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Before 1165 and All That

Scholar-monks composed new Pali texts in the reform era as a creative response to perceived religious decline and it was the very upending of traditional order in the preceding two centuries that provided these monks not only with the motivation but also the resources to bring about a resurgence of their tradition. Early attempts to explain this era of literary efflorescence focused narrowly only on the causal role of political stability and patronage during the events of the reforms themselves. Declaring this period to be Sri Lanka’s ‘Augustan age’, for instance, G.P. Malalasekera in his influential *The Pāli Literature of Ceylon* emphasized Parākramabāhu I’s role (1157–86) in determining the cultural character of the era. He wrote that, ‘with this perfect internal tranquillity, undisturbed by oppression, encouraged in their activities by the great and devout interest taken by the head of the State himself, and working amidst congenial and beautiful surroundings, there arose during this period a band of scholars, who made this epoch the Augustan age of Ceylon literature’.

There is no doubt that the reforms of Parākramabāhu I were a crucial moment in the monastic community’s cultural resurgence and we will explore the nature of these reforms in the following chapter. To understand more fully the relationship between culture and society during the reform era, however, it is worth expanding the scope of our analysis beyond the momentary stability of the events themselves to examine how such reforms could not have occurred without the social and political turmoil that surrounded them. What, in particular, had changed on the island to allow the Saṅgha to finally achieve unity for the first time in well over 1,000 years? It is impossible to single out any one reason for this development, for, as Buddhaghosa wisely once wrote about causality, ‘conditions … give rise to phenomena … only when they are not independent of each other or deficient with respect to each other’.

That said, three interrelated changes in the tenth and eleventh centuries in particular stand out as important, namely the invasions of the South Indian Cōḷa kings Rājarāja (985–1012) and Rājendra I (1012–44), the fragmentation
of the royal family as a result of its pursuit of a new, exogamous marriage strategy alongside growing monastic involvement in dynastic politics, and lastly changing attitudes to Sanskrit literature as a model for composing Pali and Sinhala works. Each of these factors, which roughly correspond to changes in the island’s economic, social and intellectual resources, played an important role in both disrupting the old cultural order and in setting the stage for the emergence of new forms of religious life.

2.1. The Cōḷas, Monastic Property and the Rise of the Forest Monks

The millennium that preceded the reform era in Sri Lanka was characterized by contained conflict. It was marked by constant upheaval caused by endless dynastic and succession disputes that importantly, however, did not present an existential threat to the general patterns of social and political life. The dynastic struggles of the first millennium were often local and centred on a rivalry between two competing branches of the royal family, the Lambakaṇṇa, who ruled in Anurādhapura until 428 CE and then again after 614 CE, and the Moriya, who ruled with only a slight interruption between 455 and 614 CE. One distinct feature of the monarchy in Sri Lanka in particular in the second Lambakaṇṇa dynasty after 614 CE was the general preference for an endogamous marriage strategy, that is, for marrying in the family. Thomas Trautmann has observed that:

to a much greater extent than elsewhere in South Asia, the Ceylonese throne may be described as the joint property of an extended family, and the monarch as its trustee. The family itself was large, but its boundaries were fairly well defined. It did not need to favor the other families occupying the inferior offices of state by marrying their daughters, since its own members filled those offices, supplied brides and gave support; nor did it have to choose brides from a wide array of neighboring states which, as an island, Ceylon lacks. On the whole the attempt to keep the property in the family was remarkably successful, and the Ceylonese monarchy had a degree of continuity not to be found in the Sub-continent.

The history of the Saṅgha during the same period displays a similar tension between constant shifts in power and a general trend towards institutional continuity. From early on in its history the Saṅgha in Sri Lanka too was riven with rivalries and was ultimately split into three main fraternities or nikāyas,
the Mahāvihāra, Abhayagirivihāra and Jetavanavihāra, for most of the Middle Ages. The Abhayagiri split from the Mahāvihāra during the reign of king Vaṭṭagāmaṇi Abhaya (89–77 BCE) and a further schism in the Mahāvihāra occurred in the reign of Mahāsena (274–301) from which the Jetavana arose. Throughout the first millennium these three fraternities competed for the patronage of the royal family, who variously favoured one fraternity over the other two. The Saṅgha as a whole was successful in maintaining its wealth and property and, for much of the first millennium, monarchs respected the continued rights of a monastery over previously donated lands. R.A.L.H. Gunawardana observed, in this regard, that ‘apart from instances of plunder of the wealth accumulated in monasteries by kings at war, no attempt to confiscate the land granted to monasteries is evident until the end of the period of the Anurādhapura kingdom’.

At the end of the first millennium all of this changed. Sri Lanka became intimately embroiled in a struggle with the three great powers of South India, the Pāṇḍyas, Pallavas and Cōḷa. It began when Sena II (853–887) invaded Pāṇḍya country in revenge for the Pāṇḍya sacking of Anurādhapura in around 840, killing the monarch and forming a new alliance with the king’s son who he placed on the throne. Then came the fall of the Pallavas when in 897 a Cōḷa feudatory, crowned as Āditya I (871–907), defeated and killed his Pallava overlord Aparājita (879–97) in battle and annexed the Pallava heartland of Toṅḍaimaṇḍalam.

