Donative Inscriptions of Three Lankan Noblewomen

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Abstract: This article offers new translations, with contextual introductions, of inscriptions by three Sri Lankan noblewomen from the early second millennium: the Lady Vidurā, the Great Lady Sundarā, and the Dowager Queen Candavatī. Only Sundarā is so much as mentioned in the literary sources on which we usually rely for the history of Buddhism in medieval Lanka. However, their inscriptions together suggest a greater significance in the development of Theravāda Buddhism.

Introduction

One of the most significant events in the history of Theravāda Buddhism is, arguably, the twelfth century 'purification and unification of the saṅgha' initiated by the Sri Lankan monarch Parākramabāhu I (r. 1153–1186).[1] Prior to this moment, Buddhist monastics on the island had been divided into three distinct ordination lineages (*nikāya*s), each with their own central monastery located in the royal capital of Anurādhapura, and each with their own divergent intellectual and ritual traditions.[2] The Mahāvihāra-*nikāya*, which focused nearly exclusively on Pali-language texts,[3] seemed to be in a minority position relative to the royally-favoured Abhayagiri- and Jetavana-*nikāya*s, who—while likely maintaining a core Pali-language canon—were considerably more open to Sanskrit texts (including explicitly Mahāyāna sūtras and dhāraṇīs).[4] Yet it was Mahāvihāra-affiliated monks who were appointed to oversee Parākramabāhu's 'purification and unification' of the saṅgha;[5] it was Mahāvihāran texts on which the first grandmaster

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[1]   Regnal years follow those in de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*. The term 'Theravāda Buddhism' is used contingently, to refer to 'something, or some things, which can be seen or argued to be genealogically related to what we now call "Theravāda"': Collins, 'Periodising', 18.

[2]   This introduction necessarily simplifies much of the history of these three *nikāya*s. See, for more detailed overviews, Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*; Walters, 'Mahāyāna Theravāda'; *idem*, 'Buddhist History'.

[3]   This included a core canon of texts in the Pali language (understood to be Māgadhī, the language of the Buddha himself); commentaries on those texts also written in Pali, most famously the commentaries of Buddhaghosa; Pali manuals and compendia synthesising teachings from throughout canons and commentaries; and historical narratives called *vaṃsa*s, literally 'lineages'. Ritual uses of Pali texts included the chanting of *paritta* (Sinhala *pirit*).

[4]   On the textual corpus of the Abhayagiri in particular see Cousins, 'Teachings'. On the relative status of the three monasteries see Shirley, 'Buddhism, Gender, and Politics', 4, 60–64.

[5]   Parākramabāhu's Galvihāra *katikāvata* refers to Diṁbulāgala Mahākāśyapa

(*mahāsāmi*) of the newly unified saṅgha based his own disciplinary promulgations;[6] and within a generation it was the Abhayagiri and Jetavana monastics lambasted in retrospective accounts as heretical schismatics from the pious Mahāvihārans. Thenceforth the Mahāvihāra's flag would only fly higher, as its legacy increasingly became recognised as a source of authority across the nascent Theravāda world.[7]

Understanding the Mahāvihāra's apparent reversal of fortunes is therefore central to our understanding of Theravāda history. But we have, until recently, relied very heavily on the accounts provided in those same retrospective accounts which sought to valorise the Mahāvihāra and paint their rivals as villains: the thirteenth century *Pūjāvaliya* and extension to the *Mahāvaṃsa*;[8] the fourteenth century *Nikāya-saṅgrahaya*;[9] and later texts written in Southeast Asia such as

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as head of a monastery of *mahāvihārādhivāsin*s, 'those abiding by the Mahāvihāra'. See further below.

[6]   I refer here to the monk Śāriputra (Pali Sāriputta, Sinhala Säriyut), who wrote sub-commentaries on several of Buddhaghosa's works. On his disciplinary sub-commentaries in particular, see Crosby, 'Sāriputta'.

[7]   The acceptance of the Mahāvihāra's legacy in later Southeast Asia was a gradual process, and one which developed only in response to contingent local conditions: see Blackburn, 'Lineage, Inheritance, and Belonging'.

[8]   The 'core' *Mahāvaṃsa* was written in the fifth or sixth century, and received a commentary (the *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*) in the tenth. From the thirteenth century onwards, the *Mahāvaṃsa* received periodic 'extensions', adding on new chapters to bring its account up to the reign of the then-present monarch. While these extensions were published by modern editors under the name *Cūlavaṃsa*, they clearly refer to themselves as *Mahāvaṃsa* in all extant manuscripts. The dating of these extensions is contested. For the purposes of this article I generally follow the 'traditional' attribution of the first *Mahāvaṃsa* extension to the thirteenth-century reign of Parākramabāhu II. See the discussion in Wickramasinghe, 'The Age of Parākramabāhu I', 11.

