

# VIBHISANA AND VIJAYANAGAR AN ESSAY ON RELIGION AND GEOPOLITICS IN MEDIEVAL SRI LANKA

Jonathan S. Walters

Who is Vibhisana? Students of Indic literature will quickly respond, "He is a character in the *Ramayana*, the brother of Ravana, king of Lanka, whom he betrays in the service of Rama, paramount overlord of India". Students of Sri Lankan religion will add that he is also a god in the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, sometimes treated as one of the "four guardian deities" of the Island, who lives at Kalaniya.

Both sets of students might be perplexed, though, at what the other could tell them. Students of Indic literary culture should be surprised to learn that the *Ramayana* is only peripherally important in the religious history of Sri Lanka. Unlike Hindu India, and unlike Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia, in Sri Lanka -- at least before the Kandyan Period, when South Indian (and Southeast Asian) standards were much in vogue--the *Ramayana* was not a popular source for temple art, it was not a popular theme in literary composition, it was not widely circulated in manuscript, it was not the basis for a yearly festival of re-enactment; there is no "Sinhala *Ramayana*" comparable to the vernacular recensions made in other parts of the world. Except for the cult of Vibhisana itself, most of the pre-Kandyan evidence we have that the *Ramayana* was even known in Sri Lanka is evidence that Sri Lankans wanted nothing to do with India's great epic - which is hardly surprising in light of the fact that *Ramayana* narrates the story of the Indian conquest of Lanka. Buddhist authors reviled the text as useless<sup>1</sup>; the Sri Lankans smashed to bits Chola inscriptions that taunted them with analogies to the *Ramayana* story in the wake of their defeat<sup>2</sup>. Students of Sri Lankan religion should be surprised to learn

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Jatakathakatha* contains several alternate versions of the story of Rama (e.g. *Dasaratha Jataka*) which replace its main themes with Buddhist ones. Buddhaghosa referred twice to the *Ramayana* as "*nirathakatha*", "worthless talk" (for references see G.P.Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, "Ramayana" q.v.); the authors of the medieval Sinhala prose works *Amavatara* and *Saddharmaratnavaliya* denounced it with the same designation ("*nirarthakatha*"; for references see Anuradha Seneviratne, "Rama and Ravana: History, Legend and Belief in Sri Lanka", *Ancient Ceylon*, No.5 [1984] p. 229.)

<sup>2</sup> Rajendra Chola I, who was really responsible for the destruction of Sri Lanka's Ikshvaku imperial dynasty, claimed, "The lord of the Raghavas (i.e., Rama) constructed a bridge across the water of the ocean with (the assistance of) able monkeys, killed with great difficulty the king of Lanka (i.e., Ravana) with

that Vibhisana is not a god in the *Ramayana*, he is a demon (his name means "Terrifying" in Sanskrit). He is not worshipped in India, unlike "divine" figures in the *Ramayana* such as Hanuman and Rama. To my knowledge he is only found<sup>3</sup> at one Indian temple, on an outside wall of the Chola imperial monument in Tanjore, where his statue was placed, not as an object of worship, but as a symbol of the conquest of Sri Lanka<sup>4</sup>. Why is this betrayer of his own brother worshipped as a god only in Sri Lanka, a land which has little other traffic with the *Ramayana* mytheme, which happens to be the very nation he betrayed to India (where he is not worshipped at all)? Who is Vibhisana?

Paranavitana<sup>5</sup> and others<sup>6</sup> have tried to answer this question by assuming that the cult of Vibhisana dates back to the time of the actual *Ramayana* war, when an "historical" Vibhisana, as Ravana's successor to Sri Lankan kingship, was first crowned and later deified. But there are problems with this historicist interpretation. Most important, it is not at all clear that "Lanka" of the *Ramayana* and modern Sri Lanka have always been considered the same; the exact location of "Lanka" remains hotly contested to this day. After the time of the Chola inscriptions we can be certain that this

---

sharp-edged arrows; (but), this terrible General of that (king Arunmolivarman) crossed the ocean by ships and burnt the Lord of Lanka (Ceylon). Hence Rama is (surely ) surpassed by this (Chola General)." E.Hultzsch, tr., "The Tiruvalangadu Plates of the Sixth Year of Rajendra-Chola I", *South Indian Inscriptions* III: 421, vv. 80 (No.205). For smashed Chola inscriptions discovered in Sri Lanka see *EZ* 6 :1. It was probably to mock/counter precisely this rhetoric that the *Culavamsa* provides allusions to the same story in its description of the reigns of Parakrambahu I and Parakramabahu II (CV 64: 42; 68:20; 75:59; 83:46).

