

The Kinsmen of the Buddha: Myth as Political Charter in the Ancient and Early Medieval Kingdoms of Sri Lanka

"Of all the chapters in religious anthropology," Claude Lévi-Strauss observes in his *Structural Anthropology*, "probably none has tarried to the same extent as studies in the field of mythology. From a theoretical point of view the situation has remained very much the same as it was fifty years ago, namely, chaotic. Myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways: as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of esthetic play, or as the basis of ritual."¹ Despite the noteworthy impact of his own theoretical work, it is not possible to say that the situation has become less chaotic during the score or so of years since Lévi-Strauss made this statement. The work of the foremost students of mythology like Malinowski, Boas, Kluckhohn and Lévi-Strauss himself has been concerned primarily with myth in "savage society". Malinowski was acutely aware of the need for the study of myth in ancient civilization and believed that "the study of mythology as it functions and works in primitive societies should anticipate the conclusions drawn from material from higher civilizations."² In more recent times anthropologists and classical scholars have begun to pay close attention to the study of literate myths, particularly those of Mesopotamia and Greece. However, historians have been generally sceptical about the usefulness of the study of myth and hesitant about accepting it as a legitimate branch of their discipline. Thus, if the progress made in anthropology in the study of myth has not been impressive, in the field of historical research, it is not possible even to assert that a serious beginning has yet been made. The present paper is exploratory and experimental in character in attempting to draw on the theoretical work in anthropology for the study of a group of myths in Sri Lanka. It is hoped that this attempt, however tentative and limited, would contribute towards the development of conceptual tools for the historians of South Asia to enable them to approach the task of drawing on the considerable store of mythical material which has so far been largely ignored by them as irrelevant.

The two major chronicles of Sri Lanka, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvāṃsa*, present detailed accounts of the three visits to the island that the Buddha is supposed to have made. These accounts are in Pāli verse. The *Dīpavaṃsa* presents the longer version which covers two chapters containing in all 150 verses. The *Mahāvāṃsa* devotes only one chapter with 84 verses to present a much more concise account of the visits. A third version, in prose, is to be found in the *Vaṃsathappakāsini*. Though this work is a commentary on the *Mahāvāṃsa*, the account presented therein differs in certain respects from the *Mahāvāṃsa* version.

The accounts of the three visits of the Buddha in these three sources are not corroborated by Indian material or even by the Pāli Canon preserved in

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, London, 1969, p. 207. The relevant chapter was first published as a separate paper in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 78, No. 270, 1955, pp. 428-444
2. Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology" in *Magic, Science and Other Essays*, New York, 1948, p. 145

Sri Lanka. They contain descriptions of highly miraculous deeds. During all these three visits the Buddha is said to have had dealings with only non-human beings: *yakkhas*, *nāgas* and *devas*. Despite this, nineteenth-century writers like William Knighton, who published *The History of Ceylon* in 1845, found it possible to accept the historicity of these events.³ For both Knighton and L. E. Blazé, the author of *A History of Ceylon for Schools* published in 1900, the *yakkhas* and *nāgas* represented the pre-Aryan inhabitants of the island.⁴ The euhemeristic approach of these early European writers has been subjected to sharp criticism by later scholars nurtured in the traditions of empiricist historiography.⁵ But there is little doubt that these stories were and are still believed to be true by the faithful among the Buddhists. The late Professor Senarat Paranavitana aroused a chorus of indignant protest by making a casual comment in a public speech delivered a few years before his death in 1972 that there was no justification for the belief that the Buddha did visit the island.

Though the stories concerning all the three visits of the Buddha form a single group, there is reason to believe that even the chroniclers considered the first visit to be of special import. In the *Dīpavaṃsa*, for instance, the story of the first visit forms a separate chapter while both the second and the third visits are described in the second chapter. Further, the role of the Buddha in this story is quite inconsistent with the characterization presented in the Pāli Canon and the commentarial works. As would be seen in due course, in this story the Buddha is hardly the *mahākāruṇika*, the man of profound kindness, but a personality totally different from the type that one encounters in other Buddhist literary works. It becomes clear from an examination of the *Mahāvāṃsa* and the *Vamsatthappakāsinī* that there is also an inconsistency between the account of the first visit of the Buddha and the legend about Vijaya, "the first king of the island". The Buddha is said to have cleared the island of the *yakkhas* during his first visit, but, according to the Vijayan legend, Vijaya and his followers found within the island a kingdom of the *yakkhas*. Vijaya fought against these *yakkhas* and destroyed them with the aid of Kuvēni before he founded the kingdom of Tambapanni. It would thus seem that these two acts of tales were of independent origin and had been deliberately strung together by the chroniclers.