[9]   This text is based heavily on the earlier *Pūjāvaliya*, but adds in considerable further details intended to further demonise the Abhayagiri- and Jetavana-*nikāya*s. See, most recently, Bretfeld, 'Theravāda'.

the *Sāsanavaṃsa*.[10] These texts, written by monks who considered themselves heirs of the Mahāvihāra, explain Parākramabāhu's apparent support for that *nikāya* in his twelfth-century reforms as simply a long-overdue recognition of its orthodoxy in the face of schismatics. The historiography of Sri Lankan Buddhism has therefore tended to echo this perspective: our own narratives are replete with the accomplishments of 'great men' like Parākramabāhu I, Vijayabāhu I (r. 1055/1059–1110), and Niśśaṅka Malla (r. 1187–1196), while women are mentioned in passing if at all.[11]

The inscriptional record, however, problematizes such an androcentric account of the Mahāvihāra's eventual rise to prominence. Inscriptions by women are rare: out of the five-hundred-plus inscriptions dated to the late Anurādhapura and Poḷonnaruva periods, only sixteen are attributed to a female patron or are dated in the regnal year of a female monarch.[12] Among these few inscriptions, however, we can identify two features rare in, or even absent from, the inscriptions of their male peers: namely, support for the Mahāvihāra-*nikāya*, and use of the Pali language. This latter point, in particular, is worth dwelling on. Because the Pali language became so firmly associated with Buddhist kingship across the Indian Ocean region, and because we have evidence of Southeast Asian inscriptions in Pali from at least the sixth century onwards,[13] some scholars have tended to assume

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[10]   On the use of these texts in modern historiography see Walters, 'Buddhist History', particularly 152–64.

[11]   On such androcentrism in the historiography of Sri Lanka, see further Shirley, 'Beyond Masculinity'.

[12]   I refer here to the inscriptions collected in Ranawella, ed., *Inscriptions of Ceylon* (hereafter *IC*), vols. V and VI; and the temporally relevant sections of Pathmanathan, ed., *Tamil Inscriptions of Sri Lanka* (*TISL*). The specific inscriptions are *IC* V(i) no. 27; *IC* V(ii) nos. 12, 13, 32, and 70; *IC* VI nos. 7, 8, 23, 90, 91, 92, 93, 98, and 100; and *TISL* nos. 51a and 54. I exclude from this count those few inscriptions which mention both a male patron and his female relatives; I include those which acknowledge the sovereignty of a female monarch, as questions of devolved agency are often unclear.

[13]   See, e.g., Skilling, 'New Pāli Inscriptions'.

that Pali was always a feature of Sri Lankan inscriptional culture.[14] In fact, this is not the case: the *only* extant Pali-language inscriptions (with one possible exception) prior to the thirteenth century—by which point the legacy of the Mahāvihāra was firmly established amongst the unified saṅgha—were those created by royal women; all others were written in Sinhala, Sanskrit, or Tamil.[15]

What I am suggesting is that, based on their inscriptional output, some Sri Lankan noblewomen seem to have an interest in what would become the hallmarks of the later Theravāda—the Mahāvihāra-*nikāya* and the Pali language—during a period in which the future of that *nikāya* and language was in flux, to a degree not evident in the men's inscriptions. Below I provide fresh translations, with brief introductory remarks, of the four of these inscriptions which make this trend most evident: one by a tenth century noble-woman named Vidurā; two by a twelfth-century royal consort named Sundarā; and one by a widow of Parākramabāhu himself, named Candavatī, created at some point *after* his purification and unifica-tion. Only Sundarā is so much as mentioned in the literary sources on which we typically rely for histories of the period, and then only in passing.[16] Each of the four inscriptions is relatively short; several have suffered weather damage, making them entirely unreadable in places.

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[14]   Sheldon Pollock, for example, suggests that Sri Lankan inscriptions prior to the 'vernacular turn' were 'written in prosaic Pali'. Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 387.

[15]   The possible exception is a copper-plate inscription, in a Nāgarī script, found in the Anurādhapura Jetavana-*vihāra*. This was originally published as de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *Epigraphia Zeylanica* (hereafter *EZ*) I no. 3, where it was interpreted as a Sanskrit *śloka*. Paranavitana later interpreted it, in his con-tribution to de Silva Wickremasinghe and Codrington, eds., *EZ* III no. 16, as a Pali-language citation of the Vaṭṭaka-*jātaka*. If this is correct, this would then make the inscriptions of the women below the earliest non-'citational' Pali in-scriptions, and the earliest to be attributed to a specific donor.

[16]   Historians have attempted to identify both Vidurā and Candavatī with women mentioned in the *Mahāvaṃsa*, but these connections are tenuous. See further discussion below.

Between them, however, they provide a slightly alternative narrative of Theravāda history to that found in retrospective narrative texts, one which reflects, perhaps, an ongoing investment in the prosperity of the Pali-oriented Mahāvihāra by Sri Lankan noblewomen.