The rapid end to Pallava rule led to a hasty reorganization of the political status quo that had existed in the orbit of the old power. The Laṅkan monarchy, in particular, pursued a dangerous strategy of maintaining alliances with the Cōḷa’s neighbouring enemies. The alliance with the Pāṇḍyas led Kassapa V (914–23) to send an army in support of Rājasiṃha II (900–20) against the Cōḷas and to give the latter’s son asylum in Sri Lanka after the defeat of their combined forces. The Cōḷa king Parāntaka (907–55) was intent on invading Sri Lanka in order to capture the Pāṇḍya regalia, briefly succeeding in the reign of Udaya IV (946–54), who is remembered by monastic historians as a lazy drunk. It was Parāntaka’s later successors, Rājarāja and his son Rājendra, however, who were able to firmly establish Cōḷa rule on the island. The Cōḷas chose Polonnaruva in the east as their principal base instead of the old capital of Anurādhapura and maintained settlements around Polonnaruva and various port towns that acted as staging posts for incursions into the south of the island.

It has been suggested that the Cōḷa invasions brought about cultural change due to imperialism or even some ethno-religious rivalry. There is little evidence, however, that the Cōḷas harboured much cultural ambition in their rule. In terms of literary influence, the Cōḷa rulers only left a few
inscriptions often connected with the patronage of Śaiva temples. It was rather the wider South Indian elite – courtiers, warlords, artisans and merchant guilds – and also later kings who were responsible for the majority of Tamil inscriptions produced on the island, most of which can be dated to long after Cōḷa rule had ended. An inscription dating to the reign of Vijayabāhu I (1055–1110), for instance, entrusting the protection of the tooth relic of the Buddha to the Vēlaikkāra mercenary company, begins with a Sanskrit verse and eulogizes Vijayabāhu in literary Tamil. Most of the religious patronage connected with the Cōḷas came from the new mercantile communities who supported the construction of Śaiva temples and also some Buddhist monasteries around Poḷonnaruva, port towns and other commercial centres. If this religious patronage did result in the production of Tamil literature, no work prior to the fifteenth century has survived.

Monastic histories viewed the Cōḷa invasions as primarily an economic loss. The late-medieval Cūḷavaṃsa (‘Little history’) states that ‘by violently breaking open the relic chambers of all three fraternities in the undivided land of Laṅkā with their numerous, valuable golden images and thus taking the vitality (oja) out of all the monasteries here and there, demons seized the heart (sāra) of Laṅkā’. The emphasis on the widespread looting and destruction of monasteries and relic sites found in such monastic accounts was possibly more of a literary embellishment than reality. Keir Strickland in a recent archaeological study, for instance, has concluded that there is very little evidence at Anurādhapura for any of the mass devastation of the Sacred City mentioned in monastic histories.

Strickland confirms, though, that the civilization around the old sacred capital of Anurādhapura did indeed collapse by the eleventh century. It seems that more damaging than the sacking of monasteries was that the Cōḷas re-centred their administration and economic infrastructure around Poḷonnaruva, redirecting long-distance trade routes away from the west to the northeast. According to Strickland, ‘we see the reorganisation of trade routes away from Anurādhapura, the disappearance from Anurādhapura of craft specialists, of manufacturing, of the elite, of monumental construction, effectively the loss of all the characteristics of an urbanised complex society, all the characteristics of a centralised economy’. The economic shock was compounded by the fact that Vijayabāhu I, having overthrown the Cōḷas in 1070, maintained Poḷonnaruva as his administrative base.

Cōḷa rule was also likely more harmful to monastic interests than any prior incursion on the island due to the fact that in the preceding centuries the monastic community had transformed into a powerful landowner. From around the late eighth century inscriptions record a large number of royal donations to the Saṅgha of land and immunities, in particular exemption from
taxation. Recent analysis of Christopher Davis suggests a steady rise in such donations, peaking in the ninth and tenth centuries. The Saṅgha benefited from the alienation of land by taxing its inhabitants, using their labour, or extracting their surplus produce. As R.A.L.H. Gunawardana notes:

by about the ninth century, monasteries had come to own, apart from movable possessions, a vast extent of property in estates, irrigation works and even salterns, some of them situated at considerable distance from the owning institution.

The Saṅgha maintained its rights through a variety of methods. In the cases where the original donor continued to manage the estate, the donor oversaw the continued transference of appropriate income from the estate to the Saṅgha. In instances where the Saṅgha had full proprietary rights over the land, it employed coercive strategies to maintain control such as restricting the water supply to unco-operative tenant farmers or confiscating their tools, which the monastery owned. While it is unclear if the Cōḷas forcibly deprived the Saṅgha of its land rights, the economic shift east would have drastically reduced its income centred on Anurādhapura and its hinterland.

It is in the context of this unprecedented economic change that we can perhaps understand the curious rise to prominence of a group of forest monks based in Diṁbulāgala, a hilltop monastery situated roughly twenty kilometres from Poḷonnaruva. Most significantly, Parākramabāhu I selected these monks, led by a certain Kassapa, to oversee the reform and unification of the Saṅgha in 1165. The highest ranks of the Saṅgha after the reforms continued to be dominated by monks from this forest fraternity. It was a certain Medhaṅkara, another forest monk from Diṁbulāgala, who led the monastic reforms of Parākramabāhu II in 1266. Explanations of the meteoric rise of what prior to the Cōḷa invasions was a peripheral monastic outpost have tended to rely on Weberian theories about the revolutionary potential of charismatic leaders. It was the ‘ascetic charisma’ of forest fraternities, R.A.L.H. Gunawardana has argued, that enabled them to secure popularity in the eyes of the laity. There is clearly some truth to this in that the forest monks of the reform era do play up their ascetic credentials in their claims for authority. We can speculate that what actually brought these forest monks into power in the first place, however, was their fortuitous economic position in Poḷonnaruva’s hinterland.