- <sup>3</sup> By "found" I mean that an image is installed; he is of course depicted in temple murals all over India.
- <sup>4</sup> A photograph of this image is to be found in A.L.Basham's *The Wonder that was India*.
- <sup>5</sup> S.Paranavitana, *University of Ceylon History of Ceylon*, Vol.I. Pt.II, p. 765.
- <sup>6</sup> Jonathan Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon* London: Richard Bentley (1840) Vol. I, p. 152; E.W.Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon* Colombo: Gunasena (1946) p. 44; K.W.De A. Wijesinghe, ed. and tr., *Selalihini Sandesa* Colombo: Oriental Press (1949) p. 80; Seneviratne, *op.cit.*, p. 234.

equation was made in the Indic world, so the issue is moot when discussing post-Cholan history: Sri Lanka was definitely considered to be the same place as "Lanka". But it would be difficult to establish that fact for the pre-Cholan Period: the (ca. 9th century, A.D.) *Mahamayurividyarajni*<sup>7</sup> contains a (somewhat earlier) geographical catalogue of demons which does indeed list "Vibhisana, the demon in Lanka" but names separate *yaksas* as the demons in Tamraparnidvipa, i.e. Sri Lanka. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, (ca. 1st century, B.C.) Rama passes this island (Sri Lanka) on his return journey from Lanka, the actual home of Ravana (which other historicists consequently identify with the Maldives)<sup>8</sup>. We can hardly discern strong historical grounds for assuming the equation of Sri Lanka and "Lanka" in about 2500, B.C. ! Moreover, the earliest *historical* evidence of Vibhisana worship in Sri Lanka can be dated with precision to the Gampola Period, 1344 A.D., which is an odd fact if he had already been worshipped here for four thousand years prior to that date!

There is another possible explanation for the cult of Vibhisana in the offing which might be made: like the other gods in the Buddhist pantheon, he must be treated as a "Hindu influence" on the Island. But even if we admit the possibility of "influence" in general - which is highly problematic in its own right<sup>9</sup> - in this particular instance we cannot point to an "influencer" because the cult of Vibhisana is unknown outside Sri Lanka.

So it remains a challenge for the historian of Sri Lankan religion to explain the worship of Vibhisana. In this essay I want to suggest an explanation that avoids the pitfalls in the "historicist" and "influence" schools, yet accounts for the enigmatic cult of

---

<sup>7</sup> Sylvain Levi, "Catalogue Geographique des Yaksas", *Journale Asiatique*.

<sup>8</sup> These details were provided to me by Prof. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty; I have not found the issue sufficiently interesting to follow out the scholarship on the "historical" Lanka.

<sup>9</sup> The word is actually a technical term from medieval astrology, equivalent to the Sinhala term *graha-dosa*. Its currency in academic discourse precludes a scientific investigation of the process by which thinking people (e.g. Buddhists) interacted with other thinking people (e.g. Hindus) in history, replacing that investigation with the (magical) thesis that one reified hypothetical entity ("Hinduism") can alter the structure of another ("Buddhism") in the absence of human agency. In future work I intend to take up the problem of "influence" with reference to the widespread worship of Vishnu (sometimes also equated with Rama; see Seneviratne *op.cit.*) among Sinhala Buddhists.

this figure. My own method is strictly historical<sup>10</sup> in that it asks questions about Vibhisana within the historical period to which the *evidence* of his worship belongs. What we know for fact is only the evidence itself - people in certain periods wrote texts and carved inscriptions that mention Vibhisana - and we can be quite certain that the bulk of this evidence belongs to the Gampola and Kotte Periods. In seeking the rationale for Vibhisana's cult, we therefore should focus on the question: what was it about the Gampola and Kotte Periods that constituted an environment in which writing texts and carving inscriptions about Vibhisana was rational and meaningful? Why did he first appear in the historical record only in 1344 A.D.? Why was his significance eclipsed (by other "guardian deities" like Natha) from Kandyan times to the present?

