Ikṣvāku Women

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Abstract: The women I will discuss in this article are known solely from inscriptions and no other source. In this article, I will introduce the royal dynasty of the Ikṣvākus that these women were part of or linked to and discuss the women and how they lived, exploring what we can ascertain from the inscriptions. I will focus on religious aspects, and in so doing hope to demonstrate the extent to which epigraphy enhances our knowledge of otherwise unknowable aspects of the lives of ancient women.

Keywords: Ikṣvāku dynasty, women, inscriptions, Brahmanism, Buddhism

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Introduction

The Ikṣvākus, often known as the Andhra Ikṣvākus, ruled a region of South India during the third and fourth centuries of the Common Era. The major city of the Ikṣvākus, ancient Vijayapurī, and its surroundings, now lie submerged under the reservoir contained by the Nagarjunasagar Dam. However, archaeological evidence of the Ikṣvākus remains, and this includes some donor inscriptions made by female laity, many of whom were royal women. The ancient capital at Vijayapurī was once a thriving, vibrant, cosmopolitan city. Travellers arrived from near and far to trade and left their mark on life and culture. Prior to being submerged, the city stood on the banks of the Krishna River. Upstream of the river's delta, en route to Vijayapurī, remains of international trade, have been found, in the shape of Roman coins and artefacts. Vijayapurī itself also reveals much of its own seeming 'melting pot' character. This is well exemplified on one particular pillar found during excavations at the site.

Rosen Stone concludes her book on the Buddhist art of the region, known as Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, with a reference to this pillar decorated on four sides. Each one of the four sides reveal, in turn, an Iranian, Roman, Greek, and Indian figure. On one side is a 'guardian figure in Scythian dress', on the next a 'togate figure, quasi-Roman in appearance', the next a figure in 'classical [Greek] dress', and on the fourth side a *yakṣī*, or *vṛkṣadevatā*, which is a typical Indian sculpture.[1] As well as this, other features of the material remains easily demonstrate the nature of society in ancient Vijayapurī. For instance, imitation Roman coins were produced in the area and made into jewellery to be worn, and the remains of an amphitheatre style stadium were discovered.[2]

In a now dated but—for its time—comprehensive study of ancient Vijayapurī, Rama Rao provides translations and a study of life in the city and surroundings. While he mentioned the women in discussions of their inscriptions, and deliberates on, for instance,

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1 Rosen Stone, *The Buddhist Art*, 100.

2 Ibid., 30, 10.

their royal pedigree, he includes only one discursive paragraph on these important women. Rama Rao comments that 'These ladies were free to follow any religion of their choice', and adds that, whilst the dynasty itself followed Vedic tradition, these women's expressed religiosity as 'devout worshippers of the Buddha, indicates the freedoms these ladies enjoyed'. He concludes his paragraph on the 'ladies':

> The renovation of the mahācaitya of the Buddha at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa was due to the pious munificence of the lady members of the Ikṣvāku royal family. This shows that these ladies had their own resources and were free to spend their wealth as they pleased.[3]

In what follows, I will pick up on some of the points Rama Rao makes. The questions of 'choice' and 'wealth' are important ones, and I will go into those in some detail. But initially I would like to clarify two points he makes. Firstly, on the question of 'royal' status. Whilst it is apparent in many of the cases, in relation to many of the women who had inscriptions engraved, a connection to the royal family, the dynasty, is clear. The majority of the women had royal links either through birth or marriage. On some occasions, a royal link is not apparent, such as with the short inscription in which the woman making the donation does not have her name stated but tells us only that she is the wife and mother of military men.[4] In this paper I call this group of women 'royal and noble' women, although I am aware that such terminology has its limits, as their exact pedigree is not always clear.

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[3] Rama Rao, *Ikṣvākus*, 51

[4] See EIAD 7. An online project, Early Inscriptions of Āndhradeśa (EIAD) includes re-edited and re-translated inscriptions of Āndhradeśa. The general editors are Arlo Griffiths and Vincent Tournier. The site contains a full bibliography relating to each inscription. The Ikṣvāku inscriptions relating to the women that appear in this article were first edited and translated by Vogel (in papers published in *Epigraphia Indica* 20 and 21, hereafter EI). The EIAD site includes updated editions and translations. EIAD conventions for editions follow ISO 15919, but add ° to indicate vowel hiatus and independent vowel signs.