We learn from an inscription of Sundārī or Sundaramahādevī, the Kāliṅga dowager-queen of Vikramabāhu I (1111–32), for instance, that more than five hundred monks were living at Diṁbulāgala prior to the reforms, indicating that the hilltop monastery had thrived after the Cōḷa invasions. The monastery had likely benefited from the new trade routes and was now
better connected with the northeast Indian mainland than the old centres in the west of the island. H.C.P. Bell noted that even in 1917 Dimbulāgala was a ‘beacon-hill’, ‘by which mariners skirting the Eastern coast of Ceylon are greatly assured of their position’. While historians have debated the extent to which the reforms of 1165 actually amounted to a victory of the Mahāvihāra over the Jetavana and Abhayagiri, few have questioned how much continuity there was between the post-Cōḻa Mahāvihāra and what had been before. There is an argument to be made that the reformed monastic community after 1165 was the product of a unique strand of Mahāvihāran thought and practice found at this hilltop site.

2.2. Stranger Queens, Civil War and Buddhist Politics

When the Cōḻas overthrew the Pallavas in 897, there was no guarantee that they would become the hegemonic power in the region that they did. In fact, in the century before their conquest of Sri Lanka beginning in 993, there were occasions when the Lankan court asserted its independence from the Cōḻas and fended off a number of attempts to bring the island under their suzerainty. And yet, paradoxically, the court’s very attempt to assert its independence from its neighbours contributed to its rapid fragmentation from the eleventh century onwards. This was in part because rulers, for the first time, intensified marriage alliances with kingdoms rivalling the Cōḻas, creating rival factions within the royal family.

Nearly all the foreign queens who married into the Laṅkan royal family from the tenth century onwards were from the kingdom of Kaliṅga, situated on India’s eastern coast just south of Bengal in what is now Orissa, though later marriages with the South Indian Pāṇḍyas and other northern lineages further complicate the picture. We find frequent mention of Kaliṅga royalty present in the Laṅkan court from the reign of Kassapa IV (898–914) onwards. Mahinda IV (956–72) was the first to marry a Kaliṅga princess, who may have been mother of his son Mahinda V (982–1029). The author of the Cūḷavaṃsa thought the event unusual enough to write that ‘even though there existed a lineage of kṣatriyas in Laṅkā, the ruler of men had fetched a princess born in the lineage of the Wheel-Turning king of Kaliṅga and made her his principal queen’. Her brother also had a daughter Lokitā who then became the wife of Kassapa VI (known as ‘Vikramabāhu’, 1029–40).

Vijayabāhu I strengthened ties with the Kaliṅgas and took a Kaliṅga princess, Tilokasundarī, as his queen or mahesī to ensure ‘the longevity of his own lineage’, according to the Cūḷavamsa. He had three of his queen’s kinsmen, Madhukaṇṇava, Bhīmarāja and Balakkāra, brought from Sihapura in
Kaliṅga country and established at his court. Vijayabāhu and Tilokasundarī had a son, Vikramabāhu I, and, for the purpose of continuing their line, arranged his marriage to a Kāliṅga princess, Sundarī or Sundaramahādevī, the younger sister of these three Kāliṅga princes.

It was in the reign of Vijayabāhu I that the monarchy’s ties to India became more complex. During Cōḻa rule there appears to have been a number of foreign dignitaries in the kingdom of Rohaṇa in the South of Sri Lanka, most notably a certain Jagatipāla, who is described in the Cūḷavamsa as a prince of the solar dynasty hailing from ‘Ayojjhā’ (Sk. Ayodhyā) in northern India. In a power struggle over control of the South, the Cōḻas killed Jagatipāla and captured his queen and daughter, Līlāvatī. In the reign of Vijayabāhu I both queen and daughter escaped to Sri Lanka and the monarch took Līlāvatī as one of his queens. Vijayabāhu further sent his sister, Mittā, to marry a Pāṇḍya prince, whose offspring identified as Pāṇḍyas and as scions of the lunar dynasty, opposing the Kāliṅga side of the royal family.

After the death of Vijayabāhu I, rightful succession was meant to pass to his brother Jayabāhu I (1110–11), followed by Vijayabāhu’s son Vikramabāhu I. Vikramabāhu’s right to the throne, however, was soon challenged by Mittā’s three sons, Vīrabāhu (also known as Māṇābharaṇa), Kittisirimegha and Sirivallabha, who plotted with Jayabāhu to install Vīrabāhu instead as his successor. This led to a bloody civil war between the two factions resulting in Vikramabāhu I nominally ascending the throne at Poḷonnaruva and the three brothers along with the elderly Jayabāhu ruling regions outside of the capital. Matters were not helped by the fact that Vikramabāhu while fighting his half-brothers also had to contend with an invasion of the island by a north Indian prince, Vīradeva, who temporarily captured Poḷonnaruva before being finally slain on a muddy highway somewhere near the capital. The Saṅgha it seems opposed Vikramabāhu’s usurpation of Jayabāhu’s throne and never officially consecrated him as king. The monastic community suffered greatly during this period of war and monastic historians remember the warring brothers with contempt, singling out Vikramabāhu in particular for stealing monastic property in order to support his military exploits:

