

A Translation of the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*

THE HISTORY OF THE
Buddha's Relic Shrine



STEPHEN C. BERKWITZ

THE HISTORY OF THE
BUDDHA'S RELIC SHRINE



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*Dedicated with my deep appreciation and respect to
Professor W. S. Karunatilake and Professor G. D. Wijayawardhana*

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The production of *The History of the Buddha's Relic Shrine*, from the initial translation through its publication, was a long process that depended on the kind assistance and encouragement of many people. This work grew out of doctoral research that I conducted in Sri Lanka between 1995 and 1997 under the auspices of a Fulbright Junior Fellowship and the University of Kelaniya, which served as my host institution at that time. Tissa Jayatilaka of the U.S.-S.L. Fulbright Commission was instrumental in facilitating the arrangements that allowed me to spend many months in Sri Lanka learning to read Classical Sinhala one page at a time. I was extremely fortunate to have been assigned to work with Professor W. S. Karunatilake at Kelaniya, who generously committed to working with me for several months and provided invaluable encouragement and support with this project. My good fortune continued when Professor G. D. Wijayawardhana agreed to assist me with my work. I undertook this translation under the guidance of these two professors, although I am solely responsible for any errors or deficiencies herein. Both professors are truly extraordinary scholars and wonderful human beings. I feel a tremendous amount of gratitude to them for opening up the rich corpus of classical Sinhala literature to me.

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The publication process has been long, but ultimately worthwhile. Preparing a complete English translation of a lengthy, thirteenth-century Sinhala history is not easy, especially since there are precious few conventions and standards to use. And given the limited familiarity with this literature in the West, it was not easy finding a publisher. Thus I am extremely grateful to Cynthia Read at Oxford University Press for her interest, patience, and support concerning this work. Working with Cynthia, Julia TerMaat, Linda Donnelly, Margaret Case, and many others at OUP has been a delightful experience. Likewise, I owe a great deal of thanks to Mark Csikszentmihalyi, former editor of the American Academy of Religion's Texts and Translations Series and the person who first expressed interest in my work and then shepherded it through the review process. The anonymous reviewers of my translation devoted their time to going through my manuscript and making numerous suggestions for its improvement. I wish to thank them for committing themselves to the often thankless job of reviewing a book manuscript.

Brill Academic Publishers, the publisher of my book *Buddhist History in the Vernacular: The Power of the Past in Late Medieval Sri Lanka* (2004), generously allowed me to reproduce many quotations here that also appear in my book-length study of Buddhist history writing as a form of religious and ethical practice. In this earlier work, I analyze and theorize about the writing of historical narratives in Sri Lankan Buddhism. Although some of the arguments from *Buddhist History in the Vernacular* appear in the introduction to this translation, I encourage readers to consult this work in its entirety to see how I interpret works such as the *Sinhala Thūpavam̐sa*.

Finally, as always, I wish to acknowledge my family and friends for believing in me and not questioning my sanity while I dedicated many years to the task of reading and translating Sinhala texts. My wife, Imali, has been a constant and invaluable source of encouragement, while my

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NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION

Although I consulted a number of printed editions of the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*, I have relied primarily on the recent edition prepared by W. S. Karunatillake. My inspection of over two dozen manuscript editions of the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* has led me to conclude that producing a translation from such works would be impractical and no more accurate, since such manuscripts date back no further than about two or three centuries, and many of them are filled with scribal errors and variants that appear mostly in spellings rather than substantial details. Since Sinhala versions of paracanonical texts were not bound by the same close attention to accurate transmission as the texts of the Pāli Canon, some innovation and alterations inevitably appear between editions. A reader is likely to find different spellings for names and words; indeed, sometimes in the very same text. I have retained many of these variations, so the reader will find proper names and technical terms that alternate between Sanskrit, Pāli and Sinhala versions. The edition by Karunatillake was chosen for its reliability and the fact that it contains some acknowledgment of the variants among other modern printed editions.

Since there is no standard version or original manuscript left that could be treated as authoritative, I have attempted to compensate for this lack by comparing several modern editions to check for variations or omissions. Although this method may seem unsatisfying to the critical

reader, it is nevertheless consistent with the ways that premodern Sri Lankan Buddhists encountered these texts—as works with fluid boundaries that were subject to continual revision as they were copied by hand and sometimes condensed into shorter excerpts in ad hoc anthologies of diverse texts bound together in one manuscript. In short, in an environment where critical editions were virtually unknown, the use of a single text for reading and editing was fairly typical.