According to the *Dīpavaṃsa*, the *yakkhas* were the original inhabitants of the island. At the time of the first visit of the Buddha they had all assembled at Mahiyaṅgana. The Buddha appeared in the sky over this assembly and afflicted the *yakkhas* with rains and cold winds. Then he addressed them to ask for a place to sit in return for dispelling these calamities. The *yakkhas* readily consent to this and beseech him to provide heat to overcome the cold. The Buddha sits on his rug and makes it diffuse heat, unbearable in its intensity, compelling the *yakkhas* to flee. He then brings Giridīpa, another island, close to Lankā and, when the fleeing *yakkhas* clamber on to it, returns Giridīpa to its original place.⁶

3. William Knighton, *The History of Ceylon*, London, 1845, pp. 8-11

4. L. E. Blazé, *A History of Ceylon for Schools*, 10th edition, 1937, p. 8

5. See for instance S. Paranavitana, *University of Ceylon History of Ceylon*, Vol. I, Pt. 1, 1961, p. 95

6. *Dv.* Chapter 1

In the variant version found in the *Māhavaṃsa*, the *yakkhas* offer the Buddha the whole island if he would only relieve them of their distress. The Buddha sits on the ground, spreading his leather rug, and causes the rug to expand. Burning flames surround the rug. The *yakkhas* withdraw right up to the coastline and are transported away in the same manner as in the *Dīpa-vaṃsa* version.⁷

It is in the *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* that this encounter is presented in the most dramatic manner.⁸ The Buddha uses his supernatural powers to harass the *yakkhas* with eleven different types of afflictions. Torrential rains and hurricanes descend on them. They are pelted with showers of stones, weapons, burning embers, hot ashes and mud. Cold and humid winds, storms and darkness torment and terrify them. When the *yakkhas* appeal to the Buddha for succour, he demands a place to sit in return. They offer him the whole island. The Buddha expresses the doubt that this offer might be revoked later. The *yakkhas* then give a solemn promise (*sapatha*) that no one would ever hinder the right of the Buddha over the island. The Buddha seats himself on his leather rug and restores normalcy except for the fact that the cold continues to torment the *yakkhas*. The *yakkhas* appeal to the Buddha to release the heat rays of the sun. In response to this request, the Buddha causes his rug to emit heat. He also causes the rug to expand till, ultimately, it covers the whole island. The body of the Buddha, too, expands with the rug and it is said that, finally, the proportions of the island, the rug and the body of the Buddha were "the same". The *yakkhas* who retreat before the spreading rug reach the very shores and are convinced that "the island has been taken over by this great and powerful king of gods and lost to us."⁹ The compassion of the Buddha is aroused by their plight and he brings Giridīpa in the manner described in the two chronicles to transport them away.

The Buddha's encounter with the *yakkhas* in the three different versions of the tale examined above contrasts sharply from descriptions of the "taming" of non-human beings in the Canon. In the story of the *yakkha* Ālavaka, for instance, it is the Buddha's kindness, tolerance and good temper unruffled by the open hostility he met with which win over Ālavaka.¹⁰ Here, on the other hand, the Buddha is portrayed as one who harassed the *yakkhas* with devious afflictions. He asks the *yakkhas* for a place to sit, but finally drives them from their homeland. During the course of the story, he is often referred to as *jina* or "conqueror", a title which suits him here in its literal meaning. In this tale the Buddha is clearly the conqueror who has time for compassion only after a kingdom has been annexed. Indeed he is cast in an unusual role.