King Vikramabāhu seized the maintenance villages belonging to the Buddha and so forth and gave them to his attendants. In Poḷonnaruva he gave over many monasteries distinguished with relics for foreign soldiers to live in. Gems, pearls and the like that had been given by the faithful as offerings to the alms-bowl relic and precious tooth relic; the sandalwood, the afores, the camphor, and the many images of gold and the like too; those he plundered and forcefully took away as he pleased.
This civil war encouraged further social and political fragmentation. The people of the different regions stopped paying dues (kara) to these different kings and, according to the Cūḷavamsa, ‘ignoring the ruler, they resorted to banditry, and lived impudently (lit. ‘raised up’, i.e. independently) each in their own territory’.47

This newly fragmented social and political order continued into the reign of Vikramabāhu’s son and nominal successor, Gajabāhu II (1132–53). Gajabāhu never sat securely on the throne and his reign was constantly threatened by familiar rival factions. His biggest threat was a young Parākramabāhu, ruler of the province of Māyāraṭṭha. Parākramabāhu was of mixed Kāliṅga and Pāṇḍya ancestry since his mother, Ratanāvalī, was the daughter of Vijayabāhu and the Kāliṅga Tilokasundarī, and his father was Virabāhu, the eldest son of Mittā, who had unsuccessfully attempted to install himself as Jayabāhu I’s successor. Another contender for the throne was Mānābharana, ruler of Rohaṇa in the South. He too had a heritage reflective of the court’s rival factions since he was the son of Sirivallabha, the youngest of Mittā’s three sons, and Sugalā, who was the great-granddaughter of the North Indian prince Jagatipāla, through Vijayabāhu’s marriage to Līlāvatī.

Eyeing the throne, Parākramabāhu steadily amassed a large army and finally attacked Gajabāhu in Poḷonnaruva. According to the Cūḷavamsa, he justified his challenge to the Kāliṅga king on religious grounds since Gajabāhu ‘had fetched princes holding evil beliefs from abroad and had thus filled Rājaraṭṭha with enemies (lit. thorns)’.48 It was the monastic community, however, who stepped in and brokered a peace deal between Gajabāhu and Parākramabāhu in which the latter was effectively recognized as Gajabāhu’s legitimate successor.49 But upon Gajabāhu’s death in 1153 his ministers reneged on the treaty and brought to the throne Parākramabāhu’s cousin, Mānābharana, ruler of Rohaṇa. Parākramabāhu’s forces attacked Mānābharana and forced him to flee south for refuge, where he died. His mother Sugalā hid the Buddha’s tooth and bowl relics in Rohaṇa and, in pursuit, Parākramabāhu violently subdued the province and brought both Sugalā and the relics back to Poḷonnaruva.50 While Parākramabāhu’s twenty-nine-year reign ushered in relative peace on the island, old enmities between royal factions re-emerged upon his death and sixteen rulers, allied variously to Kāliṅga and Pāṇḍya factions, took the throne in the fifty years before the reign of Parākramabāhu II (1236–70).

The increasingly cosmopolitan nature of the royal court changed political discourse on the island too. Kassapa IV in 904 CE claimed for the first time in a royal inscription that he as monarch descended from the Indian Okkāka or Ikṣvāku (Sk.) lineage of kings. Rulers from Kassapa IV onwards frequently
assert their supremacy within this transregional royal lineage at the beginning of their inscriptions in royal eulogies or praśastiṣ often modelled on continental Sanskrit forms.\textsuperscript{51} The Sinhala of the royal court, then, took on many of the characteristics of what Sheldon Pollock has called a ‘cosmopolitan vernacular’, localizing for the court’s audience on the island transregional, Sanskritic conceptions of kingship and power.\textsuperscript{52} Mahinda IV, for instance, regularly claimed in his inscriptions to be ‘descended from the royal line of King Okkāka, who abounds in a multitude of illustrious, boundless and transcendental virtues’ and that he ‘had made other Kṣatriya families of the entire Jambudvīpa (India) his vassals’.\textsuperscript{53}

At the same time we also begin to see in the monastic writings of the era detailed discussions about the connection between the Okkāka royal line and the Buddha’s own genealogy.\textsuperscript{54} A contemporary Pali commentary on the Mahāvaṃsa ‘Great history’ that was perhaps in dialogue with Mahinda IV’s political project, for instance, claimed that the Śākya branch of the Okkāka lineage, which it argues was the superior branch of the solar dynasty, solely survived in Sri Lanka since the royal family on the island descended from Paṇḍukābhaya, the mythic king of Lankā, who was a grandson of Amitodana, the Buddha’s paternal uncle, and whose Kāliṅga wife was also a grandchild of Amitodana.\textsuperscript{55} (In introducing within this narrative a Kāliṅga queen, who is pointedly also descended from the Buddha, it is tempting to see here as well an attempt to accommodate Mahinda IV’s unusual Kāliṅga marriage within expectations about the religious identity of the island’s rulers.)