Another challenge I face with this work is the absence of universal standards or accepted conventions in the translation of Sinhala works. The relative paucity of English translations of medieval Sinhala texts has prevented the development of a common critical apparatus upon which I could base my work. (Three notable exceptions include *Jewels of the Doctrine* and *Portraits of Buddhist Women*, which present selected stories from the thirteen-century *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* in English, by Ranjini Obeyesekere, as well as Udaya Meddegama's translation of the *Anāgataṃsa Desanā*.) As one might expect in a South Asian Prakrit language, many Sinhala words are polysemantic and bear the varied impressions of Buddhist technical terms, Sanskrit poetics, and overlapping etymologies that together conspire to make precise translations difficult. However, rather than leaving important Sinhala texts to wallow in obscurity, I have striven to translate Parākrama's *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* in as accurate and consistent manner as possible. It is hoped that in time, as more Sinhala works are translated into Western languages, new conventions and a critical apparatus will emerge to guide those who will produce translations in the coming years.

The major interests guiding my translation of the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* reflect my desire to convey something of both the style and meaning of Parākrama's text. Although the ornate style of Sanskritized Sinhala prose from the thirteenth century can make for some awkward and lengthy English sentences, I have tried to retain occasional traces of the grandiloquence with which Parākrama crafted his historical narrative. Nevertheless, I have taken the liberty of rewording and rearranging some particularly complex sentences to render a translation that is more comprehensible and that adheres more to the conventions of idiomatic English. The balance between retaining style and preserving meaning may not always be achieved, but I feel that this tension is a productive one that ultimately contributes to a translation that manages to transmit a semblance of both the style and meaning of the original work.

Readers should also note that I have reorganized the text into clearly marked chapters of fairly consistent lengths. This decision to divide the text into chapters that highlight certain events marks a departure from more traditional forms of the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*. Early modern manuscript editions typically lack chapter headings altogether. Although there are some instances where the text clearly identifies certain sections in the narrative by stating that such-and-such an account is finished, this practice is inconsistently done and would result in chapters ranging wildly in length from just a few paragraphs to several dozen pages. As a compromise, I have included the concluding statements where they appear in the text, but I have not always used them to mark out chapters. My defense for this decision is that adding chapters is like adding punctuation. There are limited traces of either in traditional Sinhala palm-leaf manuscripts, but it is useful to add them to a translation so that modern English speakers may read and use this work more easily.

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THE HISTORY OF
THE BUDDHA'S RELIC SHRINE

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INTRODUCTION

The *Vaṃsa* Tradition in Theravāda Buddhism

In the latter part of the thirteenth century, a lay scholar named Parākrama Paṇḍita composed a text that is little known in the West, but that is recognizable and influential in the Theravāda Buddhist community of Sri Lanka. Parākrama's work is often referred to as the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* or simply the *Thūpavaṃsaya*, but the former title is preferred here so that this work may be easily distinguished from a Pāli work of a similar nature called the *Thūpavaṃsa*, which was composed around the twelfth or thirteenth century CE. As the name implies, this late medieval text was composed in the language of Sinhala, a language native only to the island of Sri Lanka but derived from the Indo-Aryan language family of India, albeit with numerous Tamil language borrowings. Broadly speaking, the subject of Parākrama's work is the Buddhist cult of relics as historically practiced in the Theravāda tradition of Sri Lanka. More specifically, however, the text deals with a revered, 120-foot *stūpa* or relic shrine called by various names—such as the Mahāthūpa (Great Relic Shrine), Ruvanvāli Sāya (Relic Shrine of Golden Sand), and Ratnamāli Dāgāba (Relic Shrine of Golden Garlands)—that is still standing in the northern Sri Lankan city of Anurādhapura. This relic shrine was built in approximately the second century BCE, but it remains an

important focal point for the sacred geography of the island and for contemporary expressions of Sri Lankan Buddhist devotional practice.

In order to understand the significance of this text and the relic shrine it describes, it would be helpful first to place Parākrama's work within broader literary developments in Theravāda Buddhism. The class of historical writings known as *vaṃsas*, that is to say chronicles or histories, comprises an important and sizable genre of Theravāda Buddhist literature. Scholars recognize that such texts were produced from an early date in the history of Buddhism, with the oldest extant example being the *Dīpavaṃsa* from around the fourth century CE. It is fair to say that Theravāda Buddhists have maintained a long-standing interest in these types of texts, as Buddhist histories concerning a variety of subjects have been produced and copied in fits and starts up to the present day in Theravāda communities. Western scholars have also shown considerable interest in these works. Many orientalist and colonial researchers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries eagerly translated and read Buddhist *vaṃsas*, and these texts were among the earliest subjects of modern Indological research. This was probably because Buddhist *vaṃsas* contained literary accounts of past kings and historical events connected with several archaeological remains that were found in India and Sri Lanka, which at the time was called Ceylon by the British.