Inscription 1: Vidurā's Inscription at the Issarasamaṇārāma, ca. 966 CE[17]

The first of our inscriptions was originally located at a complex of rock shelters on a small hill just south of the royal capital Anurādhapura.[18] While the area is popularly known today as Vessagiriya,[19] medieval inscriptions (including the inscription of Vidurā translated below) instead call it the 'Royal Great Monastery (*radmahavehera*) of Isurameṇu Bo-Upulvan-Kasub-hill', the Sinhala rendering of the Pali 'Issarasamaṇa Residence (*ārāma*)... named for Kassapa and his two daughters Bodhī and Uppalavaṇṇā'.[20] Inscriptions have been found in the caves and rock shelters of this site dating back to the early centuries BCE, recording donations of specific caves either to individual monks or to the saṅgha as a whole.[21] From the medieval period, however, we have inscriptions carved on smoothed slabs which mark royal donations, in the form of gold and land tenures, to what is clearly a more institutionalised monastic community at the site.[22]

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[17]   From the edition in Ranawella, *IC* V(ii), 262–63; with reference to de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *EZ* I, 38–39.

[18]   The inscription was moved from its findsite to the Anurādhapura Archaeological Museum sometime in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

[19]   Vessagiriya is the name given in the fifth-century *Mahāvaṃsa* to an ordination site on the island (see *Mahāvaṃsa* 20:15). However, modern scholars have suggested that the 'original' Vessagiri may have been located several miles further south: see Nicholas, 'Historical Topography', 98.

[20]   *Mahāvaṃsa* 39: 10–12.

[21]   Fourteen of these rock inscriptions are published in *EZ* I, no. 2.

[22]   On the economic institutionalisation of monastic communities in the later

One of these inscriptions records a donation by a 'Lady Vidurā'. Vidurā's inscription is carved on the obverse of a longer inscription by Mahinda IV (r. 956–972), who is called 'Sirisaṃbo *mapuramakā*' in Vidurā's inscription. This suggests some connection between the two, and possibly that she held an important position within his court. Unfortunately, the exact nature of this relationship is unclear.[23] It is possible that if the inscription were not so badly damaged, we might have other clues available to us; all we have to go on in the surviving portion is the title I have translated as 'Lady' (*aṃbu*, from Sanskrit *ambā*), a common feminine honorific throughout inscriptions of the period.[24]

Anurādhapura period, see Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*.

[23]   Ranawella has suggested that Vidurā may have been mentioned in the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s account of the reign of Udaya IV (r. 946–954): see Ranawella, ed., *IC* V(ii), 262. The familial relationship between Udaya IV and Mahinda IV is not clear from available sources. The passage in question describes worship done by an *orodhā vidurā* to a Buddha-image which Udaya erected in the Mahāvihāran compound (MV 53:49). The full passage reads *orodhā vidurā tassa pādajālena pūjayi | maṇīhi pajjalantena paṭimaṃ taṃ silāmayaṃ*. Ranawella seems to be following Geiger and Rickmer's translation, often taken as the definitive rendering of the *Mahāvaṃsa*, of *orodhā vidurā* as 'one of the ladies of the harem, Vidurā'. See Geiger and Rickmers, trans., *Cūlavaṃsa*, 1:177. However, in the absence of a clear indication otherwise (such as a *nāma* or *abhidhāna*), we do not have a strong reason for taking *vidurā* as a proper name; this might instead be a generic reference to 'a wise (*vidurā*) concubine (*orodhā*)'. It is certainly plausible that the thirteenth-century compiler of the *Mahāvaṃsa* extension knew of this tenth-century noblewoman, by name, with a particular penchant for supporting the Mahāvihāra. But we should be cautious about definitively identifying the Vidurā of our inscription, who seems to have had some relationship with Mahinda IV, with the Vidurā mentioned in a thirteenth-century retrospective account as a concubine of Udaya IV.

[24]   The Sanskrit *ambā* has a particular connotation of motherhood, but it is not exclusively used by a mother's own children; we can translate it as a generic honorific of 'good mother!'. In Sinhala, *aṃbu* seems to be more closely associated with marital status: see Väliviṭiyē Sorata, *Śrī Sumaṅgala Śabdakoṣaya*, s.v. 'aṃbu'.

Vidurā's inscription records her donation of both ongoing land-tenure (*pamuṇu*)[25] and certain material goods ('a collection of alms and cloth') to 'the saṅgha residing in this residence'. The specific wording of this donation tells us much about the economic situation of noblewomen like Vidurā in the later Anurādhapura period. She tells us that the material goods were obtained from (what seems to be) the same monastery she was patronising, once she had first given them a large quantity of gold: some form of alms-economy was clearly at work within the walls of the monastery.[26] This is supplemented by an ongoing land tenure, presumably to ensure the ongoing support of the monastery 'even in the [future?] absence of saṅgha'. This tenure is referred to with a (relatively unusual) personal pronoun (*māge*), '*my* tenure-land', further emphasising the extent of Vidurā's economic independence and personal control of substantial assets.