Also, on the issue of 'religion', there are questions that need to be posed and answered. Whilst we can understand, *pace* Rama Rao, that members of the Ikṣvāku dynasty, their subjects, and visitors to their city had an awareness and understanding of certain aspects of what we might term 'Brahmanism', 'Hinduism', and 'Buddhism', the parameters of each, and how one is distinguished from the other are not clear.[5] The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) published two works on the region, based on the archaeological fieldwork conducted prior to the flooding of the valley. The first volume covers Neolithic and Megalithic times, and the second focuses on the Ikṣvāku period, the two main periods of habitation at the site. The archaeological evidence from the Ikṣvāku period provides strong attestations of both Buddhism and Hinduism. The Mahācaitya—as it is called on the inscriptions themselves—appears to have been the most significant of the Buddhist sites in the Nāgārjunakoṇḍa valley.[6] What the second volume, on the Ikṣvāku period, also demonstrates, is what appears to be harmonious co-existence between what we would call 'Buddhism' and 'Hinduism'. Remains of what were Buddhist monasteries and monuments and Hindu temples were found situated side-by-side, or in close proximity. Whilst the archaeological evidence does reveal periods of development which suggest more of a focus on building Buddhist or Hindu sites at various times, there is

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[5] There is evidence of both what we would term 'Brahmanism' and 'Hinduism' at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, as will become clear. See, for instance, note 7. Sarvadeva is a name for the Hindu god Śiva, and whilst Śiva has Vedic antecedents—as the Vedic god Rudra—the fulcrum of Śiva worship advances as Brahmanism becomes Hinduism, a development within the tradition played out at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa.

[6] This may have been the first Buddhist monument, constructed, as it was, on megalithic sacred ground. Schopen has already noted that in the ASI report on Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, the authors of Volume I (on the Neolithic and Megalithic) report that they found it difficult to fully excavate the main Megalithic burial site in the valley essentially because the Mahācaitya had been built right on top of it, utilizing some of the very megaliths for construction. Schopen, *Business*, 364, citing Subrahmanyam et al., *Nagarjunakonda*, 212.

nothing to suggest competition or tensions.

The majority of the inscriptions made by Ikṣvāku royal and noble women are either engraved on the pillars that once graced the Mahācaitya or were to be found nearby. These are donor inscriptions, records of material donations to the Buddhist community of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa.[7] Nine of these are essentially the same inscription, reproduced on nine pillars of the Mahācaitya, and those nine, as well as others, are all recorded to have been made on the same day—likely the day the Mahācaitya was completed and perhaps consecrated.[8] Even though many of these inscriptions have the exact same date, parts that appear quasi-formulaic differ. In many of these the women express an aspiration to attain nirvāṇa as a result of the donation.[9] The women who aspire to attain nirvāṇa appear well schooled in Buddhist teachings. They include Cāntisirī, the uterine sister (*sodarā bhaginī*) of Cāntamūla, the first king of the Ikṣvākus. She is the main donor, with eleven of the donor inscriptions from the site likely to be hers.[10] Another sister of Cāntamūla, Culacantisiriṇṇikā, is recorded

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[7] As well as donor inscriptions for this Buddhist site, there are also inscriptions relating to the building of Hindu temples. See, for instance, the repeated EIAD 50-1, 50-2 and 50-3, on stone stelae at a Sarvadeva temple.

[8] Vogel, EI 20, 4.

[9] At least one inscription from this period is a record of a man making a donation and aspiring to attain nirvāṇa as a result of it. That is to say, a few men did also make such donations, but in this paper I concentrate on the royal and noble women.

[10] For inscriptions of Cāntisirī see EIAD 4, 6 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 24, 28. In most cases her name appears on the extant inscriptions, but in some cases the name is only partially rendered. In a separate inscription, Cāntisirī is identified as the driving force behind the establishment of the Mahācaitya, 'And while the Great Shrine of this great monastery was being erected by the Talavara's wife Cāntisiriṇṇikā of the Pūkiyas and her people, (Rudradharabhaṭārikā) contributed to the Talavara's wife and her people one hundred and seventy — 170 — dīnārimāṣakas and a pillar' (*mahātalavarihi ca pūkiyānaṁ cāṁtisiriṇikāhi °imasa mahāvihārasa mahācetīyaṁ⟨mhi⟩ samuthapiyamāne mahātalavarīsu °ubhayitā dinārimāsakā satarisataṁ 100 70 khaṁbho ca*). Edition and transla-

to have made one donation.[11] There are also inscriptions of other women who are relatives of Cāntamūla; daughter, niece, and daughter-in-law, such as Adavi-Cāntisirī, Bapasirinika, alongside other female relatives and non-relatives.[12] The words and phrases used on the inscriptions whereby the women express their desire to attain nirvāṇa are not always identical, but are similar. Even within the inscriptions of Cāntisirī, the aspiration is not always expressed in the same way. In the inscriptions, the women hope that making an offering will bring about beneficial results for both themselves and others. These aims are detailed. Hopes include that the offering will bring about, for themselves, 'well-being and happiness in both worlds' and attainment of nirvāṇa alongside 'the well-being and happiness of all in this world'.[13] Three examples of the religious aspirations in these inscriptions are as follows:

> ...for the sake of bringing about well-being and happiness in both worlds and for achieving the bliss of nirvāṇa for herself and for the

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tion: EIAD 10. Also see Vogel, EI 20, 19.

