Was There A Gonisa-vihāra in Ancient Ceylon?

If we take Geiger’s translation of the Cūlavamsa as our authority, a monastery named Gonisa-vihāra played an important part in the early upbringing of Dhātusena, the warrior king of the fifth century, who re-established Sinhalese sovereignty after a period of Tamil rule, constructed the great irrigation reservoir named Kalāvāva and came to a tragic end at the hands of his son Kassapa I. The Cūlavamsa, after recounting Dhātusena’s parentage, informs us that, as a small boy, he had adopted the life of a sāmanera under the tutelage of his uncle, an unnamed thera who resided in the Dīghasanda-āvāsa of the Mahāvihāra. Two incidents which portended the great destiny that awaited Dhātusena, and the measures adopted by his uncle, the thera, to protect the small boy, and to fit him for his future career, are narrated in a passage, vv. 17—21 of chapter 38 of the Cūlavamsa, which has been translated by Geiger as given below:

‘Now once as the latter (i.e. Dhātusena) was reciting (sacred texts) at the foot of a tree a cloud began to rain. A snake seeing this, encircled him in her folds and covered the book and the boy with her hood. The uncle saw that. Another time another penitent in his wrath threw dung at his head but failed therewith to disturb his spirit. The uncle beheld that too and thinking: “that is in very truth a most excellent being, without doubt he will become king, he must be protected”, he went along with him into a vihāra, and instructed him in the Gonisa-vihāra with the object, “he must be made a master in state-craft”’.

According to Geiger’s own admission, this translation cannot be taken as adequately conveying the sense of the original Pali, the least unsatisfactory feature to the student of history being the degradation of the Nāga (a divine being) who protected Dhātusena into a common snake, and the change of his sex. Geiger’s own note on his performance is as follows: “The passage is somewhat dubious. In the first place, I believe that the words ādāya tam vihāram upāgato mean: he fetched him out of the Dīghasanda-parivena. As that lay in Anurādhapura, the youthful Dhātusena was here not safe enough from possible machinations of the king. His uncle took him to the Gonisa monastery (gonisādi-vihāra means the monas-
tery whose name begins with gonisa). We do not know where this monastery was, as it is not otherwise mentioned—possibly in the south of the capital. For the rest I follow the conjectural nitiim of M. Geiger which makes the sense far more pregnant. As his uncle regards Dhatusena as the future king, his task is to acquaint him with niti, i.e. state-craft.”

Before we come to deal with Geiger’s rendering of gonisadi-vihara, we might dispose of his interpretation of adaya tam viharam upagato. This phrase occurs after the recounting of the portentous happenings, and the reflection of the thera that the boy should be protected, but before the mention of the thera’s resolve that the boy should be trained in a place other than the Dighasanda-parivena. The two incidents witnessed by the thera are said to have occurred while the boy Dhatusena was studying, seated under a tree, and the statement in the chronicle that the uncle ‘took him, (i.e. the boy) with him and came to the vihara ’ refers to his coming to the Dighasanda-parivena from under the tree. It was after returning to the residence from the arbour that the thought occurred to the thera that the boy should be instructed at a place more suitable for the formation of his character than a monastic residence in Anuradhapura was for that purpose. According to the sequence of events in the narrative of the Cúlavamsa, it was after the thera had been warned in a dream that the Tamil king ruling at Anuradhapura was designing to capture Dhatusena that the thera took him away from the Dighasanda-parivena. And this account is given in the third verse following the phrase adaya tam viharam upagato. The word aagato, ‘came,’ cannot also be interpreted as ‘fetched out’ as Geiger has done. The vihara1 in this phrase, thus, cannot refer to the monastic residence meant by gonisadi-vihara.

The half verse occurring in Geiger’s text of the Cúlavamsa as gonisadi vihara ‘yam kattabbo nitiim iti has been translated by Wijesinha as saying ‘I must render this youth accomplished at the Gonisa Monastery’. Turnour, the first translator of the chronicle, has completely misunderstood the passage and translated it by ‘Beloved, do not omit, night or day, to improve thyself in what thou shouldst acquire’. The text followed by Wijesinha appears to have had gonisada in place of gonisadi, and he has taken this to be the proper name of a place, as Sumangala and Batuvan-tudave, who translated the chronicle into Sinhalese, have also done with regard to gonisadi.