What particularly interests us is the institutional identity of the monastery Vidurā patronised. That she refers to it as a 'Royal Great Monastery' (*radmahavehera*, cf. Pali *rājamahāvihāra*) is not necessarily an indication that this was affiliated with the Mahāvihāra-*nikāya*; This seems, based on wider inscriptional usage, to have been a generic term for any royally-sponsored monastery. However, the adjoined inscription of Mahinda IV specifically refers to a relationship with the 'Royal Great Monastery of the Mahamevnā Tisaram', another name for the Mahāvihāra's titular head monastery

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This title appears in nearly every Sinhala-language inscription by a woman in the late Anurādhapura period, but seems to have fallen out of favour by the Poḷonnarua period.

[25]   On the emergence of *pamuṇu* grants as a 'permanent tenurial right' over a piece of land, see Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*, 65.

[26]   On the economic dimensions of medieval Sri Lanka monasteries see particularly Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough*; for a parallel interest in economic affairs in earlier India see Schopen, 'The Business Model of a Buddhist Monasticism'; for an analysis particularly concerned with the gendered dimension of such economic interests see Milligan, 'The Economic Power of Women in Early South Asian Buddhism'.

located in the Mahāmegha Forest.[27] We can therefore assume that, by the time Vidurā created her donative inscription, the Issarasamaṇa monastery was associated with the wider Mahāvihāra-*nikāya*.

Only the first eight lines of the inscription are still legible; based on the text on the adjoined inscription of Mahinda IV, there may once have been as many as thirty-seven lines of text inscribed. Thankfully, the little we have left contains the central details of the donation: the date (in Mahinda's regnal years), the identity of the donor, and the goods donated. Based on the last surviving line, and wider inscriptional practices, it seems likely that the remainder of the inscription would once have laid out various stipulations about how the donation was to be used for the benefit of the monastery, and perhaps the identities of the local officials 'witnessing' the donation and its terms.

> On the fifth day of the waxing moon, in [the month] Durutu (Pali: Phussa), of the tenth [regnal] year of the Great Lord Sirisaṃbo:[28] We[29] donated to the saṅgha residing in this residence (1) a collection of cloth[30] and alms[31] that the Lady Vidurā obtained from the Royal

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[27]   Nicholas, 'Historical Topography', 127, 129–30.

[28]   The title used here, *mapurmukā* (from Skt. *mahāpramukha*), was frequently used as a paramount royal title in this period, along with *maharad* (Skt. *mahārājan*).

[29]   It is unclear whether the plural verb form is honorific, or whether multiple parties were involved in the donation. Given that only Vidurā is named (in the extant section), and that we see below a reference to '*my* (*māge*) lands', I suspect the former.

[30]   This is likely a reference to *kaṭhina* cloth, the material used to make robes for Buddhist monastics. Lay devotees traditionally present *kaṭhina* to monastics at the end of the rains retreat, in the lunar month of Vap (P. Assayuja), not in Durutu.

[31]   The term I am translating here as 'alms', *vasaga/väsäga*, is highly contested. De Silva Wickremasinghe suggests that the etymology may be from Sanskrit *varṣa-agra*, 'a measure of food given as alms' (*agra*) suitable for a particular year or season (*varṣa*): de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *EZ* I, 28, n. 5. However, de Silva Wickremasinghe also suggests as an etymological alternative

Great Monastery of Bo Upulvan Kasubgiri, having paid two hundred units[32] of gold; and (2) my Goṅgayan tenure-land[33] which is in Muvariya. Even in the absence of saṅgha, these alms are offered; and the Salvatta which was given by the Vihāra to the medicine-hall, and the two areas[34] in the Pahaṅgamu field [given] to the two medicine attendants... [remainder effaced]

Inscription 2: Sundarā's Earlier Inscription, Early-mid Twelfth Century[35]

This inscription was carved into a smoothed slab which was later repurposed to construct a tiered *maṇḍapa* in Poḷonnaruva, which became the royal capital around the beginning of the second millennium.[36] Due to both this re-purposing, which obscures the

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Skt. *varṣa-āgāra*, a house in which to shelter from the rainy season.

[32] The specific unit used is a *kaḷand* (from the Tamil *kaḻañcu*), a measure of weight.

[33] De Silva Wickremasinghe has suggested that *goṅgayan* may be derived from *gon-geya*, a group of cattle: de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *EZ* I, 39; see also Väliviṭiyē Sorata, *Śrī Sumaṅgala Śabdakoṣaya*, s.v. 'gon-gē'. Given that *pamuṇu* in this period usually refers to land-tenure (as discussed above), I therefore take *goṅgayan* as either a proper name, or perhaps an indication that the land in question was intended for cattle-grazing.