[11] See EIAD 8.

[12] For Adavi-Cāntisirī see EIAD 15 and for Bapisiriṇṇikā EIAD 5. Also see EIAD 8, 9, 10, 12.

[13] The reference to 'both worlds' (*ubhayaloka*) is of interest. Both within Buddhism and Brahmanism, according to the texts, eschatological notions are disarranged and can be seen to evolve. Both appear to start with—as is likely the case more broadly—a dichotomy: a division into this world and some 'other' (see, for instance, Gonda, *Loka*, on the evolution of ideas pertaining to worlds and realms in the Veda). And this bifurcation undergoes classification, cataloguing, and systematisation, which results in—to oversimplify things vastly—a division into three worlds in Vedic Brahmanism and the 'other world' of nirvāṇa for Buddhism. The evolution of eschatological belief is easier to discuss in terms of Buddhism, whereby we can see in the early texts of the tradition contradictory views that either following the path set out by the Buddha results in benefits in 'this world and the next', or that the aim is to go beyond both this world and the next. The subject of *ubhayaloka* and what it might mean in this context, relating to Buddhism and Brahmanism, will be the topic of my next paper.

sake of bringing about the well-being and happiness of all people...
...°ubhayalokahitasukhāvahathanāya °atano ca nivāṇasaṁpati-saṁpādake savalokahitasukhāvahathanāya ca...[14]

...for the sake of well-being and happiness in both worlds and nirvāṇa for herself.
...°atano °ubhayalokahitasukhanivāṇatha⟪nā⟫ya.[15]

...and for accomplishing the bliss of nirvāṇa for herself...[16]
...°atano ca nivāṇasaṁpatisa⟪ṁ⟫pādake...[17]

At first sight, the women's adherence to the teachings of the Buddha and desire to follow the path as laid out by him stand in contradistinction to other aspects of religiosity known about the Ikṣvākus. They were patrons of Brahmanism, as is recorded in the inscriptions and demonstrated by other evidence, not least the name

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[14] Vogel's original translation is: '... for the attainment of welfare and happiness in both world and in order to attain herself the bliss of *Nirvāṇa* and for the attainment of welfare and happiness by all the worlds ...' (EI 20, 17). The above is the EIAD 4 updated edition and translation but emended back to Vogel's 'bliss' for *sampatti*, rather than the EIAD 'fortune'. *Sampatti* in Sanskrit is usually translated as 'good fortune, success, or prosperity', but in Pali it has a broader meaning to encompass, essentially, mental states produced from good fortune, success, or prosperity, so 'bliss' or 'happiness'. Whilst it is the case that, broadly speaking, nirvāṇa is considered to be the transformation of human experience into something other, often said to be beyond comprehension, and in that broad sense 'bliss' or 'happiness' as the translation may not seem apposite, it does accord with other ways in which nirvāṇa is described in early canonical texts, such as, as 'supreme happiness' in the *Dhammapada*/*Dharmapada* (Pali *nibbāṇaparamaṃ sukhaṃ*, von Hinüber and Norman, eds., *Dhammapada*, verses 203 and 204, 30. Brough, ed., *The Gāndhārī Dharmapada*: *nivaṇa paramo suha*, verses 162 and 163, 145).

[15] Edition and translation: EIAD 7.

[16] Translation: EIAD 5. Em. 'bliss', as per note 14 above.

[17] Edition: EIAD 5. *Atane* emended to *atano*, following Vogel EI 20, 19, n. 11.

they chose for themselves, named after, as they are, the important mythical solar dynasty of Hindu tradition. Some of the same inscriptions within which the women aspire to nirvāṇa include a list of rituals said to have been performed by Cāntamūla, who seemed to have been something of a patriarch of the Ikṣvākus, and other royal males as well. The list sometimes appears as formulaic, in which instances it includes the *agnihotra*, *agniṣṭoma*, *vājapeya*, and *aśvamedha*. On others, only the *aśvamedha* is mentioned. This causes us to return to the above question to understand the extent to which each of these aspects—the desire to attain nirvāṇa and the expressed engagement with Brahmanical ritual—were considered to be competing parts of two distinct and discreet religious traditions. To what extent was each understood to be part of a religious tradition or path that stood in contrast to another; if you are one (a follower of the Buddha) you are not the other (an adherent to Vedic tradition)?