Sri Lanka was one of the first countries where the Buddhist *saṅgha* developed a durable and close relationship with the state. It is possible to suggest that this growing rapprochement between the *saṅgha* and the state would have soon encountered serious problems. The early Buddhist ideal of kingship, as evident in the concept of the *cakkavatti* outlined in tales like the Mahā-sudassana Sutta in the Pāli Canon, was one based on non-violence. The

7. *Mv.* 1.17-43

8. *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*, ed. G. P. Malalasekera, London, 1935, Vol. I, pp. 71-82

9. *ayaṃ dīpo iminā mahesakkena devarājena pariggahito hutvā parahatthagato ahoṣi.* *Vap.* Vol. I, p. 79

10. *Samyutta Nikāya*, ed. Léon Feer, London, 1960, Vol. I, pp. 213-215; *Sāratthappakāsinī*, ed. F. L. Woodward, London, 1929, Vol. I, pp. 316-337

cakkavatti or the Universal Monarch tours the earth accompanied by his army and wins over the subservience of petty rulers through a mixture of eloquent expositions of the doctrine and pressure, without resort to violence.¹¹ Historical attempts to follow this ideal were few and, as would be expected, kings in actual life offered a distinct contrast to this ideal. Hence, though many kings associated closely with the Buddha and were his ardent patrons, politics (*khatta-vijjā*) is treated in the Brahmajāla Sutta as a "low science" (*tiracchāna vijjā, hīna-vijjā*).¹² According to the Mahābodhi Jātaka, politics represented the single-minded quest for power unhampered by codes of ethical conduct: Teachers of politics encouraged followers even to murder their own parents for the sake of self-advancement.¹³ The attitude that the *saṅgha* should adopt towards the warrior-king, the manipulator of the foremost apparatus of organized violence in society, would have been a problem which rankled in the mind of many a monk in the formative phase of the relationship between the *saṅgha* and the state in Sri Lanka.

Placed in this context, it is possible to see in the myth of the first visit of the Buddha an attempt at mediating a contradiction. In the myth the Buddha is also a conqueror. His use of supernatural powers to harass the *yakkhas* is comparable with the king's resort to violence against foes. In explaining the need for the Buddha to take such extraordinary steps it is stated that the *yakkhas* were incapable of understanding the truth and opposed to the *sāsana* and, therefore, they had to be removed from the island.¹⁴ Thus the myth presents a moral principle distinct from those found in the Pāli Canon: violence is permissible in the interest of the *sāsana*, against those who do not understand the "true doctrine" and are opposed to it. This re-interpretation of the attitude towards violence facilitates the mediation of the contradiction between the ethical ideal and the practical behaviour of kings.

The story of Duṭṭhagāmanī in the *Mahāvamsa* is a clear instance of this new interpretation being invoked to justify the actions of a king. This king is credited with the construction of some of the principal Buddhist monuments at Anurādhapura. He was also a warrior whose campaigns for the unification of the island in the second century B.C. wrought great carnage. There was an obvious difficulty in presenting this successful warrior as a Buddhist hero. The mediation of this contradiction follows the same lines as in the myth. The campaigns of Duṭṭhagāmanī, the chronicle asserts, were not for personal glory but for the establishment of the *sāsana*, to make "the *sāsana* shine forth."¹⁵ According to the chronicle, Duṭṭhagāmanī was overcome with remorse at the end of his campaigns when he recalled that a multitude of people had been killed. A group of *arahants* from Piyaṅgudīpa discerned his thoughts and came through the air to assure him that, though millions had fallen during his campaigns, he could be certain of being born in heaven. Only "one and a half" human beings could really be deemed to have been slain by him since of all

11. *Dīgha Nikāya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, London, 1947, Vol. II pp. 169-199

12. *Dīgha Nikāya*, Vol. I, p. 9

13. *mātāpitaropi māretva attameva attho kāmetabbo*. See *The Jataka*, ed. V. Fausboll, London, 1963, Vol. V, p. 228

14. *te pana saccapaḷivedhāya abhabbā sāsanaassa avaruddhā. tato te mayā nīharitvā giridīpamhi vāsetabbā*. *Vap*. Vol. I, p. 67.