1. For the use of the word vihara with the meaning of a ‘monastic residence’ in particular, and not ‘monastery’ in general, see Khuddusikkha, v. 156, and the old Sinhalese gloss thereon. Also consult the term vihara-gonisadika used by Buddhaghosa in the Sumanasirasidikā (P.T.S. Edition p. 1099), discussed below.
Was There a Gonisa-Vihāra in Ancient Ceylon?

Geiger's reading gonisādi is supported by several manuscripts and, as will become clear also from the evidence to be discussed in the sequel, is acceptable. He agrees with his predecessors, Wijesinha, Sumangala and Batuvantudave, in seeing a proper name in this, but differs from them in taking the element gonisa as the proper name, and treating ādi as introduced for the purpose of satisfying the metrical requirements, as for instance in expressions like Kadalyādi-nivāta (Cv., 48.50) for Kadali-nivāta and Vijayādibāhu for Vijayabāhu. This device, which does not say much for the literary skill of an author, has been rarely resorted to in the Cūlavamsa; as a rule, ādi is introduced between the two elements compounded in a proper name, and not between two words in a compound comprising a proper name and a common name. According to the manner in which Geiger has broken up Gonisādi-vihiara, it would correspond to a phrase like Anurādhātipura for Anurādhapura, a type of usage not met with in literary works. Geiger himself has pointed out that a monastery named Gonīsā has not been met with anywhere but in this doubtful passage. Geiger's interpretation of this phrase, therefore, raises doubts in one's mind, as to its acceptability. Aggamahāpandita A. P. Buddhadatta Mahāthera, the accomplished Pali scholar who has pointed out and corrected many a slip in the distinguished philologist's translation of the Ceylon chronicles, has nothing to say on the passage that we are discussing.

The word gonisādi, with or without the suffix ka, occurs in several places in the Pali literature, not as a proper name, but in fact as the name appropriate to a particular type of monastic establishment. In the Khuddasikkhā (v. 144), gonisādi is enumerated among the four types of kappiya-bhāmi or kappiya-kuti, i.e. buildings in which it is permissible for monks not only to live, but also to cook food. Here, the Khudda-sikkhā follows the injunction attributed to the Buddha Himself in the Mahāvagga, V. 33, 4: Auyānāmi bhikkhave catasso kappiya-bhāmiyo, uassavantikām, gonisādikām, gahapatīm, sammutiṃ ti. Rhys Davids and Oldenberg have rendered the word by 'ox-stall' in their translation of the Vinaya Piṭaka, and this meaning has been given to the word in the Dictionary of the Pali Text Society. Miss I. B. Horner, in her translation of the Vinaya Piṭaka, renders gonisādikā by 'that connected with what is fortuitous'. Miss Horner has consulted Buddhaghosa’s Samantapāsādikā on the meaning of the word, but her interpretation, which hardly conveys a clear idea as to the character of a gonisādikā, is due to her not properly grasping what the commentator says. Buddhaghosa's comments on the word are: gonisādikā duvidhā ārāmagonisādikā vihāragonisādikā ti. Tāsu yattha n'eva ārāno na senāsanānī.
parikkhittāni honti, ayaṁ ārāmagonisādikā nāma, yattha senāsanāni sabbāni vā ekaccāni vā parikkhittāни, ārāmo aparikkhito, ayaṁ vihāragnisādikā nāma iti ubhayatāpi ārāmassa aparikkhittabhāro yeva panānām.  

"Gonisādikā is twofold, an ārāma (monastery) which is a gonisādikā and a vihāra (monastic residence) which is a gonisādikā. Of these two, where neither the ārāma (monastery as a whole) nor the individual residences (vihāra) are enclosed, this is an ārāmagonisādikā; where the residences, all or some (of them), are enclosed, but the monastery (ārāma) as a whole is not enclosed, this is a vihāra-gonisādikā. Thus, in both cases, it is the fact of the monastery being not enclosed that is the criterion." According to this explanation of Buddhaghosa, a gonisādikā is a monastery which as a whole is not enclosed with a fence or wall; the individual residential buildings within it may or may not be enclosed. This interpretation is in accord with the definition of a gonisādikā in the Kluddasikkhā, v. 147: yebyuyyena parikkhito ārāno sakalo'pi vā vuccate gonisādī ti. "A monastery which is for the most part or totally not enclosed (with fence, etc.) is called a gonisādi." Here, it would be noted, the word occurs just as it does in the Cūlavamsa, without the suffix ka, the use of which, thus, is seen to be optional, and does not affect the meaning of the word. The Sikhyavāda-vinisa (Sir D. B. Jayatilaka’s edition, p. 52) defines gonisādi in similar terms.