Scholars preoccupied with reconstructing the ancient history of the Indian subcontinent have consistently affirmed the historical value of these texts. Heinz Bechert, a notable German Indologist, writes to this effect, "[I]t cannot be doubted that the only early historical literature within the realm of South Asian culture which ever has existed is that of Ceylon, and that historical writing in the strict sense of the word did start on the subcontinent only after the first Muslim invasions had disturbed the traditional establishment of Indian life and culture."¹ The privileged status ascribed to Buddhist *vaṃsas* as "historical" literature turned works like the *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa* into prized historical documents. In contrast to the Hindu *purāṇas*, the epic tales of Hindu gods and goddesses, the Theravāda *vaṃsas* were believed to contain narratives that were more factual and realistic since they tend to deal with historical figures and places. However, even the alleged historicity of the *vaṃsas* did not prevent scholars from cautioning others against accepting everything in their narratives as factual. In discussing the historical value of the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvaṃsa*, Wilhelm Geiger asserted the need for researchers to

read such works with a critical eye. In commenting on the tendencies of *vamsas* to embellish the historical record with fantastic and legendary accounts, he wrote, “Whoever writes the history of Ceylon will have to separate the real kernel of fact from this traditional material.”² Geiger and other historians who consulted Buddhist *vamsas* for historical information emphasized the need for scholars to employ the historical-critical method for evaluating one’s sources in order to reconstruct an accurate picture of the past as it really happened.

Although one cannot deny that Buddhist *vamsas* are useful for historical research into the South Asian past, it will become clear below that works like the *Sinhala Thūpavamsa* show us that Buddhist history writing reflects a variety of interests and purposes. The various concerns informing Buddhist historiography stem, in part, from the fact that such writings grew out of an ancient literary tradition. The Pāli commentaries, or Aṭṭhakathās, are said to have been based upon older literary sources written in an ancient form of the Sinhala language, as well as other Prakrit sources. Tradition holds that commentaries on the Tipiṭaka, or the Theravāda Buddhist canon said to comprise the Buddha’s word, were brought from India to Laṅkā by the monk Mahinda (Sinhala: Mihiṇḍu) around the third century BCE. The significant additions made to those texts in the island include accounts of the establishment of Buddhism locally. These commentaries are widely believed to have contained the narratives from which later *vamsa* texts were composed.

A number of these commentaries, which are no longer extant, are mentioned in the *Vamsaṭṭhappakāsanī*, the commentary written on the *Mahāvamsa* sometime around the eighth or ninth century CE. The works mentioned include the *Dīpavamsaṭṭhakathā* (The Commentary on the History of the Island), the *Cetiyaṅvamsaṭṭhakathā* (The Commentary on the History of the Relic Shrine), and the *Mahābodhivaṃsaṭṭhakathā* (The Commentary on the History of the Bodhi Tree), among several others. G. P. Malalasekera holds that these ancient sources were used in composing later Pāli historical works on the same subjects. He points out, for example, that the author of the *Vamsaṭṭhappakāsanī* advises readers to consult the *Cetiyaṅvamsaṭṭhakathā* for information regarding what was deposited in the Great Relic Shrine, or Mahāthūpa.³ Not coincidentally, the Pāli *Thūpavamsa* also provides a detailed description of the offerings deposited in the shrine. As such, he concludes that this ancient commentary was one of the sources used to compile the Pāli version of the history of the Great Relic Shrine.

Other textual antecedents for *vaṃsas* that were composed by Theravāda Buddhists include the extant Pāli Aṭṭhakathā texts written by Buddhaghosa and others during the fifth and sixth centuries CE. These works are traditionally held to have been based upon many of the same Sinhala Aṭṭhakathā composed around the beginning of the Common Era in the island of Laṅkā. But since these Pāli works have survived, we are able to trace some accounts of the Buddha's life story and the transfer of his relics from India to Laṅkā that appear in later *vaṃsas* back to these commentaries. For instance, the lengthy historical narrative that opens the *Samantapāsādikā*, the commentary on the Vinaya written by Buddhaghosa, contains an account of the lineage of monks who transmitted the Buddha's teaching as well as descriptions of events surrounding the establishment of Buddhism in Laṅkā. Parts of this narrative were reiterated by works like the *Mahāvaṃsa* and the Pāli *Thūpavaṃsa* afterward. Likewise, the *Jātaḥaṭṭhakathā* and the *Madhuraṭṭhaviḷāsinī*, the commentaries on the *Jātaḥa* and *Buddhavaṃsa*, respectively, include accounts related to the Buddha's career that occasionally appear in later *vaṃsas*.