Other evidence from sculptures and (texts or) stories circulating at the time might help here. Adorning another Buddhist monument in the region, the Amarāvatī stūpa site, are images of episodes of the well-known story of Śyāmāvatī.[18] According to Buddhist texts, Śyāmāvatī (Pali Sāmāvatī) is the wife of a king, a devout follower of the Buddha, and the object of some of his other wives' jealousy. Versions of the narrative and narrative cycle vary, but some primary, overarching features of the most popular versions are as follows:

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[18] Images of this narrative appear at various Buddhist sites across India, including at the Amarāvatī stūpa, which is a large-scale Buddhist monument in the same region as Nāgārjunakoṇḍa (Zin, 'The Oldest Painting'). The narrative is told and retold in various Buddhist texts, including Pali commentarial literature, certain of which could be South Indian in origin and dated to the fourth century. For instance, it appears in commentaries to the *Dhammapada* (von Hinüber and Norman, eds., *Dhammapada*, I.II, 161–231) and the *Aṅguttaranikāya* (Walleser, ed., *Manorathapūraṇī*, I.XIV, 3–4). The popularity of this set of related narrative stories can be indicated by parts of it appearing in a Sanskrit manuscript fragment of the *Sutta Nipāta* from Eastern Turkestan (Hoernle, 'XVIII. The Sutta Nipāta') and a fuller cycle of stories appearing in a later work from Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere, *Portraits*, 21–79).

Another wife, Māgandiyā, plots to turn the king against Śyāmāvatī, which results, in the end, in the king shooting an arrow at Śyāmāvatī—an image depicted on the monuments. Due to her devotion to the Buddha, and innate loving kindness, the arrow does not penetrate Śyāmāvatī and, as a result of this act, the king is converted to Buddhism. This brief rendering of a much longer series of important narratives that come to be known as the Udayana cycle (named after the king) demonstrates that, for present purposes, a story that includes expression of tensions between Buddhism and other religions was in circulation in the area and at a time prior to the Ikṣvāku period. It is not only a narrative that demonstrates tensions and certainly delineates differences between Buddhism and other religions, but it also, interestingly, shows that it is the *wife* of the king who is the devout follower of the Buddha.

From the evidence at Amarāvatī, it is not possible to know which version of the story of Śyāmāvatī was known to inhabitants of the area, neither at the time the sculptures were made nor subsequently. Could the melting pot nature that developed in ancient Vijayapurī have become a site for increased tolerance and understanding between religions, such that practice of what otherwise might have been seen as competing traditions become acceptable? Ways in which traditions influenced one another certainly seem in evidence.[19] Bearing in mind the question that the two could sit side-by-side, I will focus in what follows on aspects of contrast from a gendered perspective: contrast between, on the one hand, ritual duties, and on the other, female agency.

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[19] According to Bakker ('Monuments') and Sarkar ('The *Chāyā-sthambhas*'), some of the earliest examples of memorial pillars in India are found at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, which seem to be the beginning of a tradition of commemorating the dead that developed into pictorial hero and *sati*-stones. Sarkar suggests that memorialising the dead in this way may have come about in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa from the influence of the Śakas (ibid., 205). Similarly, of course, it could be due to Buddhist influence.

Brahmanism

One of the main ways in which patronage of Brahmanism is expressed on the inscriptions is through praise of kings. Most often this expression relates to the first king Cāntamūla, but also appears on other inscriptions in relation to other males of the royal line.[20] Most often it occurs as the following formula, but not always.[21] The king or former king in question is said to be:

> ...sacrificer of the agnihotra, agniṣṭoma, vājapeya and aśvamedha...
> ...°*agihotāgiṭhomavājapeyāsamedhayājisa*...[22]

Of these Brahmanical rituals, the *aśvamedha*—essentially the sacrifice of a horse by a king—is the most well attested from ancient India, both on epigraphy, coins and a few other pieces of archaeological evidence. For example, the (early) Sātavāhana royal couple, Sātakarṇi and Nāgaṇṇikā had a coin issued that appears to commemorate their performance of *aśvamedha*. Similarly, on the long inscription at Nāneghāṭ—attributed to Nāgaṇṇikā—*aśvamedha* is declared as one of the rituals performed.[23] Also, the longest reigning Kuṣāṇa king, Kaniṣka is recorded to have performed *aśvamedha*, and many (later) Gupta coins of various kings depict the ceremony.[24]

The *aśvamedha* is also well documented in the texts of Brahmanism. It is mentioned in both the epics that were evolving at this time, the *Mahābhārata* and *Ramāyāna*, as well as the *Brāhmaṇa*s, which

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[20] See for instance EIAD 30 and EIAD 55 and 56.