15. *Mv*. 25.2-3, 17

those who had been slain only one had practised the "five precepts" while another had uttered the *tisarana*—the three statements professing the seeking of refuge in the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *saṅgha*. All others were "unbelievers and men of evil life" and were not to be esteemed more than beasts. Thus, like the myth, the *Duṭṭhagāmaṇi* legend implies that violence committed on "unbelievers" is not evil. "But as for thee," the *arahants* exhort the king, "thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha in manifold ways; therefore cast away care from thy heart, O ruler of men."¹⁶ The inconvenient question, whether from the Buddhist point of view the killing of men "who were like beasts" was not in itself an "evil action" is left unraised and, therefore, unanswered. It is significant that the chronicler closes the chapter by speaking of the "evil" arising from the murder of human beings through greed, thereby emphasising the distinction between killing through greed and killing in the interest of the *sāsana*.¹⁷ Later on, at the end of the chapter which described the demise of *Duṭṭhagāmaṇi*, it is stated that he entered the *Tusita* heaven immediately after he left this world. The chronicler further predicts that he is destined to be the chief disciple of *Metteyya*, the future Buddha.¹⁸ Thus the story of *Duṭṭhagāmaṇi* echoes the idea embodied in the myth of the first visit of the Buddha in implying that violence is not invariably associated with evil, and that a distinction has to be drawn between violence committed in the interest of the *sāsana* and that motivated by greed. The message is spelt out quite clearly: one who commits violence for the glory of the *sāsana* incurs no evil.

The myth of the first visit of the Buddha and the story of *Duṭṭhagāmaṇi* in the *Mahāvamsa* present a new moral principle which enabled a distinction to be drawn between permissible and non-permissible types of violence. This principle which is not found in the Pāli Canon was basic and vital for one of the most important ideas of kingship evolved in the island—the association of the king with the *Bodhisattva*. The term *mahāsatta*, an epithet of *Bodhisattvas*, is used in the *Mahāvamsa* to refer to *Sirisaṅghabodhi* who ruled in the third century A.D. This king was considered to be a paragon of virtue and a zealous patron of the faith.¹⁹ The *Cūlavamsa* states that *Buddhadāsa* (A.D. 337-365) led the life of a *Bodhisattva*.²⁰ According to the same chronicle, *Upatissa I* (365-406) practised the *dasapāramitā*—the ten principle virtues that a *Bodhisattva* should acquire.²¹ Similarly, *Aggabodhi I* (571-604) and *Sena I* (833-853) are said to have aspired to *Buddhahood*.²² By the reign of *Mahinda IV* (956-972), the ideas implicit in these statements seem to have reached full maturity. This king not only claims to have secured for himself "the way to *nirvāna*", but also speaks of the rulers of his dynasty as "the *ksatriya* lords devoted to the Buddha, who of yore have received the assurance made by the Omniscient Lord of Sages, the pinnacle of the *Sākya* clan, that none but *Bodhisattvas* would become kings of prosperous *Lankā*."²³ It appears from this statement that by this time it was believed that indeed everyone who became

16. *Mv.* 25.101-111

17. *Mv.* 25.116

18. *Mv.* 32.75-83

19. *Mv.* 36.73-97

20. *Cv.* 37.109

21. *Cv.* 37.180

22. *aggabodhi-gatāsayo Cv.* 42.1; *buddhabhūmigatāsayo Cv.* 50.65

23. *nobosat-hu norajvanhayi sākūla kot savaniya muniraj-hu. . (viyāran) lad. . EZ, Vol. I, p. 237 ll. B52-53 and p. 240*

king in Sri Lanka was a Bodhisattva. The elevation of the king to one of the highest positions that a layman could aspire to in the Buddhist social order represents an advanced stage in the development of the ideas of kingship in the island. It is noteworthy that the inscription bearing this statement was erected within the precincts of a monastery. In acquiescing in this idea, the *saṅgha* recognized the king as the leader of the laity in a political as well as a religious sense. Some of the kings who are described as Bodhisattvas were by no means saintly. The aspirations of Sena I to Buddhahood did not prevent him from sending his agents to India to assassinate Mahinda, a rival who was living there in exile.²⁴ Mahinda IV speaks with pride in his edicts about the victorious military campaigns prosecuted in his reign.²⁵ If it was thus possible to recognize a future Buddha in a king who wielded the sword with vigour or eliminated his rivals through assassination, it is quite clear that by this time the contradiction between the warrior king and the Buddhist canonical ideal of kingship had in fact been mediated.