[34] The specific term is *kiriya*, an area of land suitable for sowing a set quantity of rice: de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *EZ* I, 3, n. 4.

[35] This translation, and the following, are taken from Shirley, 'Buddhism, Gender, and Politics', chapter 3, in which I provide more detailed annotations. The translation itself is from the edition in Ranawella, ed., *IC* VI, 18–19; with reference to Codrington and Paranavitana, eds., *EZ* IV, 67–72.

[36] This structure has been identified by modern scholars as the *Rājave-śyābhujaṅga-maṇḍapa* ('Hall for the Enjoyment of Royal Concubines'), built by Parākramabāhu I and then later rebuilt by Parākramabāhu II (r. 1236–1270): Nicholas, 'Historical Topography', 177; de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *EZ* II, 67–68.

original location of the inscription, and the extensive damage to its textual contents,[37] its original purpose is unclear. The inscription was created by a 'Great Lady Sundarā' (Sinhala *sundaramahadevi*), who identifies herself as the primary consort (*agamehesun*, cf. Sanskrit *agramahiṣī* and Pali *aggamahesī*) of Vikramabāhu I (r. 1111–1132). We know from a reference in the *Mahāvaṃsa* that Sundarā was originally born in Kaliṅga, and was the sister of Tilokasundarī, *agramahiṣī* of Vikramabāhu's own father Vijayabāhu I.[38] As Sundarā's other extant inscription (below) also mentions her son, Gajabāhu II (r. 1132–1153), we can cautiously assume that the two were created in the respective reigns of her husband and son; we cannot date either any more accurately.

Both modern editions of the inscription tell us that 'The present record, so far as the preserved portion goes, does not contain anything which we do not already know about these rulers [Vikramabāhu and his father Vijayabāhu] and queen [Sundarā]'.[39] The inscription is also inexplicably excluded from Dias's discussion of Pali-language inscriptions.[40] Despite this general inattention, the present inscription may represent a pivotal moment in the history of Sri Lankan epigraphy. Among those inscriptions which have survived until today—which is, to be fair, a very incomplete record—this is the earliest to include non-'citational' Pali, composed specifically for the inscription itself: here in the form of a short verse preceding the inscription 'proper' in Sinhala prose.[41]

The Pali verse is sadly damaged, and so is illegible in places. However, we can clearly see that it offers praise to a monk named Ānanda, who had some form of relationship to the saṅgha in the Cōḻa Empire (now Tamil Nadu) and the 'Copper-country' (*tam-*

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[37]   Only the first seven lines, out of an estimated 45, are legible.

[38]   *Mahāvaṃsa* 59:49.

[39]   Codrington and Paranavitana, ed., *EZ* IV, 68; Ranawella repeats this verbatim in *IC* VI, 19.

[40]   Dias, 'Sanskrit and Pali Inscriptions', 106.

[41]   To my knowledge, the only scholar to explicitly comment on the significance of this Pali-language inscription is Gornall, *Rewriting Buddhism*, 28.

baraṭṭha).[42] Without any further details about this monk, it is impossible to precisely identify him or his institutional affiliations.[43] However, we might reasonably assume that he, or a monastery with which he was associated, was the beneficiary of the grant in question; we might further assume that he had some particular affinity with the Pali language, and that this is the reason Sundarā chose to begin her inscription with a(n apparently unprecedented) Pali verse. We cannot say with certainty that a monk who merited praise in Pali was *necessarily* affiliated with the Pali-exclusive Mahāvihāra-*nikāya*: both the Abhayagiri- and Jetavāna-*nikāya*s, despite their openness to Sanskrit, also presumably had a core canon in Pali; and of course monks in South India had long produced Pali-language scholarship without any overt connection to the Lanka-based Mahāvihāra.[44] Nonetheless, when paired with Sundarā's second extant inscription (below) this inscription is sug-

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[42]   Modern commentators are divided on the location of this 'Copper-country'. Buddhaghosa refers to Sri Lanka itself as Tambapaṇṇa, and we might plausibly take Tambaraṭṭha as a variant thereof. In the introduction to his *Epigraphia Zeylanica* edition, Paranavitana argued that Tambaraṭṭha was instead Nakhon Si Dhammarat (Nagara Śrī Dharmaraṣṭra) in what is now southern Thailand; he would later argue instead that this referred to Ligor: Paranavitana, 'Religion, Literature, and Art', 565. On Paranavitana's increasingly spurious attempts to draw connections between Poḷonnaruva and Southeast Asia in his later career, particularly with reference to the Kāliṅga monarchs, see de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 78. Tournier has identified Tambaraṭṭha (in another inscription) as being in Southern India, which would fit well with Ānanda's Cōḷa connection: Tournier, 'A Tide of Merit', 24–27, particularly n. 102.