[21] An occasion, the king is simply said to be a performer of *aśvamedha* and the other rituals are not listed (see EIAD 30), and there is one later example which includes three rituals of the above list, but leaves out the *agnihotra*, and instead includes *bahusuvarṇṇaka* (EIAD 53).

[22] Edition and translation: EIAD 6. Vogel does not translate all of this inscription, but has 'offerer of' for *yājisa* elsewhere (for instance EI 20: 18, 21 and EI 21: 62, 64).

[23] Collett, 'Reimagining the Sātavāhana Queen *Nāgaṇṇikā*'.

[24] Raven, 'Samudragupta's Aśvamedha Coins'.

detail how the performance of it should be carried out.[25] In relation to both the *aśvamedha* and other Brahmanical rituals listed on the inscriptions, wives of the performer of the ritual always play a part.[26] The *aśvamedha* is the most complex of these four, but even with regards to the simplest of the set, the daily morning or evening prayers, or *agnihotra*, the wife's role is crucial, albeit in all cases also invariably minor.

In the texts that detail ritual procedures, the male, the husband, is the *yajamāna*, the 'sacrificer', the patron of the ritual, and the main beneficiary. The benefits of the rituals, however, are considered more broadly to be for the *yajamāna*'s family unit, not only for him personally. The rituals are a family affair in the sense that the wife (*patnī*) plays a crucial part. Without the presence and participation of the wife, the rituals will not be efficacious. On this point, Heesterman writes, 'the *patnī* joins her husband in all religious acts, her presence being required for their validity'.[27] The *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* states that a sacrifice without a wife is no sacrifice at all.[28] Underscoring the joint nature of the ritual procedures, with both spouses having a part to play, the *Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa* says the wife is half of the *yajamāna*.[29]

If the recording of these Brahmanical rituals on the inscriptions are an indication that Ikṣvāku royalty and nobility performed Brahmanical rituals on a regular basis, the very women who are aspiring to nirvāṇa are also presumably participating daily in Brahmanical rituals with their husbands. Whilst the inscriptions record that royal

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[25] Interestingly, as noted by John Brockington, the Vedic rituals that are mentioned in the *Ramāyāna* are the same four that are recorded on these inscriptions, along with the *rājasūya* ('Religious Attitudes', 126).

[26] Smith, 'Indra's Curse'; Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife*.

[27] Heesterman, 'The Sacrificer in Ancient Indian Ritual', 137.

[28] *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* 3.3.3.3: *áyajño vā eṣáḥ yò 'patnīkaḥ*, 'There is no sacrifice without a wife' (my translation).

[29] *Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa* 1.86.13: *tad āhur ardhātmā vā eṣa yajamānasya yat patnī,* 'It is said, "Half of the self of the *yajamāna* is the wife"' (my translation). See Amano, 'Indication of Divergent Ritual', 471–77 on *tad āhur* as an indicator of divergent opinions on the *brāhmaṇa*s.

men did engage in these rituals, this may have been more a performance of sovereign power, a statement of the authority and right of the king to rule.[30] If, however, any of these rituals or others were performed, these royal and noble women—who we have seen favour Buddhism—being the wealthy, powerful elite women on Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and wives of important men, may well have been encumbered and duty-bound to participate.

Alongside the delimiting spousal roles for women in Vedic ritual, access to sacred knowledge was also limited for women. The well-known dharmaśastric maxims, particularly those in the *Manusmṛti*, prohibit women, along with *śūdra*s, from having access to the Veda. This, many *dharmaśāstras* proclaim, is because women are too impure to be taught the Vedas. There exists, however, some evidence that women did have, at least, access at some points in early Indian history.[31] In a Buddhist text, the *Avadānaśataka*, is a story of Soma, a female learned Brahmin. She learned the Vedas from her father and became the best known learned Brahmin in her region, with people coming from miles around to settle disputes. One noteworthy Brahmanical text, a *dharmasūtra*, also observes women who were able to engage more fully in Vedic tradition as religious adepts known as *brahmavādinī*s and *sadhyovadhū*s.[32]

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[30] This is not the only reason rituals might not be performed. It is well known that the *Upaniṣad*s concern themselves with what has come to be termed internalisation of ritual, and this is also debated with regards of texts of Vedic tradition, see, for instance, Cavallin, 'Sacrifice as Action'. Bodewitz, in his study of the *Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa* I, 1–65, often returns to the question of whether rituals are actually performed. As a general point, he notes, 'so-called mental sacrifice may be either the performance in thought of an existing rite (with all minute details) or the identification of a particular way of life...with sacrifice in general (or even with a particular rite)' (ibid., 321).