In analysing the function of the myth of the first visit of the Buddha as a "political charter", it is possible to discern a second major theme. The myth clearly embodies the "message" that the island of Sri Lanka belonged to the Buddha. Not only was the island presented to him by the *yakkhas*, but also he acquired it by driving them away by the force of his supernatural powers. The interesting detail about the request of the Buddha for a place to spread his rug and sit and how the rug began to expand and finally covered the whole island is reminiscent of another myth, the foundation of Carthage which Virgil refers to in the terse, almost cryptic, verses in his *Aeneid*. In the Roman myth, Dido, the devoted wife of Acerbas, flees from the kingdom of her brother who, being covetous of the wealth of Acerbas, had engineered his murder. On reaching the site of Carthage, she purchases land amounting to the area covered by an oxhide. But she cuts the oxhide into thin stripes and, by this clever strategem, becomes the owner of a large extent of territory on which the fortified city of Carthage is erected.²⁶ The *Mahāvamsa* myth seems to suggest that the Buddha acquired the lordship over the island through comparable means. Thus the island had been "given by the *yakkhas*", "acquired by strategem" and also "conquered": the Buddha had acquired a complete and unchallengeable right over the island.

The political significance of the "message" that the island belonged to the Buddha becomes clear when it is examined in association with another myth in the chronicles. According to the chroniclers, Vijaya was the first king of the island. But a new lineage begins when Paṇḍukābhaya, or Pakuṇḍa of the *Dīpavamsa*, ascends the throne. The *Dīpavamsa* devotes a short chapter to present his genealogy while in the *Mahāvamsa* his life-story is given in great detail. The significance of the Paṇḍukābhaya legend has been the subject of considerable speculation by modern scholars. G. C. Mendis, for instance,

24. Cv. 50.4

25. See for example EZ, Vol. I, p. 33 ll. 5-6

26. *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trsl. C. Day Lewis, London, 1954, p. 21. Justin (18, 4, 3-18; 6;8) gives a much more detailed account of the incident: ". . . itaque Elissa delata in Africae sinum incolae loci eius adventu peregrinorum mutuarumque rerum commercio gaudentes in amicitiam sollicitat, dein empto loco, qui corio bovis tegi posset, in quo fessos longa navigatione socios, quoad proficeretur, reficere posset, corium in tenuissimas partes secari iubet atque ita maius loci spatium quam petierat occupat, unde postea ei loco Byrsae nomen fuit." *Historicae Philippicae*, 1802, p. 198.

has emphasized the artificial nature of the legend by pointing out the similarities between it and the stories about Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* as well as Buddhist canonical tales like the Ghata Jātaka.²⁷ According to the *Mahāvamsa*, the Sākya prince Paṇḍu, son of Amitodana, heard that both his homeland and his clan would be destroyed soon. He left his homeland and founded a new kingdom on the southern side of the river Ganges. Paṇḍu had seven sons and a daughter. Bhaddakaccānā, the daughter, was famed for her beauty and had many suitors. The king put her in a ship and set her adrift on the Ganges declaring: "Whosoever can, let him take my daughter." The suitors failed to halt the ship and it finally reached the shores of Sri Lanka where Bhaddakaccānā became the queen of Paṇḍuvāsudeva, the nephew of Vijaya. On hearing that their sister was living in Sri Lanka, six of her brothers came and settled in different parts of the island. Bhaddakaccānā had ten sons and a daughter. The daughter's name was Cittā but she came to be known as Unmādacittā "since she drove men mad by the mere sight of her beauty". Soothsayers had predicted that her son would slay her brothers. So she was made to live in a chamber built on a single pillar to which access was only through the king's bed-chamber. Dīghāyu, one of the Sākya princes who had settled in the island, had a son called Gāmanī. This young man saw Unmādacittā and fell in love with her. He cleverly found a means of visiting her and the result of their union was Paṇḍukābhaya.²⁸