[43]   This Ānanda has been tentatively identified as the Ānanda who wrote the *Upāsakajanālaṅkāra* and was praised as the teacher of Vedeha and Buddhappiya: see Paranavitana, 'Religion, Literature, and Art', 565. However, based on intertextual references in the *Upāsakajanālaṅkāra*, its author must have been active in the early thirteenth century at the earliest: Blackburn, 'Review of Giulio Agostino', 274–48. A more plausible explanation is simply that there were multiple monks named Ānanda across the centuries.

[44]   Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism*, 5–6.

gestive of a particular inclination on Sundarā's behalf towards that institution and its textual tradition.

The Sinhala section of the inscription, as with many of the period, describes a sequence of relationships which eventually lead to Sundarā herself: the mythical ancestor-king Ikṣvāku; his supposed descendent Vijayabāhu I, founder of the Poḷonnaruva-based dynasty of Lankan kings; his son Vikramabāhu I; and finally his consort Sundarā. Sinhala grammar, with its many left-branching adjectival clauses and often (intentionally) unclear syntactical attribution, does not always lend itself to easy English prose; in what follows I have reversed the order in which each individual is mentioned, to make clearer the nature of the relationships between each.

> Svasti! Śrī!
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> [In Pali verse:] May the excellent sage known as Ānanda—possessor of supernatural powers, a flag raised in the land of Laṅkā—be victorious; he who, resolute (*dhīra*), became a *thera*... [illegible] ...the ascetics of Tambaraṭṭha; who did... [illegible] ...the *śāsana* among the Cōḷa.
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> [In Sinhala prose:] By the Great Lady Sundarā, best of the solar family, the primary consort to
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> the Lord Vikramabāhu, who was born of
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> the Lord Sirisaṅgabo Vijayabāhu, who was like a sole refuge for the world and the *śāsana*, who ruled having united all of Lanka without transgressing the ten *rājadharmma*s, and who was born in the royal lineage of
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> Okā (Sanskrit Ikṣvāku), who excelled in a collection of auspicious, endless virtues unequalled in the world, and who subjugated the other *kṣatriya* families of Dambadvahi (Skt. Jambudvīpa)...

Inscription 3: Sundarā's Inscription at Diṁbulāgala, Early to Mid-Twelfth Century[45]

Sundarā's second extant inscription is, thankfully, preserved *in situ*. It is carved into the roof of a cave ('Cave No. 2') in Diṁbulāgala, a range of hills some sixteen kilometres south-east of Poḷonnaruva. This cave, like those at 'Vessagiriya' described above, forms part of a network of rock shelters which appear, from other inscriptions, to have been occupied by monastics from a very early period of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Diṁbulāgala carries huge significance in Buddhist history. When Parākramabāhu I set out to 'purify and unify' the Lankan saṅgha in 1165, he relied on a monk named Mahākāśyapa (Pali Mahākassapa, Sinhala Mahakäsup) to lead the overseeing committee of monks.[46] This Mahākāśyapa is described as leading the 'Udumbaragiri' (in Parākramabāhu's own inscriptions)[47] or 'Audumbaragiri' (in later narrative sources)[48] vihāra, almost certainly the same Diṁbulāgala referred to in this inscription of Sundarā's.[49] Significantly, the Diṁbulāgala monks are described as 'abiding by the Mahāvihāra' (*mahāvihārādhivāsin*), which would go some way to explaining why that 'purification and unification' seemed to ultimately favour the legacy of the Mahāvihāra-*nikāya*.[50] While our knowledge of the monastery's longer history is murky, it does not seem to have been the focus of much royal intervention prior to the period under discussion. Cave inscriptions on the mountain tell us that monastics have dwelt there, not necessarily continuously, since as early as the

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[45] As for the inscription above, see for more detailed annotations Shirley, 'Buddhism, Gender, and Politics'. The translation is from the edition of Ranawella, ed., *IC* VI, 20–21; with reference to the two editions of de Silva Wickremasinghe, *EZ* II, 184–89 and 194–202.

[46] See, for the source of the standard account, *Mahāvaṃsa* 78:6–7.

[47] Ranawella, ed., *IC* VI, 31; de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *EZ* II, 275.

[48] Samaranāyaka, *Nikāya saṅgrahaya*, 79.

[49] Although cf. the early caution of de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *EZ* II, 188.

[50] See further Shirley, 'Buddhism, Gender, and Politics', chap. 4.

second century BCE.[51] More immediately prior to the Poḷonnaruva period, however, the history of this site becomes hazier. We do have references in the *Mahāvaṃsa*—both the fifth century original and the thirteenth century extension—to a 'Dhūmarakkhāga Mountain' which seems, on geographic grounds, to be another name for Diṁbulāgala. The only references to a monastery at this site, however, come in texts likely postdating the twelfth century.[52] Sundarā's inscription, therefore, represents the earliest extant evidence of royal interest in Diṁbulāgala since the BCE Brahmi cave inscriptions—an interest which benefitted the monastery just a generation or so before Parākramabāhu appointed its leader to head his purification and unification of the saṅgha, and so shape the course of later Theravāda history.