There are occasions in the tenth century where we find mirrored in the inscriptions of the monarchs of the era this explicitly Buddhist form of political identity, where kings connect their Okkāka genealogy to the Śākya clan of the Buddha. The few inscriptions that do echo monastic expectations of royal identity are always addressed to monastic elites.\textsuperscript{56} We can perhaps explain the explicit religious inflection occasionally given to these rulers’ Okkāka ancestry as a sign of more local political constraints where kings chose to mirror monastic expectations of kingship, at least partly, we can imagine, in deference to the very real power of the monasteries they patronized. This is evident in the very first inscription to evoke the Śākya clan in a praśasti, namely, Kassapa V’s regulatory inscription at the Abhayagirivihāra in Anurādhapura in 920, where he responds to an incident in which his officials had given away oxen from a service village belonging to the monastery. Kassapa V reminds the monks of his benevolence to them, formally reconfirms the villages owned by the monastery and establishes a number of other freedoms and protections, while also – perhaps in return for siding with the monastery – assigning new rules for monastic behaviour and practice.\textsuperscript{57}
In periods of royal power and relative stability, as we find in the early tenth century, we can easily overlook the political necessity of such diplomacy. It is only when the island descended into civil war, with some rulers attempting to deprive monasteries of their land, that we begin to see the actual contingency underlying relations between the court and monastic community. In such a fragmented social and political environment, ignoring monastic power could have disastrous consequences, as the fate of one of Vijayabahu’s foreign queens attests. According to the Cūḷavaṃsa, either Tilokasundarī or Līlāvatī made the error of seizing property belonging to the monastic community and, in a theatrical show of deference, the king ‘had her led by the neck and evicted from the city’.

And yet it is also in the inscriptions of the foreign queens of the era that we find some of the most creative religious politics ever produced on the island. Perhaps the greatest politician of the age, at least in terms of monastic relations, was the Kāliṅga queen Sundarī, wife of Vikramabahu I. Her diplomatic interventions were particularly crucial since, as mentioned, her husband was largely despised by the Saṅgha. In one unprecedentedly deferential inscription, Sundarī actually begins her record with a short praśasti in Pali eulogizing a powerful monk, Ānanda, who she describes as a ‘banner raised aloft in the land of Laṅkā’. Never before had Pali been used as a language of inscriptional encomium and nor had a member of the royal family treated the monastic community as a political overlord by placing a praise poem to a monk before the traditional eulogy to the monarch.

Another impressive political statement is her inscription at Diṁbulāgala, discussed above, where Sundarī records the construction of a road between two caves at the hilltop monastery. In a masterful political move, she donated to the ‘cave of the sun’ (hiru-maha-leṇa) – the name of which evokes her ‘solar’ royal lineage – ‘statues, stūpas and bodhi trees’ and renamed it ‘Kāliṅga’ cave (kāliṅgu-leṇa) after her own clan. Sundarī further describes herself in the inscription’s opening eulogy ‘as descended from the Solar dynasty which belongs to the lineage of Suddhodana, the Buddha’s father, that has sprung from the royal race of Okkāka’. She does not mention king Paṇḍukābhaya, grandson of the Buddha’s paternal uncle, perhaps because, as Kāliṅga-born, she was technically not part of this branch of the Śākyas, and instead, echoing the commentary on the Mahāvaṃsa, connects her Kāliṅga lineage directly with Suddhodana himself. She further uniquely dates the inscription (c. 1136) not to the reign of her deceased, unpopular husband, but from the date of the coronation of king Jayabahu I who, as mentioned, was the last king before the civil war consecrated by the monastic community.

Her skilful Buddhist politics, without precedent in earlier inscriptions, were likely intended to win favour for her son Gajabahu and it seems to have
helped when, faced with imminent death at the hands of Parākramabāhu’s forces, the Saṅgha intervened on Gajabāhu’s behalf and brokered a peace deal between him and Parākramabāhu, ultimately saving the king’s life. The war and in-fighting among the long line of pretenders to the throne prior to the reign of Parākramabāhu I, then, had turned the Saṅgha into an important political entity in its own right, introducing as a result more localized, religious forms of political discourse.

2.3. The Complex Prehistory of Reform-era Sanskrit

The adoption of Sanskrit literary models in the royal inscriptions of the tenth century was part of a growing engagement with Sanskrit court culture – centred on poetry or kāvya and its ancillary philological disciplines such as grammar and poetics – both within the Lanka court and the Mahāvihāra prior to the reforms. Kassapa V, for instance, likely composed the first treatise on Sinhala poetics, based on Sanskrit models, and a number of scholar-monks composed Sanskrit grammatical works too. Both the court and monastery relied upon similar intellectual resources, notably the Sanskrit works of Buddhist monks with ties to northeast India.

The most influential scholar of the pre-reform era was undoubtedly Ratnamati or Ratnaśrījñāna. Ratnamati was one of a number of monks from Sri Lanka who travelled in this period between the island and northeast India, especially to the sacred site of Bodh Gayā. In a recent pioneering study Dragomir Dimitrov has plausibly argued that this scholar-monk composed, among other works, a Sanskrit commentary on Candragomin’s Cāndravyākaraṇa (‘Grammar of Candragomin’), a work of grammatical philosophy, the Śabdārthacintā (‘Reflections on words and their meanings’), as well as a Sanskrit commentary on Daṇḍin’s Kāvyādarśa (‘Mirror of literature’, c. eighth century). It was possibly under this scholar’s influence that Kassapa V composed his work on Sinhala poetics, the Siyabaslakara (‘Literary ornaments for our own language’), with Ratnamati writing its Sinhala commentary (sannaya) soon after. As we will see in later chapters, Ratnamati’s Sanskrit works on poetics and grammar served as models for new forms of Pali philology in the reform era too.

It is difficult to say with any certainty why a scholar-monk such as Ratnamati suddenly became an important authority for both the royal court and the Mahāvihāra from the tenth century onwards. For there had long been scholars from Sri Lanka present in northeast India. There is a tradition in a seventeenth-century Tibetan history, for instance, that in the reign of king Dhammapāla (775–812) a contingent of Sinhalese monks at Bodh Gayā,
likely allied to the Mahāvihāra, joined with certain monks from Sindh in actively opposing Tantric practices there. Some of the monks who travelled must have become highly educated. We learn from the same history too that a scholar-monk from Sri Lanka, Jayabhadra, even rose to the position of abbot at Vikramaśīla in the middle third of the ninth century. Ratnamati’s peculiar rise to prominence may be explained, as Dragomir Dimitrov has argued, by the fact that he was simply a rare and brilliant individual. Or perhaps also his influence was a sign of a shift in the Mahāvihāra’s own attitude to Sanskrit.