The place to start is the evidence itself, for it has much to tell us about the context it addresses. The evidence, as I have already hinted, is of two kinds: there is an inscription that mentions Vibhisana, dated 1344 (which is related to two other inscriptions of that year and the temples to which they are attached) and there are a number of slightly later "Message" (*Sandesaya*) poems that invoke his blessings. The first thing to notice is that the cult of Vibhisana was primarily a concern of the ruling elite in 14th and 15th century Sri Lanka. The inscriptions were erected by or in the name of the predominant low-country rulers of the time (Bhuvanaikabahu IV of Gampola and Nissanka Alakeswara of Raigama); they record the temple-building projects of these leaders' chief ministers and leading monks at three "official" (royal) sites: Lankatilaka, Gadaladeniya and Kalaniya. The *Sandesayas* were composed by royal poet-monks and invoke Vibhisana's blessings on the ruling elite, especially members of the royal family itself. Vibhisana thus belonged to the "official religion", the "state religion", of the day.

This insight allows us to frame the basic question more precisely: what was it about the Gampola and Kotte Periods that constituted an environment in which writing texts and carving inscriptions about Vibhisana was rational and meaningful as an element

---

<sup>10</sup> There are of course many schools of thought in the philosophy of history; my own definition of "strictly historical" follows R.G.Collingwood's lead. For a brief introduction to this great systematic philosopher's historical method see *An Autobiography* Oxford: Clarendon (1939); cp. *The Idea of History* (only the first part; the "Prolegomenon" was not written by Collingwood-himself and *Philosophical Method* Oxford, Clarendon (1933). My development of Collingwood's method participates in the on-going seminar on south Asian Texts at the University of Chicago; on the "constitutive" method developed in this seminar see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1990), also Inden's "Imperial Purana, Imperial Formation" and my "Positivist Paradise Lost: On the History of the Sri Lankan Pali Chronicle" forthcoming in the first volume of Inden, ed., *Text and Knowledge in South Asia*.

in the "official religion" of the Gampola and Kotte courts? The usual thesis about "official religion" -- that rulers "legitimated" their power by appealing to the religious beliefs of the ruled--is rather unhelpful in this instance because, as I have indicated, there is no historical evidence that Vibhisana's cult was even known before 1344 A.D., let alone that it was a popular cult among the Sri Lankan masses. The evidence we do have indicates that its sole domain was the royal court. Moreover, it is hardly self-evident that worship of the figure who betrayed Sri Lanka to India and brought about its destruction would particularly endear Sri Lankan rulers to the masses.

But "official religion" in any period speaks to at least two audiences, only one of them local. In addition to speaking symbolically, doctrinally and practically to the constituents of the speakers' own polity, "official religion" also represents the polity to other polities with which it interacts. That is, "official religion" promulgated by the ruling elite, to whatever extent it exceeds the limits of personal religiosity and enters the world of politics, is a matter of both internal and international politics: it has a geopolitical dimension. As the evidence does not allow us to argue that the cult of Vibhisana addressed local politics, we should ask if the evidence allows us to argue that the cult of Vibhisana addressed international politics. Our question thus becomes more precise: was there anything about the geopolitical reality faced by Sri Lanka in the Gampola and Kotte Periods that constituted an environment in which carving inscriptions and writing texts about Vibhisana was rational and meaningful as an element in the "official religion" of the Gampola and Kotte courts?

Having framed the question with some precision, it behooves us to examine more specifically the details about Vibhisana that the evidence provides. As the inscription of 1344 A.D.<sup>11</sup> tells us nothing about Vibhisana except that he was declared in that year to be the guardian of the western quarter of the Island, our main source for the theology of this god is the *Sandesaya* literature. I am no expert in medieval Sinhala court poetry, so I shall limit my remarks to three of the most famous *Sandesaya* poems, which are available in English translation: *Mayura Sandesaya*, *Hansa Sandesaya*, and *Salalihini Sandesaya*. These texts were composed during the century between the last quarter of the fourteenth and the last quarter of the fifteenth centuries, a century that witnessed the final days of Gampola, the emergence of Kotte as a power-base under the Alakeswaras, the establishment of Kotte as the capital of the Sinhala kings and a renaissance in Sinhala culture of which the *Sandesaya* poems themselves remain the most telling evidence.

