejected outright, in favour of

¹¹⁰ See *TISL* 26, and discussion therein.

the “properly” Lankan Buddhist traditions of Pali- and Sinhala-language political culture. This is certainly the narrative presented in retrospective texts like the *Mahāvamsa*, and so repeated by some modern historians. However, later chapters of this book will show that this was not the case. While Poḷonnaruva kings certainly took pains to present themselves as Anurādhapura’s heirs, and as good Buddhist monarchs, this did not result in an outright rejection of the ideas and practices of kingship articulated in either Tamil or Sanskrit. On the contrary: a closer reading of the evidence available from the reigns of Poḷonnaruva’s earliest independent monarchs suggests a deliberate engagement with all four of these political traditions, in order to reconstruct an entirely new form of Buddhist kingship.