It seems that Mahāvihāran monks in Sri Lanka began to engage with courtly forms of Sanskrit prior to the reforms. Kassapa, the leading hierarch at Diṁbulāgala, had the library and resources there to write a grammatical handbook for the Sanskrit Cāndravyākarana, probably at some point before the reforms of 1165 took place. Such scholarship, while not identifiably religious, cannot easily be explained as service to the royal court either, since there is no evidence it was undertaken for any king or minister. We can speculate that perhaps scholar-monks had started to produce such works for their own sake, adopting forms of culture suitably expressive of their status in the political landscape. That the Sanskrit learning usually associated with court culture was now a sign of status and prestige for the reform-era Mahāvihāra is reflected in the changing scholarly ideal of the period. In one of his works, for instance, a reform leader, Sāriputta, is compared favourably with great Sanskrit grammarians and poets, such as, Pāṇini and Kālidāsa.

The history of reform-era Sanskrit is further complicated by the fact that the monastic literary culture of the period was influenced not only by courtly forms of Sanskrit but also Buddhist Sanskrit works associated with the Mahayana and Tantric traditions. From the tenth century, for instance, we begin to see in Pali and Sinhala works a more conspicuous engagement with themes and ideas usually associated with the literary cultures of these other Buddhist traditions. While we can speculate that the scholar-monks of the reform era engaged with these ideas as part of a larger cultural package that had entered the Saṅgha through the travels of monks such as Ratnamati, we should keep in mind that the study of Buddhist Sanskrit works among the monks of the three fraternities in Sri Lanka had a much longer history too, in particular during the period of Pallava dominance in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Pallava kings encouraged Buddhist intellectual centres, such as the district of Kāñcī, to flourish on the periphery of their empire. These centres acted as diplomatic nodes in a complex religious, trade and political network, including Sri Lanka, the Pālas in northeast India, Śrī Vijaya (modern-day Sumatra) and the Tang court in China. The Pallavas in the early eighth
century, for instance, sent a number of ambassadors to the Tang court and even built a Buddhist monastery for the Chinese emperor in Nāgapaṭṭana. Sri Lanka, it seems, was an important centre of relics and Tantric learning at the time. Thanks to Jeffrey Sundberg and Rolf Giebel, we know of scholar-monks such as Vajrabodhi (d. 743) who travelled with merchants to Sri Lanka via the Pallava court to worship the island’s relics, in particular the Buddha’s tooth relic at the Abhayagirivihāra, en route to Śrī Vijaya and then China. Travelling the other way, we find Chinese monks, such as Amoghavajra (705–744), who also stayed at the Abhayagirivihāra in search of Tantric texts.

Of the three monastic fraternities in Sri Lanka, then, the Abhayagirivihāra was most connected to this ‘esoteric Buddhist network’. Contemporary accounts from Chinese travellers to South Asia note that the Abhayagiri engaged in Tantric and Mahayana practices. A seventh-century Chinese monk-explorer, Xuanzang (602–664) learned on his travels in India that the monks of the Abhayagiri in Sri Lanka studied the Mahayana whereas those of the Mahāvihāra rejected it. In a number of articles Jeffrey Sundberg has argued that king Mānavamma (684–718) and his descendants, who had all spent years exiled in the Pallava court, were great patrons of the Abhayagirivihāra and supported its esoteric Buddhist practices. According to the Cūḷavaṃsa, Mānavamma even ordained as a monk in the Abhayagiri order and his brother ‘Māna’ ruled in his stead. These monarchs of Lankā with Pallava associations oversaw institutional changes in the Abhayagiri, establishing, in particular, a number of pariveṇas or ‘schools’ within the fraternity, such as the Uttaromūla, which became the custodian of the Buddha’s tooth relic.

The Mahāvihāra’s longstanding opposition to Buddhist Sanskrit literary culture began to shift subtly during the period of Pallava dominance too. The late Lance Cousins has revealed that Mahāvihāran monks at the time, most notably a certain Jotipāla (possibly from the seventh century), composed Sanskrit works seemingly in debate with other Buddhist counterparts. The Mahāvihāra’s attitude to Buddhist Sanskrit likely further changed in the ninth century when Sena II and his successors shifted their patronage from the Abhayagirivihāra to the Mahāvihāra. Having supplanted their old adversary, the Mahāvihāra began to resemble the Abhayagiri in a number ways. It adopted some of its ritual practices, such as enshrining scriptures in reliquaries, it took on similar social functions, such as consecrating kings, and it also began to develop its own network of powerful schools or parivenas. We can speculate, then, that this emerging continuity between the two fraternities prior to the reforms, whether due to an affinity or rivalry, likely extended to their attitude about studying the Sanskrit works of other Buddhists too.
2.4. Summary