The Vibhisana who emerges in these poems is certainly the brother of Ravana and friend of Rama: we cannot doubt that his worship presupposes the *Ramayana*

---

<sup>11</sup> *JRASC B* 10: 87 ff. (No.34).

mytheme. But in the *Sandesaya* poems we find no retelling of the *Ramayana* itself; there is no description of Ravana's abduction of Sita, no mention of Vibhisana's attempt to convince his brother to return her; we do not learn about Ravana's angry accusation of Vibhisana's cowardice, we do not see Vibhisana betray his brother for Rama, we do not hear about the Indian army (led by Hanuman) that destroyed Lanka. Instead, in the *Sandesayas* the *Ramayana* has already ended; Rama is "victorious" (no indication that the victory was scored against Lanka) and he has assigned kingship in Lanka to his friend Vibhisana. Although a slightly imaginative reading of some versions of the *Ramayana* might allow us to admit that this scenario aptly describes that state of things at the end of India's great epic, it is striking that so little of the story is told or even alluded to. Further, the *Sandesayas* describe richly Vibhisana's appearance and the liturgy at his temple in Kalaniya, details which are found only here. The *Sandesayas* thus invoke a Vibhisana who is, in addition to being the Vibhisana of *Ramayana*, a "new" Vibhisana, the Vibhisana of medieval Sri Lanka.

Because our central question concerns politics, what I shall call the "political theology" of Vibhisana in the *Sandesaya* poems is more important for present purposes than the iconometric and liturgical embellishments. This theology too is absent in the various Indian recensions of *Ramayana*; but it dominates the *Sandesayas* to the exclusion of the stories and theologies that *do* constitute the epic in India. In the *Sandesayas* Vibhisana, having been empowered as king of Sri Lanka long ago by Rama, continues in the (then-) present to have a special role in "protecting" and "blessing" Sri Lankan kingship.

The Peacock in the Mayura *Sandesaya* addresses him thus:

O God Vibhisana,  
 must thou protect,  
 throughout this kalpa  
 --yea, unto its end--  
 our glorious king endowed with wide-flung power,  
 his Queen and brothers three and all hosts,  
 His officers, ministers (inclusive).  
 Give him such victory as was giv'n of yore  
 to (famed) King Rama, Dasaratha's son --  
 that so may he dominion (firm) extend  
 In ten directions; (also) bless them all  
 that greater prosperity may be theirs  
 than Vishnu or God Sakra e'er enjoyed<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> John M. Senaveratne, "Kelaniya in the 14th Century as Depicted in the Maurya *Sandesaya*", *Ceylon Antigony and Literary Register*, (January 1916) Vol. 1, Part III, p. 164.

Here Vibhisana is the focus for both the stability and the prosperity of Sri Lankan kingship.

This dual responsibility is more explicit in *Hamsa Sandesaya*; the Swan is instructed to "make obeisance at the noble feet of god Vibhisana, who was consecrated in the midst of the host of gods, and was assigned lordship over Ceylon by the popular King Rama of world-wide fame, who as a human being frightened and destroyed innumerable demon armies with one voice like a lordly lion ... Solicit the god Vibhisana to confer royal glory and blessings for longevity on this renowned King Sri Parakramabahu [VI, of Kotte] ... so that the king may enjoy the benefits of kingship for long; and entreat him further to eradicate all obstacles coming from enemies and protect him with increased blessing. Request the noble god to protect forever, as usual and with all regularity, the queen [etc.]"<sup>13</sup>

The "blessings" that Vibhisana bestows on the Sri Lankan king are thus manifold; he grants royal power, keeps the king alive, provides military support against enemies and economic strength; this contractual duty -- "as usual and with all regularity" -- extends beyond the king to his entire court, so the worship of Vibhisana effects the stability and prosperity of Sri Lankan kingship in the future as well as the present [and, we might add, in the past: "This god has occasionally destroyed the enemies and won victory for the ancient kings of Ceylon who solicited him in various ways, and he has been awarded villages, elephants, horses and followers"<sup>14</sup>].