We cannot attribute the prominence of the Diṁbulāgala vihāra exclusively to Sundarā's patronage, as recorded in the present inscription. By her own inscriptional account, the site seemed to be a bustling centre of both resident monks and (likely lay) visitors, traversing a difficult path between two auspicious caves. Other sites within the wider Diṁbulāgala area may also have hosted well-developed ritual precincts predating Sundarā's patronage.[53] However, the donations which Sundarā records in her inscription below must have significantly boosted the site's prestige. She establishes a perpetual grant of a *demaḷā-pähä*, a term which modern historians have variously interpreted as a monastery, a village (whose taxes would thenceforth be donated for the upkeep of the monastery), or

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[51]   Nicholas, 'Historical Topography', 40.

[52]   *Mahāvaṃsa* 37:213. This occurs in the section of the *Mahāvaṃsa* traditionally dated to the reign of Parākramabāhu II; cf., however, Wickramasinghe, 'The Age of Parākramabāhu I', 13–19.

[53]   I refer particularly here to the site known today as the Namal Pokuna ('Ironwood Pond'), which seems to contain all four of the components of a sacred precinct (discussed below). The layout of these components at the Namal Pokuna seems to fit neatly into what Bandaranayake categorises as a 'Type II' pabbatavihāra style of monastic layout, typical of the late Anurādhapura period: Bandaranayake, *Sinhalese Monastic Architecture*, 68, 73–74.

a specific structure.[54] In addition, Sundarā furnished the Diṁbulāgala complex with three of the four features of the 'sacred precinct' which had come to characterise Lankan vihāra design by this period: an imagehouse (*pratimāghara*), reliquary (usually stūpa, here called *dāgab*), and Bodhi tree (*bodhighara*).[55] The fourth characteristic, an *uposathaghara*, presumably already existed somewhere nearby, if there were already monks in residence. With these three additional features, Sundarā was therefore converting the 'Kāliṅga Cave' (now named after her own place of origin) into a fully-equipped ritual precinct.

With these donations, it seems that Sundarā made a significant material impact to the prestige of the Diṁbulāgala monastic complex, and thereby perhaps raised its profile significantly. This occurred just a generation before that monastery's leader would be appointed to guide Parākramabāhu's purification and unification of the saṅgha: an appointment which our retrospective literary sources attribute to Parākramabāhu's agency alone, while not so much as mentioning Sundarā's name. We cannot simply transfer credit for that appointment to Sundarā alone. However, together her two extant inscriptions present compelling evidence that she had a hand in establishing the circumstances in which the Diṁbulāgala monks *were* so appointed, and so had a hand in the course of Theravāda history.

> Unbroken [in lineage] from the solar clan in the lineage of Sudonā (Skt. Śuddhodana, the father of the Buddha), who was born from the royal family of Okā (Sanskrit Ikṣvāku);[56] who overcame Śrī in bodily splendour; primary consort to the Lord of Men Vikramabāhu,

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54   de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *EZ* II, 189; Ranawella, ed., *IC* VI, 21.

55   Bandaranayake, *Sinhalese Monastic Architecture*, 70.

56   Given Sinhala's left-branching structure, we might take this clause as modifying Vikramabāhu. However, the intervening clause, 'who overcame Śrī in bodily splendour', would *more typically* be made about an idealised woman than it would a masculine king. I am therefore inclined to tentatively take this as a claim that Sundarā herself was descended from the Buddha's own father, and through him Ikṣvāku.

born from the crowned;[57] who gave birth to Gajabāhu: the Great Lady Sundarā *vahanse*, who having seen the suffering of people who clung to the eroded chains on the path between the Great Lunar Cave and the Great Solar Cave at Diṁbulāgala, which is home to 500 of the *mahāsaṅgha* and where are established the bodily relics of Our King of Sages; having had arranged the stones [of the path]; having improved the path; having had placed in the cave[58] [Buddha-] images, reliquaries, and Mahābodhi [trees]; having given it the name 'Kāliṅga Cave'; having had made/done the auspicious wholesome act (*siri-kusala*, Skt. *śrī-kuśala*) of *demaḷā-pähä*, on the full-moon *uposathā* day in [the month of] Poson in the twenty-seventh year of Jayabāhu; having offered it for [the provision of] cooked rice; to [witness] the fact of its being given for the duration of the world's existence, I am the Great Lady Sundarā.