The world faced by the beleaguered monastic factions who gathered together in 1165 with the idea of uniting for the first time in more than a thousand years was radically different from the one experienced only two hundred years earlier in 956, when Mahinda IV had come to occupy the throne. Then, the monarchy in Sri Lanka asserted its independence from its neighbours and unprecedentedly favoured the Mahāvihāra over the other two fraternities. And yet within a few years everything collapsed. Cōḻa rule in Polonnaruva decimated Anurādhapura’s economy and resulted in the abandonment of the old capital as anything more than a ceremonial site. The marriage practices of the kings of Laṅkā during their brief freedom from suzerainty led, perhaps paradoxically, to the fragmentation of the traditional royal family and to a greater monastic involvement in politics. Wars of succession between rival factions allied to other royalty in India raged either side of Parākramabāhu I’s reign, again to the detriment of the Saṅgha’s prosperity. At the same time, the absorption of the island into continental dynastic politics was mirrored culturally in the adoption of continental, Sanskrit textual forms, both by the royal court and monastic elites. These new forms of expression not only reflected stronger ties with India but also changing attitudes among the elites of the Mahāvihāra to court culture as well as to the Sanskrit literary cultures of other Buddhists.

Notes

6. Bareau, 1955, 205–43; Gunawardana, 1979, 7–51; Rahula, 1956, 78–111. There is no definitive proof, however, that these schisms immediately resulted in the emergence of a separate nikāya. See, for instance, Kieffer-Pülz, 1999a, 72–3.
7. Gunawardana, 1979, 67. On the sacking of monasteries to fund wars, see Liyanagamage, 2001a, 57.
11. Cūḷavaṃsa 53.40. Jeffrey Sundberg has noted that Parāntaka in his inscriptions actually describes himself as ‘taker of Īḷam’, that is, as conqueror of Sri Lanka, years before his invasion in the reign of Udaya IV. See Sundberg, 2018, 434, n. 597, citing Nilakanta Sastri, 1935, 435. It is difficult to determine, however, how far these early boasts were statements of fact or simply expressions of intent.
18. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 55.20–1:

nikāyatittaye dhātugabbhe laṅkātale 'khile

mahārahe suvaṇṇādīpabimibe ca 'nappake

bhinditvā sahasā sabbe vihāre ca tahiṃ tahiṃ

yathojojāhino yakñhī laṅkāyaṃ sāram aggahum.

Chapters 37–79 of the *Cūḷavaṃsa* are often considered to be the work of a single scholar-monk Dhammakitti in the thirteenth century. Sirima Wickramasinghe, however, argued convincingly that Dhammakitti likely composed only the section dealing with Parākramabāhu’s reign. See Wickramasinghe, 1958, 8–33.

19. Davis, 1993, Vijayabāhu I’s repairs in Anurādhapura are mainly mentioned in the context of decay rather than destruction, for instance. He only refers to damage caused by the Cōḻas in relation to the Thūpārāma and relic shrines in Mahāgāma, that is, modern-day Hambantota in the far South of Sri Lanka. See *Cūḷavaṃsa* 60.56–63.


22. It has been plausibly suggested that a transfer of power from Anurādhapura to Poḷonnaruva had begun earlier as a result of the Pāṇḍya invasion of 840. See Sundberg, 2018, 213, n. 268. Even so, the evidence suggests that the economy and population of Anurādhapura continued to grow until the eleventh century, that is, until Cōḻa rule. See Strickland, 2017, 87; 113; 138; 2011, 196; 243; 286.

23. Davis, 2013, 269–318, esp. 308; 2017. Due to the loss of much of the inscriptive record prior to this period, it is difficult to properly assess the relative significance of this perceived increase in land grants. The gaps in the inscriptive record may be due to the fact that kings seem to have removed the inscriptions of their predecessors which their own edicts superseded, sometimes using the older rock inscriptions as building materials. See Sundberg, 2018, 194, n. 242.


27. On the few mentions of Dinbulāgalā in pre-reform literature, see Nicholas, 1963, 40.

28. Gunawardana, 1979, 46–7; 316; 349–50. See also Blackburn, 1999b, 361.

29. *Epigraphia Zeylanica* II, 184–9; 194–202 (= *Inscriptions of Ceylon* 6, no. 8.1). Vikramabāhu I is sometimes referred to as Vikramabāhū II since Kassapa VI was also known as ‘Vikramabāhu’. See Pathmanathan, 1993.

30. Bell, 1917.


32. Walters, 2000, 132–46. Jeffrey Sundberg has critiqued Walters for overestimating the power of the monarchy during the tenth century. See Sundberg, 2018, 429. I would contend, however, that, while it was perhaps not a dominant, transregional power, the monarchy was certainly resisting suzerainty, much to the frustration of neighbouring kingdoms.

33. *Epigraphia Zeylanica* V.III, 340; *Epigraphia Zeylanica* I, 161, cited in Walters, 2000, 135. See also from the reign of Kassapa IV: *Inscriptions of Ceylon* 5.1, nos. 69.18; 72.21; 78.27; 79.28; 83.32.

34. Note, however, that S. Paranavitana has incorrectly argued that Mahinda V identified as Kāliṅga due to his reading of an inscription he attributed to the king. See *Epigraphia Zeylanica* V, 59–67. Sirimal Ranawella has contested this reading and rather dates the inscription to the reign of Udaya III. See *Inscriptions of Ceylon* 5.2, no. 37.3.

35. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 54. 9–10ab:

viḷḷamānē pi laṅkāyaṃ khattiyānaṃ narādhipo

kāliṅgacakakkavattivāsavaṃse jātaṃ kumārikāṃ

ānāpetvāna taṃ aggamahesiṃ attano akā.

See also Sirisena, 1971, esp. 12.