This story and the tales about the boyhood of Paṇḍukābhaya which follow it bear a remarkable similarity not only with the Ghata Jātaka and the stories about Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* as Mendis has noted but also with the Greek myth of Perseus.²⁹ But what is most relevant to the present discussion is that the myth recounted above embodies a "message" contrapuntal to the one detected in the tale of the first visit of the Buddha. The story makes it quite clear that Paṇḍukābhaya was descended, through both his mother and father, from Amitodana. And Amitodana, according to the chronicle, was the youngest brother of Suddhodana. Though it is not specifically stated, it is not difficult for anyone who has listened to or read the story to deduce that Paṇḍukābhaya belonged to the Sākya clan and was a great grand-nephew of the Buddha. It thus becomes understandable why Paṇḍukābhaya is given so much prominence in the *Mahāvamsa*: The myth makes him the first Sākya prince on the throne of Sri Lanka. The chronicle alludes to the destruction of the Sākya kingdom and the annihilation of the Sākya clan by Viḍūḍabha³⁰ and thereby seems to suggest that Paṇḍu, the great grand-father of Paṇḍukābhaya, was the only member of the clan who survived. Thus the kings of the dynasty that Paṇḍukābhaya founded were not only Sākya princes but also descendants of the sole surviving member of the Sākya clan. Hence, if the Buddha had come to Sri Lanka as a conqueror and acquired the suzerainty over the island, the descendants of Paṇḍu would be the legitimate heirs. It would thus appear that the two myths, the tale of the first visit of the Buddha and the account of the genealogy of Paṇḍukābhaya, form the "point" and "counterpoint" as it

27. G. C. Mendis, "The Mahābhārata Legends in the Mahāvamsa", *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, New Series, Vol. V, 1956, pp. 81-84.

28. *Mv.* 8.18-9.27

29. Apollodorus II, 2.1, 4 and Pausanias II, 16.2, 25, 6. See William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, London, 1867, Vol. I, p. 14 and Vol. III p. 205.

30. G. P. Malalasekara, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, Vol. II, pp. 171, 857

were in conveying a politically significant message. They jointly serve the function of legitimizing the claims of the first dynasty of Anurādhapura to suzerainty over the whole island.

According to the chronicles, the first dynasty of Anurādhapura came to an end with the death of Yasalālaka Tissa (A.D. 52-59) and it seems reasonable to date the appearance of the group of myths under discussion to a period before this. Since the political unity of the island is implicit in these myths it is tempting to consider the reign of Dutthagāmaṇi (161-137 B.C.) whose campaigns led to the establishment of a unified kingdom as the *terminus a quo* of this period. However, till about the tenth century there is no actual instance of a king claiming membership of the Sākya clan. It does not seem to be a mere coincidence that during a period of intense political struggle like the tenth century when the Sinhalese kings were threatened by foreign invaders as well as regional factions and other local rivals their inscriptions refer insistently to the Sākya connection. It was the scholar-king Kassapa V (A.D. 914-923) who in his Mādirigiriya inscription first claimed descent from the legendary Sākya king Okkāka.³¹ The chronicles state that it was Okkāka's son Okkāmuḥka who founded the Sākya dynasty of Kapilavastu and that the dynasty was known as Okkāka-paramparā after Okkāka.³² In the edicts of the successors of Kassapa V the claim to membership of the Sākya clan occurs in elaborate form. A prince called Lāmāni Mihindu claims to be the "incomparable ornament" of the Sākya clan and a descendant of Paṇḍukābhaya in an inscription issued in the reign of Dappula IV (924-935).³³ A more detailed claim occurs in a fragmentary slab inscription found in the grounds of the Abhayagiri monastery and dated in the seventh year of a king identified as Mahinda IV (956-972). In this record, the king is described as "the pinnacle of the illustrious Sāhā (Sākya) clan, who is descended from the lineage of Okāvās (Okkāka), who has come down in the succession of the great king Sudovun (Suddhodana) and who is descended from the lineage of the great king Paṇḍuvasdev Abhā".³⁴ The claims of the Sinhalese kings that through lineal descent they had the right to be the lords of "the maiden, the isle of Laṅkā" occurs in inscriptions from the time of Kassapa V.³⁵ If these edicts disregarded inconvenient matters of historical detail, like the fact that these kings of the tenth century belonged to a dynasty different from the one which Paṇḍukābhaya is said to have founded, they also did violence to the details in the myth which presented Amitodana, and not Suddhodana, as the Sākya prince from whom the kings of the first dynasty of Anurādhapura were descended. Yet, descent from Suddhodana is claimed in two more records—the Polonnaruva pillar inscription of Mahinda V (982-1029) and the Dimbulāgala inscription of Sundaramahādevī, the queen of Vikramabāhu I (1111-1132).³⁶ It is understandable that the Sinhalese kings preferred the father of the Buddha to his uncle as their ancestor. The modification of the myth brought them closer still to the Buddha himself. These inscriptions demonstrate how the myths were invoked in order to legitimize the