The "contract" between the Sri Lankan king and Vibhisana is more explicit still in *Salalihini Sandesaya*. Here "the God-king [Vibhisana] bestows all such things that gladden the heart as fame, wealth, power, forces, war-victories, kingship, offices, eminent success (in undertakings), long life and strength, for the mere wishing ..."<sup>15</sup> The futurity of this "blessing" is obvious in the fact that what the Salalihini asks the god to provide aging Prakramabahu VI is an acceptable heir to the throne.

Returning to our central question, the *Sandesayas* certainly provide grounds for arguing that, as part of the "official religion" of the Gampola and Kotte courts, the worship of Vibhisana was a matter of geopolitical significance: recognition and bestowal of kingship, fame, economic prosperity, military alliances and war victories all participate

---

<sup>13</sup> K.V.P. Vikramasinghe, tr., *Hamsa Sandesaya* Colombo: Gunasena, (1979) pp. 236-237.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>15</sup> Wijesinghe, *op.cit.* p.35.

in the sphere of international politics. But it remains to be shown *how* the worship of Vibhisana could have fulfilled a geopolitical dimension of "official religion". What was it about the geopolitical reality faced by Sri Lanka in the Gampola and Kotte Periods that made Vibhisana's cult geopolitically rational and meaningful at that time? Why, of all the possible deities, should Vibhisana have been posited as the bestower, protector and increaser of Sri Lankan kingship during the Gampola and Kotte Periods?

Answering this question requires that we now look beyond the primary evidence to the historical situation in which it was produced. Throughout the Gampola and Kotte Periods the kings in Sri Lanka's low country faced an internal threat from the *Cinkaiyariyan* (Arya Cakravartin) rulers of Jaffna, and until the early fifteenth century there was also strife between Gampola and Kotte. But these three --Gampola, Kotte and Jaffna-- were petty kingdoms indeed when compared with the real contender for overlordship that this period produced - Vijayanagar, the South Indian home of the most powerful empire in fourteenth and fifteenth century South Asia. Interaction with the Vijayanagar empire dominated geopolitics in South Asia during the Gampola and Kotte Periods. The dictates of Vijayanagar could be ignored only at the risk of military and economic destruction; the kings of Vijayanagar assumed responsibility for political order and stability throughout the region.

Nilakanta Sastri has surveyed the plentiful evidence that the Vijayanagar kings with their powerful armies did indeed play a significant role in late fourteenth and fifteenth century Sri Lankan politics<sup>16</sup>. Yet he conceives of this relationship in entirely *eristical* or contentious terms: Vijayanagar makes "inroads" throughout this period by its military expeditions, and usurps taxes in the intermediate periods, during which the Sri Lankans submit. For Nilakanta Sastri, the impact of Vijayanagar on Sri Lanka does not begin until it has sent an army to the Island. But if Vijayanagar was simply an aggressor against Sri Lanka, it becomes impossible to understand why the Island was not just swallowed up by its considerably more powerful neighbour. Why did the Vijayanagar kings wait nearly fifty years after the Empire was founded (1336) to invade Sri Lanka (ca. 1385)?<sup>17</sup> Once they had invaded, why did they leave all three kingdoms on the Island intact, even serving to protect them from each other? How were they able to collect taxes here before sending their first military expedition?<sup>18</sup> What gave them the

---

<sup>16</sup> K.A.Nilakanta Sastri, "Inroads by Pandya and Vijayanagara Empires", *UCHC* Vol. I, Pt. II, pp. 686-690.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 686-7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; there is a Muslim account of 1378 stating that the Sri Lankan king was in the practice of sending gifts to the Vijayanagar court.



right to intervene in the first place?

It is useful to remember in this connection that relationships among human beings--individuals or polities -- are seldom if ever merely eristical, mere confrontations aimed at the total destruction of one party by the other. Instead, they almost always involve some overlapping *dialectical* dimension aimed at reaching compromise for the betterment of both parties<sup>19</sup>. I submit that Vijayanagar would and even protected its kingdoms, would not have been able to collect taxes without military force and would not have had a right to intervene in Sri Lankan politics *unless* such a dialectical, constructive relationship with Sri Lankan rulers had already been initiated, a relationship involving not only confrontations aimed at crushing Sri Lanka but also dialogues aimed at making Sri Lanka want to be part of the Indian empire and at making the Indian empire want to bother with Sri Lanka. The eristical side--quashing the rebellions of a united Sri Lanka as well as adjudicating civil wars within a divided Sri Lanka--could have come into play only after Vijayanagar, through dialogue, had been recognized by Sri Lankans as having a right to intervene, and only after Vijayanagar, in the same process, had determined that it wanted the responsibilities incumbent upon those who secure that right.