Inscription 4: Candavatī's Inscription at the Potgul Vihāra, Late Twelfth Century[59]

Our final inscription is located on the *maṇḍapa* (ritual entranceway) of a structure called today the 'Potgul Vihāra' (literally 'Library Monastery'), south of the Poḷonnaruva citadel.[60] The inscription is dated

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57   I tentatively take 'born from the crowned' (*voṭunu mändä upan*) as modifying Vikramabāhu, as male monarchs frequently emphasise that both their fathers and mother were so crowned (i.e., that their mother was a high-ranking consort). Alternatively, however, this could modify Sundarā here. We know little about her own lineage.

58   The term *lena* here is in the definitive singular, so 'the' rather than 'a' cave. Rather than either the Great Solar or Lunar Caves mentioned in the preceding clause, I take this as referring to a third cave, which is henceforth called the Kāliṅga Cave.

59   See further Shirley, 'Buddhism, Gender, and Politics', chapter 6. The translation is from the edition in Ranawella, ed., *IC* VI, 51–52; with reference to de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *EZ* II, 238–41.

60   The name is almost certainly a modern misnomer, derived from association

to sometime in the later twelfth century, firmly after Parākramabāhu's purification and unification of the saṅgha (and, indeed, well after his death). The inscription refers, in the second stanza, to a widow of Parākramabāhu who was herself later crowned as a monarch. This can only refer to Līlāvatī, who was crowned (and subsequently deposed) three times: 1197–1200; 1209–1210; and 1211–1212. The inscription does not, however, record a donation made by Līlāvatī herself; it is in the name of another of Parākramabāhu's widows, Candavatī.

Unlike Sundarā, Candavatī does not appear to be mentioned in any literary accounts of the Poḷonnaruva period. Some modern historians have attempted to identify her as 'Rūpavatī', a consort who is praised, at some length, in the *Mahāvaṃsa*.[61] No explanation is offered for this identification, and it was presumably motivated only by an impulse to line up the account of the *Mahāvaṃsa* with the available epigraphical evidence. We have no evidence dating to within the Poḷonnaruva period itself that Parākramabāhu ever had a consort named Rūpavatī.

Other than this attempted identification, little attention has been paid to Candavatī's inscription at the Potgul Vihāra. The Archaeological Survey's annual report for the year of the structure's (re) discovery, for example, concludes only that 'In twenty-six lines of clear-cut letters of the twelfth century is a record in Pali of its original construction by Parākramabāhu I, and its rebuilding and improvement by his two queens'.[62] It says much about the priorities of these colonial archaeologists that only Parākramabāhu, and neither of his 'two queens', is named here. The most significant use to which this inscription has been put is as evidence that non-regnal consorts like Candavatī had independent means of patronising such construction projects.[63] What none of these scholars seem to dwell on is the fact

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with a nearby statue of a sage (possibly Pulasti) reading a manuscript. The structure appears to have originally been some form of imagehouse or reliquary rather than a library.

[61] Bell, *Arch. Survey AR 1906*, 13; de Silva Wickremasinghe, ed., *EZ* II, 240.

[62] Bell, *Arch. Survey AR 1906*, 16.

[63] Siriweera, 'Economic Conditions', 54.

that Candavatī's inscription is the earliest extant Lankan inscription to be written *entirely* in Pali verse, and the second inscription to include Pali verse at all after Sundarā's praise of the monk Ānanda discussed above. Taken together, this suggests a very particular place for the Pali language in the inscriptional culture of medieval Lanka: it seems to have been reserved, both before and after Parākramabāhu's purification of the saṅgha, for royal women alone.

> He, the wise Supreme Lord of Lanka, purified the Conqueror's commands; by him this entire vihāra was made to be built. The consort (*mahesī*) of that [same] wise Lord of Men Parākrama, she who was established in the sovereignty, caused the entire vihāra to be rebuilt. The *rājinī* Candavatī subsequently became primary (consort) of that very Lord of Men; she had the *maṇḍapa* constructed.

Conclusions

These inscriptions together speak to an ongoing interest, among Sri Lankan royal consorts, in what would become two key features of Theravāda Buddhism: the institution of the Mahāvihāra, and the use of the Pali language. Male monarchs, of course, also patronised the Mahāvihāra, albeit (in the first millennium CE) less frequently than they did the rival Abhayagiri- and Jetavana-vihāras. However, the inscriptional use of Pali prior to the thirteenth century seems to have been the preserve of royal women. We can only speculate about the reason for this affinity: why did Sundarā and then Candavatī inscribe, in part or in full, in Pali, while their husbands used only Sinhala, Tamil, and Sanskrit? Regardless of the reason, this inscriptional data seems to challenge the narrative laid out in literary sources, that the rise of Mahāvihāra- and Pali-oriented Buddhism in Sri Lanka was exclusively a project of royal male patrons. While the incomplete nature of the Sri Lankan inscriptional record prevents us from drawing definitive conclusions, these inscriptions are at least suggestive of a history beyond that of the literary sources, in which elite women were active participants in shaping the history of Theravāda Buddhism.

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