31. *EZ*, Vol. II, p. 30 ll. 6-8

32. *Mv*. Chapter 2

33. *paḍu abhā naranind-hu parapuren ā... sāhā kulat ektalā ṭikvā sīti...EZ*, Vol. III, pp. 222-223 ll. A17-B1, B15-17

34. *siribar sāhā kulat kot okāvās [parapurē]n bat sudovun maharaj-hu anva [ye] nā paḍuvasdev abhā maharaj-hu parapuren bat...EZ* Vol. III, p. 227 ll. 1-4 and p. 228. I have changed "Sāhā race" in Paranavitana's translation to "Sāhā clan".

35. See *EZ*, Vol. I, p. 25 ll. 4-5; p. 46 ll. 2-3; p. 117 l. 2; p. 130 l. 2; p. 246 ll. 2-3.

36. *EZ*, Vol. II, p. 95 l. 1; Vol. IV, p. 64 ll. A12-14

rights of the Sinhalese kings to rule over Sri Lanka. It was but fit and proper that the island which had been acquired by the Buddha should be ruled by his kinsmen—the members of his own lineage.

The idea that the island belonged to the Buddha has another implication. Just as much as it buttressed the rights of the Sinhalese rulers over the island, it was also amenable to the interpretation that the kingdom belonged to the *sāsana* and that the *saṅgha* as the *buddhaputra* or the spiritual offspring of the Buddha were, collectively, heirs to the island. The idea that the island belonged to the *sāsana* is specifically stated only in the Polonnaruva North Gate inscription of Nissanka Malla.³⁷ An inscription found at Anurādhapura and attributed to the reign of Mahinda IV is useful in this connection. It describes both the king and the queen as belonging to the lineage of the Sākya king Okkāka and states that the kings of Sri Lanka were “wont to don the white scarf to serve the great community of monks on the very day they celebrate the coronation festival after attaining the dignity of kingship, bestowed by the great community of monks for the purpose of defending their bowls and robes.”³⁸ Two significant ideas are embodied in this statement. One is that the protection of the *saṅgha* and their possessions was the express duty of the king. A similar concept is found in the Polonnaruva inscription of the Velaik-kāras. According to this record, Vijayabāhu I accepted the crown on the request of the *saṅgha* in order to defend the *sāsana*.³⁹ In his Hāṭadāge inscription Nissanka Malla states that the protection of the *sāsana* was a function of the kings of Sri Lanka.⁴⁰ The second idea embodied in the Anurādhapura inscription of Mahinda IV is that kingship was an office conferred by the *saṅgha*. The inscription refers, though not in very clear terms, to a ritual performed on the same day as the consecration, which emphasised this relationship between the *saṅgha* and the king. It would thus appear that the idea embodied in the myths that the island belonged to the Buddha was basic to the political concepts and ritual pertaining to the investiture of the king reflected in the inscriptions. The myths, the political ideas and the ritual together reflect a political system in which the succession to power was based on lineal descent as well as on the concurrence of the *saṅgha* who enjoyed great prestige, and wielded a profound influence in this society.

The emphasis on the function of myth as political charter in the preceding discussion does not imply that myth cannot be understood at more than one level. Myth could indeed be multi-functional, and this or that function could vary in importance according to situations and from time to time. Further, the analysis of a myth need not be limited to identifying its functions. For instance, the myths of the visit of the Buddha also underline the belief in the destiny of the island as the *dhammadīpa*, the home of the “true doctrine” The efflorescence of Buddhism in the island at a time when it was on the decline in its original home was conducive to the rise of such a belief. The *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Vaṃsatthappakāsini* state that soon after attaining Buddhahood, even

37. *budu sasunaṭa himi lakdivaṭa* . . . EZ, Vol. II, p. 161 ll.8-9

38. *tumā pay sivur rak (nuvas) mahasaṅg-hu pilivāyū rajsiri pūmiṇā sāṇū bisev vindha (aa) vas sang-haṭ meheyat uvasarvas (sevel) bandha* . . . EZ, Vol. I, p. 237 ll.53-55. D. M. de Z., Wickremasinghe translated *tumā pay sivur* as “the bowl and robe of the Buddha”. EZ Vol. I, p. 240. This is inaccurate.