The word gonisādi as the first element of a compound occurs in the pada-bhājaniya or explanatory section of the Vinaya-piṭaka. The Sutta-vibhaṅga, III, 46, in enumerating the different types of villages, says: gonisādi-nivittha pi gāmo. Buddhaghosa’s explanation of this compound is: gonisādinivittha nāma vihīsaṁnivesādīvasena anivissitā yathā gāvo tattha tathā dve tissos nissidanti evam tattha tathā dve tīṣādhāvā cavitā nivittho. "Gonisādi-nivittha is a village which, not being planned by laying out the streets, etc., is established by erecting here and there two or three houses, in the same manner as cows lie down by twos or threes here and there." It is this explanation of gonisādi that Miss Horner has applied to gonisādikā occurring in the enumeration of the four kappiya-bhūmiyo. In this instance, however, gonisādi qualifies nivittha, the latter word referring to the manner of the laying out of a village. The same meaning cannot, therefore, be applied to the word when it is used as a substantive denoting a particular

6. The planning of the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya can be characterised as gonisādi-nivittha.
type of monastic establishment. In both cases, it seems that we have secondary developments in the meaning of the word *gonisādi* or *gonisādika*, of which the etymology would indicate ‘a place where cattle lie down’. The word was probably applied originally to the unenclosed part of a village set apart for cattle to roam about or lie down, i.e. the village pasture. The extension of the use of the word to an unenclosed monastery, where the cattle were free to roam about, or lie down, is but natural. The straggling appearance of houses in a village that had grown haphazardly suggested a parallel with the appearance of cows lying down in a pasture, and resulted in the extension of the use of the word in the compound *gonisādi-nivittṭha*. The word *gonisādika*, with its original meaning of ‘pasture’, appears to have been the origin of the word *gonaki*, occurring in some Old Sinhalese inscriptions of about the third or fourth century, denoting a certain type of land appertaining to tanks in ancient Ceylon, most probably the open land above a tank bed wherein cattle were allowed to graze and lie down.7

Whatever the significance of the word *gonisādi* or *gonisādika* may be where it is applied with reference to a village, the Pali commentaries leave no room for doubt about the meaning of the word where it refers to a monastic edifice or establishment. And it is with that meaning, i.e. ‘unenclosed’, that the word must have been used by the author of the *Cūlavamsa*. We have now to consider how that meaning is appropriate to the context in which *gonisādi-vihāra* occurs in the chronicle.

According to Geiger’s translation of the relevant passage in the *Cūlavamsa*, it was with the object of making Dhātusena ‘a master in statecraft’ that the therā, his uncle, resolved to move him out of the Dighasanda-parivena to another vihāra, which, according to Geiger, was named Gonisa. But this idea of making the boy Dhātusena ‘a master in statecraft’ has been read into the text by introducing thereto the word *nītimā* which is not found in any of the manuscripts of the *Cūlavamsa*. The text edited in Sinhalese characters by Sumangala and Batuvantudave has *dhītinī* in place of *nītimā*. Being not a critical edition, according to Western standards of scholarship, it is not stated by the editors whether the reading *dhītinī* is supported by the manuscripts utilised by them, or whether it is an emendation of a corrupt reading. Even if *dhītinī* is an emendation, it is preferable to Geiger’s emendation into *nītimā*, for most of the manuscripts contain the reading *vītimā*, and *vī* is more likely to result from a scribal

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7. The word *gonaki* is met with in the Vessagiri Rock-Inscription of Sirināga II (Ep. Zey. III, p. 222) where the published text needs emendation and in an unpublished slab-inscription of Kanitiṭha Tissa discovered at the Ruvanvīlī Sāya.

