Conclusions

LOCATING POḶONNARUVAN KINGSHIP

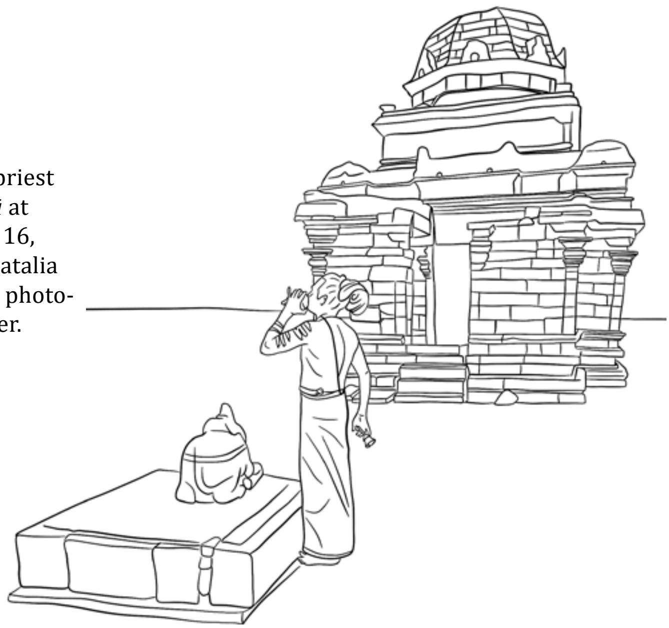

Figure 13. A Brahmin priest performing a Śiva-*pūjā* at Vāṉavaṉ's temple, July 16, 2025. Illustration by Natalia Lopez-Barbosa, after a photograph by Tyler A. Lehrer. Used with permission.

ON A VISIT to Poḷonnaruva with Tyler Lehrer in July 2025, we happened to arrive at Śiva-*devālaya* no. 2—the temple built in the Cōḻa period, named for Rājendra's consort the Great Lady Vāṉavaṉ, and on which Poḷonnaruva's Buddhist image-houses were modelled—just as a Śiva-*pūjā* was taking place. The officiating priest—hair in dreadlocks, sacred thread around his chest, ash smeared across his skin—generously invited us to participate in the *pūjā*, and we had the opportunity to speak with several of the gathered devotees. All of those we talked with, including the priest, spoke to us in Sinhala rather than in Tamil. When we expressed surprise about this linguistic choice to one of the devotees, who was proudly showing us one of the Tamil-language inscriptions on the temple's exterior, he simply replied that Śiva is worshipped at the *devālaya* by "Sinhalese, Tamils, Christians, and Muslims" alike. This productively complicates the strict religious boundaries often assumed of Sri Lanka's past and present. I saw no evidence, on this visit or others, of self-identified Christians and Muslims carrying out ritual activities at Poḷonnaruva: whether *pūjā* at the Śiva-*devālaya*s, circumambulation of the monumental *stūpa*s, or otherwise. Nonetheless, the devotee's

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insistence that all of Sri Lanka's major identity categories—with the linguistic-ethnic labels "Sinhalese" and "Tamil" juxtaposed against the religious "Christian" and "Muslim"—*might* join in the *pūjā* reminds us that we cannot take the relationships between identity category and religious practice for granted.[1] Regardless of identity, all may worship Śiva at Vāṉavaṉ's temple.

This chance encounter demonstrates the ongoing complexity of lived religious practices in the ruins of Poḷonnaruva, in ways which helpfully prefigure the significant revisions I have proposed to the history of the Poḷonnaruva period itself. At the heart of these revisions is a core argument: that the histories of religion, politics, and gender in the Poḷonnaruva period (and perhaps beyond) cannot adequately be studied in isolation from one another. In support of this position, I have attempted to demonstrate that Poḷonnaruva's noblewomen were involved in crucial acts of patronage that helped to shape the eventual form of the Theravāda; that royal men sought to position themselves relative to these noblewomen for pragmatic political reasons; and that in so doing, the supposedly inherent masculinity of kingship was itself challenged and contested. These dynamics have previously been obscured by an overreliance on retrospective narrative accounts of the Poḷonnaruva period (primarily the *Mahāvaṃsa*, *Pūjāvaliya*, and *Nikāya-saṅgrahaya*), which depicted the events of this period according to the priorities of their own.