Although it is a commonplace in the study of Sri Lankan history to focus upon the eristical side of Sri Lankan relationships with India, at least during the Gampola and Kotte Periods a dialectical relationship would have appealed to all parties involved. Vijayanagar could only benefit by the peace and stability in the region which joining all contending parties together under its own umbrella guaranteed. From the local perspective, it is hard to imagine that the three kingdoms on the Island could have withstood each other, let alone more powerful neighbours, without relying on a "big brother" to keep the peace. The rulers of Jaffna and the Alakeswaras already had linguistic, economic and cultural ties with South India that would have paved the way for agreement. The kings of Gampola had every motive--their very survival!-- to effect their own understanding with Vijayanagar.

There is in fact evidence that such a dialectical relationship, which constituted the participation of various Sri Lankan factions in the Vijayanagar Empire, did exist long before the Vijayanagar army first arrived on the Island. This is not merely the negative evidence that that army did not destroy Gampola and Kotte even when it had the chance,

---

<sup>19</sup> On eristical and dialectical relationships and their significance in the study of human history, see Colingwood's *Philosophical Method*, *op.cit.*

even when it was engaged in supporting the program of the Arya Cakravartin in Jaffna<sup>20</sup> (though that evidence is telling enough). Rather, we can point positively to the very "Constitution" of this relationship - the three inscriptions of 1344 and the temples to which they are attached.

The most obvious constitution of a dialectical relationship between Bhuvanaikabahu IV of Gampola and the kings of Vijayanagar is the Gadaladeniya temple. The unique architecture of this monument (paralleled somewhat by the contemporary *Natha devalaya* in Kandy) has long been recognized as a harmonious mixture of Vijayanagar and Sri Lankan styles; it replaces the typical Dravidian *sikhara* with a *stupa*<sup>21</sup>. The Gadaladeniya temple was in a part a visual representation of the constructive relationship between Gampola and Vijayanagar that had been initiated by 1344, a visual representation of a Hindu empire (*devalaya*) with room enough for a Buddhist kingdom (*stupa*). According to the inscription<sup>22</sup> attached to this temple, the first pious act of Dhammakirtti, the monk who (together with Sena Lankadhikara and other powerful ministers) oversaw the construction of Gadaladeniya in the name of Bhuvanaikabahu IV, was to build an image house at Sri Dhanakataka in India (Andhra Pradesh) which, as ancient Amaravati, was once a site of considerable significance for Indian Buddhism<sup>23</sup>. As Vijayanagar inscriptions at the Saiva temple in nearby

<sup>20</sup> See Nilakanta Sastri, *op.cit.*, p.687-8 and S.D.Natesan, "The Northern Kingdom", *UCHC* I: II, pp. 691-702 on Jaffna's relationships with Vijayanagar; cp. C.R.de Silva, *Sri Lanka: A History* New Delhi: Vikas, 1987) pp. 91-97. My understanding of this period has been greatly furthered by Prof. de Silva's manuscript on the founding of Kotte, which I believe is still unpublished.

<sup>21</sup> S.Paranavitana, "Gadaladeniya Rock Inscription of Dharmmakirtti Sthavira", *EZ* IV: 90-91; *op.cit.*, "Architecture, Sculpture and Painting", *UCHC* I: II, pp. 784-786; also K.M.De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, Berkely: U.Cal. Press (1981) p. 94 and John C.Holt, *Buddha in the Crown*, New York: Oxford (1990) p.100.