39. *buddhaśāsanam rakṣikka vēṇḍi saṅgha-niyogattāl tiram ḍi-sudi* . . . EI, Vol. XVIII, p. 336 ll.8-9

40. EZ, Vol. II, p. 97 ll.3-4

before he rose from his seat after attaining Buddhahood, the Buddha foresaw the destiny of the island and the need for him to visit it.⁴¹ It is also noteworthy that these tales are concerned with the sanctity of three main Buddhist shrines in different parts of the island: the *stūpa* at Mahiyaṅgana, the Rājāyatana-dhātu-vihāra in Nāgadīpa and the *stūpa* at Kalyāni.⁴² The *Dīpavaṃsa* states that during his third visit the Buddha also sanctified by his presence the sites of the Dīghavāpīcetiya and the Bo-tree at the Mahāvihāra while the *Mahāvāṃsa* adds four more places: the Sumanakūṭa and the sites of the Mahāthūpa, the Tūpārāma and the Silācetiya.⁴³ Another aspect of the myths is the characterization they present of three types of non-human beings: the *devas*, the *nāgas* and the *yakkhas*. Both the *devas* and the *nāgas* are presented as friends of the faith who accept the authority of the Buddha. On the other hand, the attitude towards the *yakkhas* is unmistakably hostile. The efficacy of the *paritta* incantations as a charm against the *yakkhas* is another of the "messages" that the myths convey. The *Dīpavaṃsa* states that soon after transferring the *yakkhas* to Giridīpa the Buddha recited the Metta-paritta, circumambulated the island and thus made it "protected for ever".⁴⁴ This detail is not found in the *Mahāvāṃsa*. But the *Vamsaṭṭhappakāsinī* takes up the theme again in stating that after transferring the *yakkhas* to Giridīpa the Buddha recited the *paritta* and thereby "established his authority". The authority of the Buddha "established on that day" is supposed to be as effective against the *yakkhas* as the flaming leather rug had been.⁴⁵

While it is evident from the preceding discussion that the myths analysed in this study could be understood and interpreted at more than one level, the justification of political dominance and of the claims of a specific dynasty to power became one of their principal functions. The myths also reveal the importance of the principle of "lineal descent" in legitimizing rights of overlordship. The analysis of myth in the present paper leans heavily, as its title suggests, on the theories of Malinowski, but it has also drawn on the theoretical work of other students of myth, in particular Lévi-Strauss. It demonstrates that some of the conceptual tools utilized in the study of myth in tribal society are useful even for the historian in the analysis of myths from more complex social formations. In literate societies witnessing a process of development leading to the emergence of the state or where the state has already come into being, myths would be to varying extents, but markedly, impregnated with political ideology. In the study of the ancient history of South Asia, historians will have to move away from their traditional methodology and pay greater attention to the study of myth as a noteworthy source of information on social and political ideology.⁴⁶

R. A. L. H. Gunawardana

41. *Dv.* 1.17-27; *Vap.* Vol. I, pp. 66-69

42. In its account of the second visit of the Buddha, the *Dv.* does not specify that the incident took place in Nāgadīpa. But it is clear from its description of the visit that it is referring to the same shrine mentioned in the *Mv.* *Dv.* 1.52-53, 2.52; *Mv.* 1. 21-24, 47, 67-68, 75

43. *Dv.* 2.60-61; *Mv.* 1.77-83

44. *Dv.* 1.80

45. *parittam katvā ānaṃ bandhivā ... tadā pana baddha-ānaṃ tesam nisīdacammaṃ iva ahoṣi.* *Vap.* Vol. I, p. 81

46. The author is indebted to Dr. Merlin Peris for assistance in clarifying the meaning of the Latin text quoted in note 26, and to Dr. H. L. Seneviratne, Mr. H. A. I. Goonetilleke and Prof. S. Kiribamune for comments.