I developed this argument through chronologically advancing chapters. In Chapter Two, I argued that the reign of Vijayabāhu I did not represent a "return" to an original and unaltered Sinhala Buddhist kingship after a period of Cōḻa interruption. Rather, he interwove models from earlier Anurādhapura-based kings; his erstwhile Cōḻa overlords; and perhaps also from wider *dharmaśāstr*ic norms of caste hierarchy (particularly evident in his material intervention at Śrī Pāda). I further challenged the claim that he revived monastic higher ordination (*upasampadā*) on the island with the help of monks from Rāmañña, as later retrospective accounts hold. His own extant inscriptions make no reference to such a revival; the Vēḷaikkāṟa inscription refers to monks from Arumaṇam and a "purification within the three *nikāya*s," but makes no mention of ordinations; and sources from throughout this period refer repeatedly to the existence of three distinct *nikāya*s, suggesting that all three ordination lineages survived in some form from the Anurādhapura period.

1 This is further complicated by the modern identification of Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan Muslims (sometimes "Moors") as a distinct ethnic group; "Christian," meanwhile, remains an exclusively "religious" identity.

Chapters Three and Four dealt with the period between Vijayabāhu I and Parākramabāhu I, often characterized as an unfortunate "dark age" in Sri Lankan history. In Chapter Three, I argued that while political power in this period was certainly decentralized, this may well have led to opportunities for individuals who otherwise did not have as ready access to that power, and to experiments with different models and rhetorics of Buddhist kingship. This included monks like the Abhayagiri/Uttaromūla-affiliated *rajaguru* Mugalan; merchant/mercenary guilds like the Vēḷaikkāṟas; and royal consorts like Cundhamalli, daughter of the Cōḻa Emperor Kulottuṅga. In Chapter Four, I argued that the court at Poḷonnaruva itself in this period—long dismissed as "inadequately Buddhist"—was also a participant in this reconstruction of Buddhist kingship. In particular, I suggested that the Great Lady Sundarā played a larger role in Theravāda history than has been previously acknowledged, given her apparent interest in patronizing both Pali-oriented monks and the Diṁbulāgala monastery.

Crucially, I also argued for more continuity between the reigns of Gajabāhu and Parākramabāhu I than later narratives like the *Mahāvaṃsa* would allow. I continued this argument in Chapter Five, which focused on the reign of Parākramabahu proper. Parākramabāhu is perhaps best remembered for his unification and purification of the *saṅgha*, an event which is often regarded as marking the triumph of the Mahāvihāra over its Abhayagiri and Jetavana rivals. While there is much in Parākramabāhu's *katikāvata* inscription which suggests some leaning towards the textual legacy of the Mahāvihāra, Parākramabāhu's own vision of kingship was decided more cosmopolitan, and his relationship with monastic leaders like Śāriputra was—while perhaps mutually beneficial—complex.

In Chapter Six, I turned to the vast inscriptional corpus of Niśśaṅka Malla, which offers us perhaps the most granular view available of kingly self-representation in medieval Sri Lanka. On the basis of this, I argued that this non-Lankan-born king intentionally played up his dynasty's "strangeness" as evidence for his qualifications to rule Lanka. This strategy was, I suggested, likely in response to perceived challenges to dynastic succession both internal (but "lower caste" in *dharmaśāstr*ic terms) and external (but "non-Buddhist"). As in the period covered in Chapters Three and Four, royal consorts once again became central to the inscriptional discourse, and increasingly so over the course of his reign, to the point that he suggested that they might be placed on the throne in the absence of a (Buddhist, high-caste) male heir.

Chapter Seven explored cases of this possibility in action: the reigns of Kalyāṇavatī and Līlāvatī, who between them dominated (on the basis of their collective length of rule) later Poḷonnaruvan politics; and the non-regnal consort Candavatī. I argued that the inscriptions of these three women, and other sources relating to the reigns of Kalyāṇavatī and Līlāvatī, evidence a far less stable politics of gender than high-literary textual accounts might allow. The inherent "masculinity" of kingship itself, and the social hierarchies surrounding it, were subject to negotiation, contestation, and even subversion.

These chapters, I hope, productively problematize the standard histories of this time and place, which often overemphasize masculine agency, "Theravāda Buddhist" orthodoxy, and a sometimes nationalistic understanding of Sinhala cultural continuity. But across these chapters I have also advanced a set of broader theoretical and methodological interventions, which I believe have application beyond the specific time and place of Poḷonnaruva.

The first intervention is methodological. The historiography of Sri Lanka has been dominated by Pali- and Sinhala-language literary sources, and particularly by Pali-language sources written retrospectively by monastics. These sources present us with very particular versions of historical events, and very particular visions of Buddhist kingship. When we turn to material evidence—inscriptions, numismatics, art and architecture—a far wider range of voices and visions become available to us. These voices are still very firmly "elite," of course, but nonetheless a valuable counterbalance against the culturalist and often androcentric narratives presented in the textual record alone. In particular, I have shown that Tamil and Sanskrit remained significant languages for political and religious expression throughout the period. To exclude from our studies sources in these languages (or, for that matter, royal courts which used these languages) is to grossly distort our historical understanding. I further identified a wider range of figures—consorts, monks, mercenaries—who intervened in debates over the proper performance of kingship.