[31] Collett, 'Somā'.

[32] Ibid., 105. The *Hārīta Dharmasūtra* is considered to be amongst the oldest of the *dharmasūtra* literature, as it is quoted from liberally in the *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* (Olivelle, *The Dharmasūtras*, xxxiii–xxxiv) and P. V. Kane calls it one of the most comprehensive of the collection (Kane, *History*,

Despite the evidence that suggests that in some regions, in some periods, women did have access to Vedic knowledge, the overarching theme in relation to performance of Vedic ritual is that women were not entitled to perform the rituals by themselves, only as the wife of the *yajamāna*. This was not due to their (likely) absence of Vedic knowledge, but due to *adhikāra*, their lack of authority. Those with *adhikāra*, entitlement to perform sacrifices, are married men of the top three classes (*varṇa*), brahmins (*brāhmaṇa*), warriors (*kṣatriya*) and merchants (*vaiśya*).[33] As we have seen, marital status is key, as the wife (or wives) play a role. A wife, by herself, however, is generally understood to not possess the authority to perform a ritual—'For women, there is no independent sacrifice'.[34] But, once again, this is not a cut-and-dry case. Two texts of Brahmanic tradition do discuss, at length, whether women can possess the authority to perform Vedic rituals, and the central topics of discussion relate back to the Ikṣvāku women and their donations—whether women can possess property. The two primary texts that discuss this are the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* of Jaimini and Śabara's subsequent commentary. As identified by both Heesterman and McGee, debate centres around the question of whether women can own property, or whether women themselves should be considered to be the property of others.[35] The conclusions drawn in the two texts are that women do have the right to own property, and can dispose of it as they wish, *ergo*, they are eligible to perform rituals themselves. This singular view stands in contrast to the overarching Brahmanical viewpoint. And whilst it would be an assumption to suggest that the Ikṣvāku court was advised by Brah-

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127–36). The complete text is lost, but parts of the text are extant as quotations within other *Dharmaśastra* and *smṛti* literature, including the *Āpastamba*.

[33] McGee, 'Ritual Rites'. McGee (34–35) also outlines additional prerequisites and requirements for *adhikāra* to be granted, which includes financial solvency.

[34] Translation by Olivelle, ed. and trans., *The Law Code of Manu*, 146. *Manavadharmaśāstra* 5.155 *nāsti strīṇāṃ pṛthagyajñaḥ*.

[35] Heesterman, 'The Sacrificer in Ancient Indian Ritual'; and McGee, 'Ritual Rites'.

min priests, if that was the case, it is not possible to know the extent of knowledge of various texts amongst such clerics. The one aspect of the lives of royal and noble Ikṣvāku women relating to this question of *adhikāra* that we do know and can say to be the case is that they did have their own wealth, and as Rama Rao already states, appear free to spend it as they please. Their pleasure, it would appear, was patronage of sites honouring the Buddha, not Vedic tradition.

The parameters delineating women's agency as asserted in the texts of Vedic tradition may have been a cause of the royal and noble Ikṣvāku women making the choices they did. If indeed, as touched upon earlier, the two systems—Brahmanical ritual and the path taught by the Buddha—were seen in opposition to one another. If Vedic rituals were seen more as a symbol of royal power then religious fervour, then perhaps there is room for both. Both the *aśvamedha* and *vājapeya* were performed as demonstrations of social, royal, or ritual power. According to the texts, as Karin Steiner writes on the *vājapeya*:

> The main purpose of the *vājapeya* is the attainment of a position or state called *svārajya*, usually translated as 'universal sovereignty' by the ritual patron. In the form of the ritual as preserved in the Brāhmaṇa- and sutra-texts *vājapeya* implies a prestigious social position but not any socio-political function or office. So the *vājapeya* is a ritual of status elevation. It accompanies, or I should say effects, a change of state of the ritual subject, the *yajamāna*. The ritual subject is separated from his fixed position in the everyday social structure to be transformed, and to assume a better position in social life again after the liminal phase of transition.[36]

Once again, here it is the status of the male that is elevated, with impacts on royal and noble women and their lives coming about relationally, dependant on their status as elite wife and partner.