<sup>22</sup> S.Paranavitana, "Gadaladeniya Rock Inscription", *op.cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Amaravati boasts some of the finest Buddhist sculpture in the world, comparable to the carving at Sanchi. It was the capital of the imperial Satavahanas and continued to be a focus for Indian Buddhism throughout the Ikshvaku ascendancy. Though it fell to ruin after the advent of the Pallavas, it was a focus for attempted revivals of Indian Buddhism well beyond the Chola Period, revivals in which Sri Lankan Buddhism always played an important role. I intend to explore, in future work, the significance of Amaravati as a focus for Indian Buddhism in a post-Buddhist India, paying special attention to the Sri

Dharanikota make clear<sup>24</sup>, this site was within the confines of the Vijayanagar Empire. The permission required for Dhammakirtti's temple-building project there could have been granted only by the Vijayanagar king himself; a constructive relationship between Gampola and Vijayanagar must have existed by that time. This Buddhist image-house in Hindu India--which we can suppose to have similarly blended the architectural styles of classical Sri Lanka and Vijayanagar--was a counterpart to the Gadaladeniya Temple. Both parties in this dialectical relationship possessed a copy of the "Constitution".

More subtle is the manner by which the Lankatilaka and Kalaniya temples' inscriptions of 1344 furthered the "Constitution" of this Sri Lankan participation in the Vijayanagar empire. Understanding it requires that we finally clarify, then answer, our central question: what was it about the Vijayanagar empire that constituted an environment in which writing texts and carving inscriptions about Vibhisana was a rational and meaningful geopolitical element of the "official religion" of the Gampola and Kotte courts? The answer to this question is that the Vijayanagar kings claimed to be Rama incarnate and consequently laid out their city, Vijayanagar, according to the sacred geography of the *Ramayana*<sup>25</sup>. The "Constitution" of the Vijayanagar Empire itself was, in other words, a complex "homology" between the (mythic) unity of the Indic world under Rama after the *Ramayana* war, on the one hand, and the (actual, political) unity of the Indic world under the Vijayanagar kings on the other. Identification of subjugated (and/or willing) vassal states with the many groups that joined Rama in the *Ramayana* was a way of constituting and describing actual relationships between these groups and Rama's (then-) present "homologue", the king of Vijayanagar. Within such a discursive

---

#### Lankan activities in Andhra Pradesh.

<sup>24</sup> For Vijayanagar Period inscriptions at the Amaresvara Temple in Dharanikota, one mile distant from the Buddhist site, see K. V. Subrahmanya Aiyer, ed., *South Indian Inscriptions* VI:104-134, Nos. 215-240, 242-244, 247-250. One Vijayanagar inscription at this site has been described in English (the above-mentioned inscriptions are in Telegu); see H. K. Narasimhaswami, ed., *South Indian Inscriptions* XVI:62.

<sup>25</sup> Especially significant in this regard is John M. Fritz's "surface archaeological" work at the ruins of Vijayanagar; see his "Vijayanagar: Authority and Meaning of a South Indian Imperial Capital", *American Anthropologist* 88 (1986) pp. 44-55. Fritz gave a brilliant talk at the Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin, Madison, in November 1987, which detailed even further than this article the layout of Vijayanagar as a homologue of the *Ramayana*; my own ideas benefitted greatly from personal communication with him after this conference.

environment we can readily understand the significance of Vibhisana; Vibhisana is the king of Lanka who participates in the peace and prosperity wrought by Rama's victory over Ravana. His homologue in the (then-) present is the king of Sri Lanka who participates in the peace and prosperity wrought by the ascendance of Vijayanagar.

It was thus an action of great geopolitical significance for Bhuvanaikabahu IV, in the (bilingual: Sinhala and Tamil) Lankatilaka inscription of 1344, to recognize Vibhisana as one of the guardian deities of Sri Lanka and to install an image of him at the royal temple, Lankatilaka<sup>26</sup>. This action--worshipping the archetypically pro-Indian, pro-Rama, pro-Vijayanagar Sri Lankan as a model for his own kingship--demonstrated Bhuvanaikabahu's commitment to participation in and dialogue with the Vijayanagar Empire; it wrote Sri Lanka into the constitution of Vijayanagar. Effected only a few years after the founding of Vijayanagar itself, this Sri Lankan participation may have been one of the very corner-stones of Vijayanagar's power. The geographical localization of Vibhisana in Sri Lanka provided a foundation for the geographical localization of the *Ramayana* in South India, a foundation for the constitution of Vijayanagar.