The precise development of this early historiographical tradition in Theravāda, however, remains fairly speculative. We have reason to believe that later *vaṃsas* adopted material from earlier commentaries in Sinhala, Pāli, and Dravidian languages, but it is likely that these narratives were substantially revised as they were rewritten in later centuries. The *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa*, the earliest works included in the *vaṃsa* genre, probably reflect transitional works in this historiographical tradition, as they comprise works of verse that deal with allegedly historical events at the expense of commentary on the Tipiṭaka. Of these two works, the *Mahāvaṃsa* has been singled out for its accomplished composition and its rich content. Composed in the latter part of the fifth or early sixth century, the *Mahāvaṃsa* traces the lineage of kings in Laṅkā and records the good deeds they performed to promote the Buddha's Dispensation (*sāsana*). Significantly, the *Mahāvaṃsa* was extended several times in typical chronicle style by authors who added to its original chapters in the twelfth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Its open-ended style and lack of a single narrative plot is indicative of the "chronicle" style of historical writing, and it may be for this reason that scholars have typically referred to *vaṃsas* as "chronicles" despite the fact that the Pāli term is better translated as "lineage." It is noteworthy that although later *vaṃsas* frequently cite material from the *Mahāvaṃsa*, most of them depart

from the chronicle style of writing and are therefore better known as histories, inasmuch as they aspire toward narrativity and contain a well-marked beginning, middle, and end.⁴

Several centuries later, Buddhist histories written in the Pāli language about one or another relics of the Buddha were composed. These relic *vaṃsas*, which tended to be more narrowly circumscribed in terms of subjects than the expansive coverage found in the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvaṃsa*, represent a new stage in the writing of Buddhist history in Theravāda. Works like the tenth-century *Mahābodhivaṃsa*, the twelfth-century *Dāṭhavaṃsa*, and the *Thūpavaṃsa* focused their attention on the arrival of the Buddha's relics in Laṅkā. Thus, important sites and objects of veneration including the Bodhi Tree in Anurādhapura, the Tooth Relic, and the Mahāthūpa, in which a sizable portion of the Buddha's bodily relics were said to have been enshrined, become the primary subjects of these medieval texts. Although the authors of these works often consulted the *Mahāvaṃsa*, they in no way relied on it exclusively for adducing material to fill out their own narratives. Other sources of written and perhaps even oral traditions provided additional information.

Later during the same period of literary production in Sri Lanka, authors began to translate and compose new *vaṃsas* in the Sinhala language, making them more accessible to local audiences. The *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* is probably the first such work to be rendered into a literary form of the local Sinhala vernacular. This work, which most scholars date to the latter half of the thirteenth century, advanced the development of Sinhala literature and inaugurated a trend whereby other authors translated various Pāli *vaṃsas* into Sinhala. Thus, in the fourteenth century, Buddhist authors composed texts such as the *Sinhala Bōdhivaṃsa*, the *Daḷadā Sirita*, and the *Sinhala Dhātuvaṃsa*, among others, for the sake of relating the histories of the Bodhi Tree, the Tooth Relic, and Forehead Bone Relic to broader and more localized audiences in Laṅkā.⁵

It is important to note that several Sri Lankan *vaṃsas* and their historiographical conventions were also spread to peninsular Southeast Asia into countries known today as Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. There is ample evidence, for instance, that the *Mahāvaṃsa* was transmitted to Southeast Asian lands where Theravāda was adopted. Other Pāli histories such as the *Thūpavaṃsa* and *Dhātuvaṃsa* were also transmitted to these lands, so that elements of their narratives likewise found their way into local Buddhist histories. A good example of this

borrowing of historiographical content and form is seen in the *Jināḱālamāli*. This Buddhist historical narrative was composed in Thailand during the sixteenth century and borrows liberally from Sri Lankan works such as *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Mahāvaṃsa*, and *Thūpavaṃsa*.⁶ As such, this later Pāli text from Thailand represents an historiographical method whereby local historical events were added to older Sri Lankan accounts of kings and relics. Such literary activity resulted in a fairly coherent Theravāda tradition of history writing that forged conceptual and sometimes institutional links between Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Of course, like their Sri Lankan counterparts, Buddhists in Southeast Asia employed various strategies to make their histories reflect local concerns and interests, domesticating the historical narratives they received by emphasizing native heroes and a local topography marked by shrines and monasteries found closer to home.