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[36] Steiner, 'Proposal', 263.

Buddhism

Normative Brahmanical texts largely offer to women only a role as part of a marriage, in which they themselves are not able to be the primary sponsor of the ritual. Investigations into women's history more generally illuminate that women did not always adhere to such strictures placed upon their behaviours, passively accepting subservient roles with little personal agency. Instead, historiography highlights that women often did what should not have been done.

Although we cannot be sure exactly which texts were being used by Buddhist communities in ancient Vijayapurī, the inscriptions do reveal that both the royal and noble women who had the inscriptions made, and the monks who resided in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, did have a good, sometimes comprehensive, knowledge of Buddhism. For example, the inscription of Bapisiriṇṇikā describes one of the monks as:

> ... preserver of the Long and Middle Divisions, pupil of the master, the noble Haṅgha, resident of the village Paṇṇa, the instructor and transmitter of the Long and Middle (Divisions) and the Five Matrices. *...paṁṇa-gāmavathavānaṁ dīghamajhimapaṁdamātukadesa⟪kavā⟫cakānaṁ a⟪ca⟫rayāna ayirahaghāna aṁtevāsikena dīgha-ma⟪jhima⟫ngayadharena*...[37]

Further, we also know that monks in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa came from far and wide, as this is noted on inscriptions that talk about monks coming from other countries also. One inscription even talks about the Theriya monks having converted others from other regions and countries from Kashmir to Sri Lanka.[38]

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[37] Edition and translation: EIAD 5. Vogel EI 20, 20, understanding the genitive plural as *pluralis majestatis*.

[38] *...nānādesasamanāgatānaṁ savasādhūnaṁ mahā[bhi]khusaghasa*, '...for the great community of monks (consisting) of all good renunciants who come from various countries...'. Edition and translation: EIAD 28. Vogel calls them 'Buddhist monks', EI 20, 21. See Collett and Bhikkhu Anālayo, 'Bhikkhave', for instances of bhikkhu as gender-inclusive. For Kashmir and Sri Lanka see EIAD

In a recent article on nirvāṇa in early Indian inscriptions, I place the inscriptions of these Ikṣvāku women within a broader context, assessing all inscriptions which include this Buddhist aspiration.[39] My primary conclusion is that when the desire to attain nirvāṇa is expressed in early Indian epigraphy, it is done so 'in the presence of the Buddha'. That is to say, it is done at monument sites, at stūpa sites, where the monuments are thought to contain a relic of the historical Buddha, and on inscriptions on relic caskets. Monument sites are, of course, sites to commemorate the Buddha. Longhurst, in his excavations of the Nāgārjunakoṇḍa site conducted between 1927 and 1931, found a relic casket in the Mahācaitya, containing a bone relic, which he assumed was a relic of the Buddha.[40] The Ikṣvāku inscriptions are later than other extent inscriptions that contain the aspiration to attain nirvāṇa, and that these ambitions were also declared in the 'presence' of the Buddha suggests some awareness of Buddhist principles and practices on the part of the Ikṣvāku women.[41]

Returning to the excerpts from the inscriptions with which we began, one more aspect of them should now shine, which is the desire of the women for a religious path that is all her own.

> ... for the sake of bringing about well-being and happiness in both worlds and for achieving the bliss of nirvāṇa for herself and for the sake of bringing about the well-being and happiness of all people...
> *...°ubhayalokahitasukhāvahathanāya °**atano** ca **nivāṇa**saṁpatisaṁpādake savalokahitasukhāvahathanāya ca...*[42]

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20. Also see, for similar examples, EIAD 21 and 24.

[39] Collett, '*Nirvāṇa*'.

[40] Longhurst describes '... a fragment of bone placed in a small round gold reliquary three-quarters of an inch in diameter. This was placed in a little silver casket, shaped like a miniature *stūpa*, 2 ½ inches in height, together with a few gold flowers, pearls, garnets and crystals' (Longhurst, *The Buddhist Antiquities*, 17).

[41] In Collett, '*Nirvāṇa*', 230–42, I discuss the question of what it means to understand the Buddha to be 'present' in his relics in some detail.

[42] Edition and translation: EIAD 4, with one em. See note 14.