36. Geiger, interpreting *Cūḷavaṃsa* 57.27–9, has argued that Kassapa VI’s son Moggallāna was also the father of Vijayabāhu I. See Geiger and Rickmers, 1998, 195, n. 3. But see Ranawella, *Inscriptions of Ceylon* 6, xxiv–xxvi.


39. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 59.49.


41. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 59.23–5. Vikramabāhu would later take his father and Līlāvatī’s granddaughter, also named Līlāvatī, as his second queen.

42. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 59.41.


44. See the description in *Cūḷavaṃsa* 61.
45. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 61.46.
46. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 61.54–7
uddharitvāna buddhādisantake bhogagāmake
so vikkamabhujo rājā sevakesu samappayi.
pulatthinagare nekavihāre dhātumaṇḍite
so va desantarīyānaṃ bhatānaṃ vasitum dadi.
saddhehi pattadhātussa dāṭhādhātuvarassa ca
pūjanatthāya dinnāni manimuttādikāni ca
candanāgarukappūraṃ suvaṇṇādiṃayā bahū

47. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 61.71:
rājāṇaṃ agaṇentā te gatā dāmarikattanaṃ
sakāṃ sakāṃ va visayaṃ āvasisnāṃ samuddhatā.
Trans. adapted from Geiger and Rickmers, 1998, 231.

48. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 70.53–4ab:
tadā desantarā rājakumāre pāpadiṭṭhino
gajabāhumahīpālo ānāpiya sakaṇṭakaṃ
rājaraṭṭhaṃ akāṣī ti suṇitvāna narissaro …
Trans. adapted from Geiger and Rickmers, 1998, 291. Pathmanathan has speculated that Gajabāhu
was in fact Hindu, based on his reading of the Tamil history of the temple of Koṇēśvaram, the

51. For the first such inscription, see *Inscriptions of Ceylon* 5.1, no. 67.16.
53. *Inscriptions of Ceylon* 5.2, no. 62.1. I have added the information in parentheses to Ranawella’s
translation.
54. Walters, 2000, 125–32. For earlier accounts of the *Okkāka* lineage, see *Dīpavaṃsa* 10; *Mahāvaṃsa* of
Mahānāma, 9.1–28. I differ from Walters in that I do not view this genealogy as necessarily working
in service of the imperial aims of the court.
55. Walters, 2000, 129.
56. The inscriptions that refer to the Śākyas, Paṇḍukābhaya or Suddhodana in the tenth century are as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ruler</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Issuer</th>
<th>Inscription</th>
<th>Audience</th>
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<td>924–35</td>
<td>Lāmānī</td>
<td>IC 5.2, no.</td>
<td>Monastic</td>
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See Paranavitana’s discussion on this point in Epigraphia Zeylanica II, 200–2. Also, Kiri bamune, 1976.

Dimitrov, 2016, 105–23. See also Hallisey, 2003; Pollock, 2006, 386–7. The Sanskrit works that likely predate the reforms include Dharmakīrti’s Rūpāvatāra, Kassapa’s Bālāvabodhana and Śāriputta’s Cāndrapañcikālankāra. Another possibility is Buddhānāga’s Pārīkṣaranātiśākā, a commentary on a grammatical handbook, Gunākara’s Pārīkarana, though we can only be sure that it was composed before 1458 since it is quoted in Śrī Rāhula’s Moggallāna-pañcikāpradīpaya. On these works, see also Bechert, 1987, 5–16.


Dimitrov, 2016, 51–74; 56–96; 599–706. For a critical overview of Dimitrov’s arguments concerning the works he attributes to Ratnamati, see Gornall, 2017. In this book, I follow Dimitrov in taking Ratnamati and Ratnakṣījāna to be the same individual, though I am also aware that this cannot be conclusively proved.


Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya, trans. 1990, 279.

To be precise, he was the third vajrācārya. See Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya, trans. 1990, 325. The historian Tāranātha wrote his work in 1608 supposedly using three Sanskrit sources. On the date and identity of this monk, see Sundberg and Giebel, 2011, 207, n. 137.

Bechert, 2005, 142.

While there is no doubt a historical connection, then, as Sheldon Pollock has skilfully elucidated, between such courtly forms of Sanskrit and political power, it is necessary to disentangle political function from the institution of the court and to acknowledge that the monastery was an equally important site of cultural change. Sheldon Pollock discusses the Buddhist monastery as a site for the production of Sanskrit court literature in an earlier article, but really only as an exception that proves the rule. See Pollock, 2003, esp. 114–121. On sites of literary production outside the court, see Cox, 2017, 156. On monastic political autonomy in India, see Davidson, 2002, esp. 167–8.

See also Hallisey, 2003, 707–12.

Abhidharmārthasaṅgrahasannaya of Śāriputta, 257, 359.


Sen, 2003, 224.


Sundberg and Giebel, 2011, 145; 149; 186, n. 72.


See, in particular, Sundberg, 2014; 2017.

Cūḷavaṃsa 57.4–27, discussed in Sundberg, 2017, 204–18. This passage has also been analysed as an origin story for the position of ‘grandmaster’ (mahāsāmi) in the Saṅgha’s hierarchy. See Gornall, 2013, 37–40; Rohanadeera, 1985, 33–5.


Cousins, 2013; 2016. See also chapter six.

See Walters, 2000, 132–41.

On the ‘cult of the book’ in late medieval Sri Lanka, see chapter six.

Walters, 2000, 130; 134–5.

The reform-era Saṅgha, for instance, seems to have tolerated monks studying the works of other religious traditions. See Gornall, 2014a, 524–5.