Locating the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*

Parākrama Paṇḍita's *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* occupies an important position in the *vaṃsa* tradition of Theravāda Buddhism. This work represents an early effort to narrate the establishment of Buddhism in Laṅkā in a literary dialect of the vernacular. As such, this work maintains a somewhat ambiguous and complicated relationship with the Pāli *Thūpavaṃsa* composed by a monk called Vācissara Thera a few generations earlier. Although people once thought that Parākrama Paṇḍita's *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* predates Vācissara's Pāli version, since the latter makes reference to an older edition composed in the language of "Sihala," most scholars now conclude that Parākrama's version reflects a later expansion upon the extant Pāli text. N. A. Jayawickrama makes a persuasive argument on the basis of a combination of internal and external evidence in favor of dating Vācissara, the author of the Pāli *Thūpavaṃsa*, between roughly 1236 and 1270 CE, whereas Parākrama Paṇḍita's text probably appeared a generation or two later, in the latter half of the thirteenth century.⁷ The difficulty in dating both of these texts stems in part from the fact that we know relatively little about their respective authors. The colophon of the Pāli *Thūpavaṃsa* suggests that its author worked in the royal library during King Parākramabāhu II's reign and composed a few other Buddhist works in both Pāli and Sinhala. The original colophon in the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* does

little more than mention the name of Parākrama Paṇḍita along with the honorary title Sakala Vidyācakravartī, which means the Wheel-Turner of All Knowledge.

Nevertheless, the decision to assign a later date to the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* is justified in part by the fact that Parākrama's work contains a surplus of material that is not found in Vācissara's Pāli text, although it obviously borrowed the plot and much description from the Pāli version.⁸ As such, Parākrama's text fits the pattern wherein older Pāli narratives were translated into Sinhala between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, an era when the production of written works in the Sinhala language overshadowed the writing of Pāli texts in Sri Lanka. The *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* elaborates substantially upon certain sections of Vācissara's text, while sticking closely to other parts of its narrative. Both *Thūpavaṃsas*, however, employ prose narratives that expand upon details found in the terse poetic style of the *Mahāvaṃsa*. Vācissara added to the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s record of King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī's career and the construction of the Mahāthūpa in Anurādhapura. Many of his additions come from Pāli material lifted from the *Samantapāsādikā* and adapted from other sources such as the canonical Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. Parākrama's Sinhala version continued the trend of elaborating upon older narrative traditions, as it embellishes the historical accounts even further, illustrating a tendency among Sinhala works beginning from around the thirteenth century to imitate the ornate style and poetic sensibilities of Sanskrit works. At the same time, this move also made classical literature more accessible to local Sinhala-speaking audiences, transforming a technical Sanskrit style into an idiom that approached the vernacular language.

Although we are unable to date the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* more precisely than the latter part of the thirteenth century, we do know at least that Parākrama Paṇḍita was a layperson rather than a monk.⁹ This information comes chiefly from brief remarks in the late fourteenth-century *Niṣāya Saṅgrahaya* and the sixteenth-century *Rājaratnākara*. This first work recalls the history of the Buddhist Sangha in Sri Lanka. The author of this text also lists the names of famous lay scholars (*grhasthapāṇḍita janayō*) who produced various treatises on the Dharma.¹⁰ The eighth of the nine lay authors mentioned here is Parākrama Paṇḍita. The *Rājaratnākara* also includes a similar list of scholars (*paṇḍitavaru*) that follows a separate list of monastic authors and mentions Parākrama Paṇḍita by name.¹¹ This evidence, along with the title by which he identifies himself, suggests that he

was a learned scholar who might have had some connection to a royal court, although this cannot be definitively shown.

Unfortunately, we have yet to find other information that could help us in identifying Parākrama Paṇḍita further. We can at least dispel a theory once held, which claimed that our author was the same person as Vidyācakravartī, the author of *Butsaraṇa*. Wimal Balagalle has refuted this by pointing out the stylistic differences between *Butsaraṇa* and the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*, even though the author of the latter evidently borrowed some material from the former in composing its narrative.¹² For his part, Ananda Kulasuriya notes that the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* contains noticeably more infelicities of style when compared to Vidyācakravartī's *Butsaraṇa*, and that the words *saṅkala vidyācakravartī* refer to an honorary title rather than a personal name.¹³ Ven. Welivitiye Sorata also argues that differences in the language used in the two works point to two different authors.¹⁴ In sum, we may safely deduce that the "Vidyācakravartī" appearing before the name of Parākrama Paṇḍita in the colophon signifies a title he claimed, perhaps in imitation of the esteemed author of *Butsaraṇa*, which served as a kind of paradigmatic work for subsequent Sinhala prose works.