The second intervention is theoretical. I have attempted to model in this book the benefits of engagement with a capacious range of scholarship, brought—selectively and cautiously—to bear on the particularities of a historical case. In particular, and perhaps unsurprisingly in a study focused explicitly on "gender," I have drawn extensively on feminist and queer scholarship. The application of this kind of theoretical lens or methodological approach to premodern sources risks accusations of "presentism": the imposition of decidedly modern frameworks—often dismissively called "identity politics"—onto ill-fitting historical contexts. It is certainly true that historical accounts can—and, as Hayden White famously suggested, perhaps necessarily always *do*—distort the evidence of the past in ways intelligible to the present.[2] However, I entirely reject that such distortions are only present (and subject to critique) in histories attentive to social oppression, while earlier generations of historians remain supposedly "objective" and "neutral." The value of critical theory is not that it tells us how we should interpret the inner lives of past subjects; it is that it can alert us to unquestioned biases which lurk in the extant historiography, and suggest possible methodological approaches which may allow us to correct those biases. Without feminist critique, we may not notice that our textual sources so heavily emphasize the heroic deeds of their male protagonists, or that the uncritical colonial-era reception of those androcentric accounts aligns very neatly with then-emergent Victorian ideologies.[3] In short, the judicious application of critical theory makes us better historians: more alert to the particularities of our historical cases than we might otherwise be.

The combination of feminist theory and material methodology enables the third intervention: a call for the dramatic reconsideration of the roles of gender dynamics in, and the contribution of royal women to, Theravāda history. This call echoes that of other scholars, working on other places in the premodern Theravāda world—particularly Cambodia, in which the rich inscriptional record again preserves female voices.[4] Too often, however, the actions of powerful men—kings and monks—are accepted as the driving factors of Theravāda history. This is largely a result of our evidentiary biases. These figures are the protagonists of (the vast majority of) textual sources from the premodern Theravāda world, and in Sri Lanka and elsewhere we have tended to accept these textual narratives as "historical fact" until proven otherwise. It is difficult to recover the lives of Buddhist women from within these manuscripts' leaves, let alone to carefully consider how they may have contributed to the historical development of the Theravāda.

However, when we pay as much heed to material culture as we do to later textual sources, we arrive at a more balanced and nuanced view of Buddhist history, one which is not read solely "through the eyes of suspicious male monastics."[5] Within the Poḷonnaruva period alone, it is significant that our only extant Pali inscriptions from this period were produced by royal consorts (Sundarā and Candavatī), not by male monarchs or, for that matter, monastics. Further, we have evidence of royal women patronizing certain

2 White, *Metahistory*.

3 See further Shirley, "Beyond Masculinity."

4 Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State*; Walker, "Inscriptions."

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

Buddhist institutions (Sundarā) and forms of textual production (Līlāvatī) at pivotal moments. We may not have the evidence available to definitively recast these women in starring roles. However, we have at least as much evidence for the significance of their involvement as we do for many of their male peers, who nonetheless take centre stage in all of our standard histories of the period.

This has major implications for histories of Theravāda Buddhism in later Southern Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia, which have often (until recently) been based on two premises. The first is that "Theravāda" was a cultural product spread unidirectionally from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia from the twelfth century onwards. The second is that the Theravāda's androcentric biases had a deleterious effect on the status of women in Southeast Asia, who had previously enjoyed a relatively favourable position.[6] The first of these premises is increasingly being challenged by the work of scholars like Prapod Assaviravirulhakarn and Peter Skilling, who have shown that Pali-oriented Buddhism has a far deeper history in Southeast Asia;[7] and Anne Blackburn, who has shown that when monastic connections to Lanka did arise in the later second millennium, they did so in response to more local concerns.[8] But even if we accept that events in Poḷonnaruva—such as the great commentarial project of Śāriputra, carried out at Parākramabāhu's behest—had at least *some* influence on the later Theravāda in Southeast Asia, we might still be sceptical of an inherent link between the Theravāda and gender inequality.