8. Translated into Sinhalese as *nāmānīti*.
error from dhi than from nī, the difference in appearance between the
syllables vi and dhi being not very marked.9 With regard to the sense
also, the reading nītimā is hardly appropriate to the context. The incident
refers to a time when Dhātusena was of tender years, and hardly likely
to profit by a course of instruction in political science. And why was
Gonisa-vihāra a suitable place to impart to Dhātusena skill in statecraft?
According to the narrative in the Cūlavamsa, it was to a monastery in the
outlying districts that Dhātusena was taken from Anurādhapura; it is
hardly likely that professors of political science were available in such places.

The word dhitima means ‘one who is courageous’, and this would
be not only in keeping with the sequence of events in the narrative, but
also would make the correct interpretation of the phrase gonisādi-vihāra
significant. The boy Dhātusena was being brought up by his uncle as a
sāmanera, to make him fit for the religious life, at the Dighasanda-āvāsa
in the Mahāvihāra of Anurādhapura. The Mahāvihāra was an enclosed
monastery, and the Dighasanda-āvāsa or parivcna, as such monastic edifices
usually were, must have been enclosed by a prakāra. The boy thus was
leading a sheltered life, subjected to a strict discipline, which gave him no
scope for self-assertion. The first incident noticed by the ther, according
to the story, was the protection of the boy during a shower of rain by a
super-human being, i.e. a Nāga. This convinced the ther that the boy
was destined to be king of the Island. The next incident noticed by the ther,
that of the boy remaining unruffled when dirt was thrown over his
head by a fellow-pupil, must have indicated to the ther that the qualities
being inculcated in Dhātusena by his life in the monastery were hardly of
the type required of one who had to wrest the sovereignty from enemies.
Meekness of character and not hitting back when hit, are admirable qualities
in a bhikkhu, but not in a prince who had to fight his way to the throne.
What a boy intended for such a career had to acquire was not humility,
but personal bravery and courage, the ability to fend for himself in a difficult
situation. These qualities could hardly be inculcated in a boy of tender
years in a cloister at the capital city. On the other hand, if the boy was
brought up in a gonisādi monastery, which was not protected by being
enclosed, and which, being in the country, would be frequented not only
by cattle, as the name indicates, but even by wild beasts, he would
learn to fend for himself and become courageous (dhitima). Thus, what
the ther was concerned with was the psychological training of the boy’s

9. We apologize for being unchivalrous in this preference, for the emendation nītimā
is due to M (i.e. Frau) Geiger.
character, not to stuff his mind with theories on state-craft. The thera’s resolve to move Dhātusena away from Dighasanda-parivena on these considerations was confirmed by the warning, received in a dream as stated in the chronicle, or in a less miraculous manner, that the Tamil ruler of Anurādhapura was becoming suspicious of the boy, and had planned to apprehend him. The boy was taken away not too soon, and we find the thera going past the Kalā Oya with him, evidently to a monastery in an outlying district, which would most probably have been of the gOllisadi type. The interpretation that we have given of gOllisadi-vihāra and the preference of the reading dhitimā to nitimā make the passage in question appropriate to the context, and we offer the following translation in place of the extract from Geiger’s translation quoted towards the beginning of this paper:

‘One day, (Dhātusena, seated) at the foot of a tree, was studying by himself. (Then) a cloud rained; a Nāga, seeing (that), protected the book and the boy, by enclosing him in his folds and also covering (him) with his hood. The uncle saw that. Another ascetic being angered with him, scattered dirt on his head, (but Dhātusena) did not show hatred in mind towards him. The uncle saw that, too, and (reflecting) “this is indeed a noble being, he would certainly become king and should, (therefore), be protected”, came (back) to the residence (vihāra) accompanied by (the boy) and trained him with the thought that he should be made courageous (by being brought up) in a monastery that is not enclosed’.

There was thus no monastery called Gonisa-vihāra in ancient Ceylon; there must have been scores of gOllisadi monasteries, just as they are found today in Ceylon. In fact, the majority of monasteries at the present day are of the gOllisadi type. The Malvatte Vihāra in Kandy and the Vidyā-laṅkāra Pirivena near Colombo are two prominent examples.

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