Other questionable theories about the identity of Parākrama Paṇḍita attempt to associate him with certain learned kings in medieval Sri Lanka. To complicate matters, there is a handful of kings from this period who were nicknamed *paṇḍita* due to their erudition. An earlier scholar wrote that one such king named Vijayabāhu II (r. 1186–1187), or Paṇḍita Vijayabāhu, was Parākrama Paṇḍita. However, this view has been discredited, since there is no evidence that this king had ever been called Parākrama and the language of the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* resembles thirteenth-century works more than twelfth-century Sinhala compositions.¹⁵ An argument could be made that King Parākramabāhu II (r. 1236–1270), also known as Paṇḍita Parākramabāhu I, was the author of the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*. This king was celebrated as a great patron of learning and authored works such as the Sinhala poem *Kaṣṣilūmiṇa* and the *Viśuddhimārga Sannaya*. Again, however, there is no evidence for identifying this king with Parākrama Paṇḍita. The king identifies himself in verse 770 of *Kaṣṣilūmiṇa* as "King Kalilkaḷ Sāvāṇi," which appears to have been his title.¹⁶ There is no comparable reference to a royal author in the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*, nor is there any mention of other works composed by the same author that could link him with Parākramabāhu II. It is

entirely possible, however, that Parākrama Paṇḍita was one of the many scholars supported directly or indirectly by that king's sponsorship of learning and letters during his reign. To identify our author with King Parākramabāhu IV (r. 1302–1326), or “Paṇḍita Parākramabāhu II,” is also likely mistaken, even though this king was a patron of works such as *Daḷadā Sirita* and may have initiated the translation of the Pāli *Jātaḥa* into Sinhala. Sinhala prose works in the early fourteenth century typically display a more marked Sanskrit influence and, unlike those other works mentioned above, there is no clear indication that this king either wrote or sponsored the writing of the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*.

If the person of Parākrama Paṇḍita remains largely a mystery, the historical context behind the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* is equally obscure due to the gaps in our historical knowledge of late medieval Sri Lanka more generally. The period of time between the fall of the Sinhala kingdom in Polonnaruwa in the early part of the thirteenth century and the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 is under-researched, with most scholars of Sri Lankan history choosing to focus either on the ancient glories of the northern capitals or the later influences of European colonialism. Consequently, our understanding of the period in which the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* was composed is incomplete. The fact that this period was characterized by shifting centers of political power and comparable weakness in Sinhala kingship also contributes to the relative lack of historical knowledge about this era.

Although one cannot be completely sure about the context behind the composition and transmission of Parākrama's text, the major challenges faced by medieval Sinhala polities offer some clues for understanding why the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* was produced. First, a conqueror named Māgha from the Kaliṅga country in India invaded Laṅkā with an army from the Malabar region around 1215. Having deposed the king at the time, Māgha ruled the northern region of the island up to his death in 1255. Buddhist literature records that during this time, Māgha and his soldiers terrorized the people of Laṅkā, destroying monasteries and books on the one hand, and repressing and stealing wealth from the island's inhabitants on the other hand.¹⁷ Even if these accounts of an aggressive non-Buddhist invader are somewhat exaggerated, it seems safe to conclude that there was a massive displacement of material and intellectual resources in Lankan Buddhist communities in this period. The disunity among Sinhala chieftains in the southern and western parts of the island

negated attempts to resist and expel the invaders in the north. This woeful state of affairs limited the amount of patronage that the Sinhala rulers could give to the Sangha. And even after Māgha's death, internal revolt and political intrigue prevented any single Sinhala leader from commanding the loyalties of the majority of the island's inhabitants, at least until the fifteenth century.

It is against this backdrop that the writing of the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* appears as an attempt to imagine and bring a new social formation into being. Rather than assuming that historical narratives are always written by the "winners" of history and function to legitimate the elite powers of the day, we may hypothesize that the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* was a text designed in part to rectify a problematic present situation and unite a broader population through a shared language and historical inheritance.¹⁸ It is possible that Parākrama's descriptions of powerful Buddhist kings and a populace united in their devotion to the Triple Gem of Buddhism were nostalgic recollections of a past that stood in stark contrast from the island's then-current state of affairs. We know, for instance, that by 1262 the Great Relic Shrine in Anurādhapura had fallen into disrepair, like many other ancient shrines in the old capital, and that efforts were being made to restore the shrine around the same time that the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* was composed.¹⁹