...for the sake of well-being and happiness in both worlds and **nirvāṇa for herself**.
...°***atano*** *°ubhayalokahitasukha**nivāṇa**tha⟪nā⟫ya*.[43]

...and for accomplishing the bliss of **nirvāṇa for herself**...
...°***atano*** *ca **nivāṇa**saṁpatisa⟪ṁ⟫pādake*... [44]

In all the inscriptions in which these women express their desire to attain nirvāṇa, the word is *atano*, 'for herself', appears. *Atano* is equivalent to the Sanskrit word *ātman* (Pali *atthā*) in the genitive singular.[45] As we have seen, although women can have agency within Brahmanic/Hindu tradition, such agency is not the norm. For women who choose to follow the teachings of the Buddha—and in spite of any type of negativity found in Buddhist texts—the quintessential goal as delineated by the Buddha is one open to both men and women. In contrast to the place women must occupy in Vedic ritual, at best, an adjunct of the *yagamāna* with joint *adhikāra*, there is no personal religious path outlined for a woman who might wish to choose one. The teachings of the Buddha and the Buddhist community provide that option for the royal and noble women of ancient Vijayapurī. Listening to, hearing about, and treading the path as outlined by the Buddha, they are able to pursue a religiosity that is all their own; a personal path, with a personal goal.

Conclusion

In such a context as this, it is of interest to see elite women making choices and appearing to choose the religious path that offers them

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[43] Edition and translation: EIAD 7.

[44] Edition and translation: EIAD 5, with em. See notes 16 and 17.

[45] The word usually appears as *atano* in the inscriptions, but also as *apano* (see, for instance, EIAD 8, 10, 19). Both are attested more broadly in relation to other Prakrits. See, for instance, Woolner, *Introduction*, 38, listing *appaṇo* and *attaṇo* as gentive singular.

something more personal. The epigraphic evidence gives rise to a begged question—What made women from a dynasty that seemed to favour Brahmanism decide to sponsor, patronise and follow the teachings of the Buddha? These women were powerful women. As noted by Rama Rao, they had money, economic wealth, which it would seem, even though they were married, they maintained ownership of and could dispose of as they pleased. While Brahmanical ritual demands female participation, this participation is often, whilst crucial, also minor, and always as a supporting partner. Elite women are more encumbered to participate, but also—as the most powerful women in society—likely to be the least accepting of marginalisation or other negative treatment. To follow the teachings of the Buddha in the way they did may have challenged the socio-religious order. Kings and nobles performed *asvamedha* and *vājapeya* as symbols of power. If their wives are not fully by their sides their power is diminished, as wives play a key role and the rituals are considered to be necessarily performed jointly. That their wives participated in religious activities concerned with commemorating the dead (the Buddha's remains) could have been seen as antithetical to Brahmanical notions of purity and pollution. In choosing to take a different path, the actions of these women may have begun to transform the religious landscape of the time and destabilise Brahmanism as it was: the Brahmanism of the Vedas.

Divorcing a key factor in the Brahmanical eschatological nexus from its place in the schema begins to unravel the world of Vedic ritual: a world within which, for rituals to be efficacious, there is a place for everything and everything needs to be in its place. In choosing the Buddha over Brahmanism, these women could potentially be dispossessing Brahmanical Vedic ritual of its ritual efficacy. The evidence for theorising like this is admittedly piecemeal. It needs to be imbricated to allow a picture to emerge. Nonetheless, from analysis of the inscriptions a picture does begin to emerge of a context in which we find a cosmopolitan city, rich in social and cultural diversity where religious traditions appear to live alongside one another in relative harmony. But when we dig a little deeper, cracks in the mirror appear. Comparing what each tradition—as it existed at the time—appeared to offer women, Buddhism offered more and

provided better options. It allowed women the freedom to practice religion for themselves, rather than be vanquished to the side-lines. In Buddhism, as is evident in their aspirations to attain nirvāṇa, their own religiosity is foregrounded, both practically and theoretically. Women such as royal and noble women, whilst encumbered more due to their privileged status to adhere to Brahmanical tradition, are also the women least likely to accept a tradition that marginalises them. As such, what we need to bear in mind is that Buddhism may well have gained ground at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa and across the region because of what it could offer women. Buddhism's more liberal attitude to women may have been in part what kept it alive and enabled it to become what it is today.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

EI 20	Vogel, 'Prakrit Inscriptions from a Buddhist Site at Nagarjunikonda'.
EI 21	Vogel, 'Two Additional Inscriptions from Nagarjunikonda'.
EIAD	Early Inscriptions of Āndhradeśa. http://hisoma.huma-num.fr/exist/apps/EIAD/index2.html.

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