It is certainly true that Buddhist texts contain many resources which *can be*, and perhaps often *have been*, deployed to denigrate women and other non-masculine individuals; we might go further and suggest that Theravādin commentarial interpretations of these texts are, in places, particularly misogynistic. But it would be a mistake, I think, to extrapolate out from such resources a monolithic and coherent "Theravāda attitude" towards gender. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, no such monolithic coherency is to be found even in a period which, arguably, set the course of the Theravāda to be oriented towards such Pali-language texts and the Buddhaghosan interpretation thereof. Rather, we see in this period (what seems to be, bearing in mind the fragmentary nature of the inscriptional record) appreciable *increases*, relative to the late Anurādhapura period, in the numbers of women

6 See, most influentially, Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*, 75–81.

7 Assavavirulhakarn, *Ascendency*; Skilling, "Advent."

8 Blackburn, "Sīhaḷa Saṅgha."

patronizing monks, monasteries, and religious texts; creating inscriptions recording such donations in their own names, complete with genealogical pedigrees; being featured in their husband's inscriptions as participating in official procedures and public performances of munificence, and as motivating his own pious works; and even, ultimately, claiming the throne for themselves. I have found no evidence that these women were ever critiqued—even by those men who unseated them from the throne, and so arguably had the most vested interest in discrediting them—on the grounds that they were acting in any way contrary to "the Theravādin" understanding of proper gender roles. In this context, and at any later point in Theravāda history, the relationship between gender and power was never a settled matter; it was, and is, contested and contestable.

We began with a discussion of the Potgul Vihāra: a structure located well outside of the city walls, bearing an inscription which had similarly been left "outside" the historiography of the Poḷonnaruva period. We might do well to conclude by returning to a far more central structure: the assembly hall in the royal palace complex. We noted in Chapter Five that an inscription near the entrance bears the name of this structure, the Rājaveśyābhujaṅga-*maṇḍapa*, which allows us to identify it as the assembly hall of Parākramabāhu I himself. But this is not the only inscription on the walls of the Rājaveśyābhujaṅga-*maṇḍapa*. Fragments of other, earlier inscriptions have been found across the *maṇḍapa*'s tiered walls, steps, and mouldings, suggesting that the stone blocks were recycled from earlier structures for use in Parākramabāhu's great council hall.[9]

Among these recycled blocks is one which contains the fragmentary inscription of Sundarā discussed in Chapter Four: the earliest extant use of Pali verse in a royal donative inscription. The deconstruction of whatever structure Sundarā had originally patronized, and the reuse of its stones in Parākramabāhu's *maṇḍapa*, is presumably responsible for the severe defacing of the inscription it bears upon it. We cannot be sure if this particular block was used in the *maṇḍapa* during Parākramabāhu's initial construction of the structure, or during the renovations carried out in Poḷonnaruva during the reign of Parākramabāhu II.[10] In either case, I suggest that this serves as an apt metaphor for the continual reconstruction of Buddhist kingship in the Poḷonnruva period. What appears to us today as a unified edifice actually

9 See discussion in de Silva Wickremasinghe, *EZ*, 2:9.

10 Codrington and Paranavitana, *EZ*, 4:68.

consists of many individual parts, assembled *bricolage* over many generations: from Sundarā to Parākramabāhu I; from Parākramabāhu II to the modern archaeologists and historians who conserve, document, and present the structure to the public. Some of the structure's stones must have been quarried fresh for the new project; others were recycled from the edificial works of those went before, incorporating them into its foundations even as it obscures them from view.

Buddhist kingship is not, and has never been, a stable and unchanging concept. It was instead a *location*, in which multiple participants constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed the proper relationship between king and *śāsana*. We cannot therefore expect to look to "authoritative sources" like the Pali canon and expect to find a readymade definition of "Buddhist politics" waiting there for us. This is not to say that reading canonical materials is not worthwhile. Modern practitioners, philosophers, and activists alike find valuable inspiration in such texts. Productive re-readings of past texts is often a useful genesis for new ideas, as advocates of (for example) the ongoing relevance of Aristotelian political thought will happily remind us. But to present such novel re-readings as representative of "the Buddhist view" is questionable; to argue that they represent (a singular and definitive) "Buddhist political thought" would be problematic. This attitude diminishes the intellectual vigour and pragmatic creativity of Buddhists throughout history who constructed, contested, subverted, and constructed anew what it meant to be a "good Buddhist king." At its worst, it revives all of the old colonial arguments that Buddhists themselves, past and perhaps also present, do not truly understand "what the Buddha taught," and that Buddhism must therefore be saved from Buddhists by the superior interpretations of modern scholarship. This is, clearly, not the case, and to think it so impoverishes our understanding of what is, was, and could perhaps become politically conceivable. The relationships between religion, gender, and politics have never been set in stone.