The descriptions of a Buddhist community united in its esteem for the Buddha's Dispensation and its proclivity to engage in large-scale communal acts of devotion under the leadership of pious kings evinces an imagined, rhetorical ideal that could be used to mobilize a larger collectivity of Sinhala-speaking Buddhists in the island. Although we cannot be sure of the motives that informed the production and dissemination of the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* in medieval Sri Lanka, it stands to reason that the writing of a glorious past in a literary dialect of the vernacular coincided with efforts to reorganize the Sinhala kingdom in the midst of an emergent culture, wherein new social and political identities were being formed in response to the historical exigencies of the time.²⁰

Nevertheless, it is well known that literary accounts of the building of the Great Relic Shrine in Sri Lanka were sometimes read aloud on ceremonial occasions. An inscription in the stone courtyard of the Great Relic Shrine from the second year of Queen Kalyāṇavatī's reign (1202–1208) describes a great gift of alms given by a noble minister at the site of the relic shrine. Among the detailed list of objects offered to the shrine,

we learn that the *Thūpavaṃśa* was read aloud during the ritual offerings that were made at that time.²¹ It is probable that the text read at this occasion was not Parākrama's version but an earlier Sinhala account of the traditional narrative describing the origins of the shrine. This particular text may have been instead the Sinhala work mentioned by Vācissara in the prologue to his Pāli *Thūpavaṃsa*.²² What is most significant about this inscription, however, is that it confirms that historical narratives akin to Parākrama's text had ritual associations and public lives as works in which sections or even a few folios could be recited aloud to groups and not only read by solitary individuals. The fact that many of the Buddhist histories written in the medieval period of Sri Lankan history are concerned with one or more relics of the Buddha—including the Tooth Relic, the Bodhi Tree Relic, the Forehead Bone Relic, the Footprint Relic, and the bodily relics enshrined in the Great Relic Shrine—supports this connection made between historical narrative and ritual practice in Theravāda Buddhism.

The Buddhist Cult of Relics

Parākrama Paṇḍita's *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* represents a text that deals primarily with the Buddhist cult of relics as traditionally practiced in Sri Lanka. Recent scholarship has shown that practices of enshrining and venerating objects associated with the historical Buddha are ancient and widespread throughout the Buddhist world. Whereas earlier generations of Buddhologists often ignored or derided relic veneration as superstitious and extraneous to the moral teachings of the Dharma, scholars now write with more interest and tolerance for Buddhist relics. Archeological research in India supports the view that the earliest material evidence of the Buddhist tradition is directly linked with the cult of relic veneration, a cult observed at least as far back as the time of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka (c. 270–230 BCE), if not before.²³ It therefore seems that Buddhist devotees began venerating a range of relics associated with the Buddha shortly after his death, which scholars believe occurred sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. Parākrama Paṇḍita's text is of value here, since it offers some explanation as to why and how relics of the Buddha were traditionally venerated.

Theravāda Buddhism has traditionally employed a threefold classification in discussing relics. This system divides relics into bodily relics or

the corporeal remains of the Buddha (and sometimes of enlightened monks called *arahants*), relics of use or objects believed to have been used by the Buddha when he was alive, and commemorative relics or images made of the Buddha after his death. This classification has led to circumstances in which numerous relics of the Buddha have been attested to throughout Asia. Although there is plenty of evidence for relics as objects of esteem and desire in countries other than Sri Lanka, the *vamsa* literature supplies ample textual referents to the importance of the relic cult in Sri Lankan Buddhism. For instance, the *Sinhala Thūpavamsa* highlights the deposit of an eighth of the Buddha's corporeal remains in what it calls the Relic Shrine of Golden Garlands (Sinhala: Ruvanmäli Dāgāba) in Anurādhapura. The history of the Bodhi Tree, considered a relic of use, is detailed in the Pāli and Sinhala versions of the *Mahābodhivamsa*. These and several other *vamsas* are significant for their representations of the events and veneration of particular relics of the Buddha said to have been obtained by ancient kings and enshrined in the island.

While the Buddhist cult of relics in Sri Lanka has been exceptionally well described and highlighted in several *vamsas*, relic veneration there shares several similarities with the worship of relics in other lands. Relics of the Buddha are frequently believed to possess miraculous powers and attributes, and may be venerated for both worldly and otherworldly ends. In Japan, for instance, relics came to be associated early on with apotropaic powers for protecting the imperial family and the state.²⁴ Generally speaking, monarchs in largely Buddhist lands could reinforce their image as devout rulers by public displays of *stūpa* building and ceremonies honoring relics in their possession, which served to legitimate their power and authority in society. Indeed, legendary accounts of King Aśoka's construction of 84,000 relic shrines throughout his reign testify to both his piety and his attempt to make visible his authority throughout the empire.