I already mentioned that another inscription dated 1344 has been discovered at Kalaniya which records, rather than the pious activities of Bhuvanaikabahu IV, the repairs effected there by Bhuvanikabahu's low-country rival, Nissanka Alakeswara<sup>27</sup>. Because Kalaniya was subsequently (as in the *Sandesaya* poems) considered to be Vibhisana's "home" in the Island, it is probable that in 1344 Alakeswara too installed an image of Vibhisana in his official temple, which probably also blended the architectural styles of Vijayanagar and Sri Lanka. Unfortunately the Portuguese destroyed all the temples and most of the images that once existed at Kalaniya (though a fourteenth century image of Rama/Krishna did survive their ravages), so this must remain largely a matter for speculation. But there are reasonable grounds for guessing that Nissanka Alakeswara also participated in the constructive relationship between Vijayanagar and Sri Lanka that

<sup>26</sup> There may also have been an image of Vibhisana at the Gadaladeniya Temple; see Holt, *op. cit.* p.100.

<sup>27</sup> H. C. P. Bell and A. Mendis Gunasekera Mudaliyar, "Kelani Vihara and Its Inscription" *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register* (January 1916) Vol. I, Pt. IV, P. 152 ff; A.Simon de Silva, "The Inscription of Kit-Siri-Mevan Kelani Vihara" *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register* (January 1917) Vol.II, Pt. III, P 149 ff.

was initiated some time prior to 1344 A.D.<sup>28</sup> It is well known that the Alakeswaras were subsequently formally allied, as "chief ministers", with the Gampola kings, and that the Gampola kings' descendants ultimately succeeded the Alakeswaras as masters of Kotte. This admittedly complex period in Sri Lankan political history becomes much more intelligible once we understand that Vibhisana's cult was the index and icon of participation in the Vijayanagar empire; Sri Lankan politics during the Gampola and Kotte Periods proceeded within Vijayanagar's mighty shadow.

Thus, when the *Sandesaya* poems enumerated the benefits derived from the worship of Vibhisana they simultaneously enumerated the benefits derived from participation in the Vijayanagar Empire that Vibhisana's cult literally constituted. So long as the kings of Sri Lanka continued to participate in the Vijayanagar empire, they continued to solicit the factors of Vibhisana, that friend of "the popular King Rama of world-wide fame" (i.e. the king of Vijayanagar) who granted the continuity of their kingship. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that Vibhisana's political/royal significance was eclipsed (by other "guardian deities" like Natha) during the Kandyan Period<sup>29</sup>, for Vijayanagar never recovered from being repeatedly sacked by the Muslims near the beginning of the seventeenth century, and with it died the discursive environment in which Vibhisana's cult was a rational and meaningful geopolitical element in the "official religion" of the Sri Lankan state.

But the effects of more than a century and a half of royal support for Vibhisana did not disappear overnight, and they have not disappeared to this day. In some circles Vibhisana continues to be listed among the "four guardian deities" of Sri Lanka. His cult is still viable in and around Colombo, where his favours are, however, solicited by the low-country villagers who flock to the temples that boast Vibhisana *devalayas* (Kalaniya, Kotte and Bellanwila Rajamaha viharayas) rather than by Sri Lanka's rulers<sup>30</sup>. That he remains a local god, despite the withdrawal of royal support for his cult centuries ago, demonstrates the degree to which the ruling elite of fourteenth and fifteenth century Sri

---

<sup>28</sup> In the light of this suggestion it is significant to note that there is a Vibhisana *devalaya* at the Rajamaha Viharaya in Kotte, although it is impossible to determine its antiquity.

<sup>29</sup> See Holt, *op. cit.* p.133.

<sup>30</sup> It is however interesting to note that earlier this year President R. Premadasa erected a statue of Ravana at Kataragama, to my knowledge the first cultic reverence ever paid this figure. In the discursive environment of medieval Sri Lanka such an act would have been tantamount to a declaration of rebellion against India.

---

Lanka were successful in making this symbol of a new geopolitical order acceptable to the people they ruled. The "new" theology of Vibhisana as a benevolently powerful protector of Sri Lanka, with its concomitant avoidance of the (Indic) stories about him as betrayer of Lanka and catalyst in its destruction, paved the way for the people to join their king in acknowledging that the worship of Vibhisana was equipped to survive in the hearts of generations of low-country villagers as a focus for their personal vows (*bhara*) long after Vijayanagar, and Kotte, had crumbled into dust.