At the same time, relic veneration in Buddhism is intimately linked with acts of merit (*puṇyākarma*), whereby people who venerate objects associated with the historical Buddha may expect to earn some good fortune in the future for a sincere display of devotion in the present. According to the logic of Theravāda, even though the historical Buddha passed away from this world into an unconditioned, transmundane state called *parinirvāṇa*, which is held to be totally beyond the realm of repeated rebirth known as *samsāra* in Indic thought, a person may give devotional

offerings (*pūjā*) of items such as flowers and incense or even make simple gestures of respect to relics and receive something beneficial in return. The benefits thought to come from venerating relics are not the result of any intervention on the part of the Buddha, but rather are taken to be the results of the well-intentioned, well-performed act itself through the impersonal karmic workings of cause and effect. In other words, the Buddhist theory of *ḥarma* (Pāli: *ḥamma*) affirms that certain wholesome actions will inevitably produce good effects sometime in the future. The unripened consequences of good *ḥarma* are also known as “merit,” which constitutes one of the desired ends to which many Buddhist practitioners aspire when venerating relics.

As a Buddhist goal, merit is exceedingly popular throughout all Buddhist communities in Asia. Deliberate acts of moral righteousness and devotion are routinely performed by people of all backgrounds in the expectation that they will earn merit and benefit from their actions in their present lifetime or a future rebirth. From the Theravāda perspective, merit gained from venerating relics or any other such act can be conducive to good health and good fortune in the present, and it may even help to effect a good rebirth in the future. However, strictly speaking, it cannot help one to achieve nirvana—the total extinction of suffering and rebirth—as only selfless, morally wholesome conduct such as that which is found in higher states of meditation is conducive to the ultimate transcendence of desire and ignorance to a blissful, indescribable state. Nevertheless, meritorious acts may still set the stage for spiritual progress at a later time, as such acts are sometimes held to purify a person’s mind and reinforce morality, both of which are accomplishments that serve to bring people closer to nirvana.

Parākrama’s *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* is a work that extols acts of merit performed at relic shrines. As such, its narrative encourages relic veneration, while tending to ignore the practice of meditation and austere living associated with forest monks in the tradition. However, it would be misleading to conclude that this work was therefore a text directed only to the laity. Gregory Schopen has convincingly shown that monastic participation in the relic cult appears in the earliest eras. He finds evidence in ancient inscriptions from the earliest *stūpas* that monks actively participated in the construction and worship of relic shrines.²⁵ The view affirming monastic involvement in relic veneration is substantiated further in the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*’s accounts of monks who fashioned and

donated bricks to build the Great Relic Shrine. Parākrama's text asserts that monks have many appropriate roles to play in the construction and veneration of relic shrines. As such, it intervenes in medieval debates over the proper duties of monks and suggests that even "forest-dwelling" monks who spend the greater part of their time in meditation should also actively support and participate in the relic cult.

According to the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa*, there are various reasons for Buddhist practitioners to venerate relics. Since such acts are defined as meritorious, it is in a person's own interest to make offerings with a focused and composed mind. At many points the text explicitly spells out the benefits of venerating relics of the Buddha, making it nearly impossible for a reader or listener of the text to overlook the merit gained from doing so. The text also reinforces scholarly arguments which hold that relics function to make a Buddha, who is absent from the world, materially present for devotees who wish to honor him and experience his power.²⁶ Although it remains to be seen whether the Buddha's passing away in nirvana actually constitutes a "problem" for Buddhists that is overcome through the presence of his relics, as some have claimed, the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* ascribes to relics miraculous powers to take the form of the Buddha and, equates relics to the living Buddha in other ways. In one account, for instance, the monk Mihiṇḍu requests a king to obtain relics in order to satisfy his wish to "see" the Buddha. Another reason for venerating relics in the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* is to fulfill one's obligations to the historical Buddha. Devotees are obliged to act out of indebtedness to the Buddha for his unlimited giving and self-sacrifice on behalf of all sentient beings.²⁷ Parākrama's text highlights this moral obligation to show gratitude as a beneficiary of the Buddha's past acts and turns relic veneration into an ethical practice, an idea that is discussed in more detail below.

In sum, the *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* provides us with important insights into the multivalent significance of the Buddhist relic cult. We learn that relics were popular focal points for Buddhist devotion, giving rise to sometimes elaborate ritual activity performed in honor of the Buddha. We also see how kings such as Aśoka and Duṭṭugāmuṇu employed relics to display their power and piety. The text also portrays Buddhist relics as instruments for spreading the Buddhist religion to new lands and defining local landscapes with centers of devotional activity and sacred power. The *Sinhala Thūpavaṃsa* depicts in vivid detail how relics are used, in John S. Strong's words, to express and extend the "life-and-death story" of the Buddha, connecting