

GEIGER AND THE HISTORY OF SRI LANKA

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I feel greatly honoured to have been asked to deliver the first of a series of lectures which the Ceylon Studies Seminar and the Geiger Samitiya hope to sponsor jointly. The collaboration of these two groups in an academic venture of this sort is perhaps a very natural event, for between Geiger and Ceylon Studies there is an obvious link. Geiger had an abiding interest in Ceylon Studies and it is very fitting that this joint effort should commence with a suitable offering to Geiger. This is not the first such commemoration of Geiger. He was an intellectual celebrity in his lifetime, duly acknowledged in Germany by his friends and admirers, who in 1931 presented him with a felicitation volume on his 75th birthday.¹ Even on this occasion a scholar from Sri Lanka, the Venerable Polwatte Buddhadatta participated, honouring Geiger with a number of Pali Stanzas. Geiger has not been totally neglected in Sri Lanka, which one may with some justification call his spiritual home. The *Geiger Samariva*, published in 1967 by the Venerable Labuhengoda Chandraratana with the assistance of Heinz Bechert, a lineal descendant of Geiger in terms of Oriental Scholarship in Germany, was a tribute to his memory. More recently Bechert himself has produced a very informative and authoritative book on Geiger.² Nevertheless there has been no critical evaluation of Geiger's work and I must hasten to add that I am not proposing to undertake such a task in any depth in this short space of time.

Wilhelm Geiger was a man of varied interests. Having begun his career as an Iranologist, he veered on to Indology and finally anchored himself on Sri Lankan Studies, which at this time was just one aspect of Indology. Here too his interests were diverse, language and history being the more important facets. I must profess total ignorance of many of the fields on which Geiger worked. My acquaintance with Geiger is limited to that branch of studies which is my own field of specialization, the history of Sri Lanka. I have been mainly stimulated by Geiger's contribution to the study of the early Pali Chro-

*This is the text of a public lecture delivered in Kandy on the 14th, February 1979 under the auspices of the Wilhelm Geiger Samitiya and the Ceylon Studies Seminar.

1. *Studia Indo-Iranica* 1931.
2. Heinz Bechert—*Wilhelm Geiger*, Colombo 1977 (2nd. edition).

nicles and his work on the history and culture of Sri Lanka. I should add by way of qualification, that these were however the major areas where his contribution was most spectacular.

To place all events and persons in their proper historical setting is a natural pre-occupation of all historians and may I crave your indulgence to do just that with Geiger. Born in 1856, Wilhelm Geiger lived during a period of great intellectual moment in Europe. Spanning two centuries—for he died in 1943—he was in terms of scholarship a true product of the Germany of his time. The nineteenth century saw Europe engulfed in great intellectual turmoil, a period of ‘generous confusion’ an age of ideas and ideologies, a time of acute spiritual tension. Many social and economic changes were sweeping through Europe and accepted values were undergoing radical change. The publication of ‘The Origin of the Species’ by Darwin in 1859 brought about a sensational reaction and precipitated a crisis of faith. Traditional religion came in for severe attack and assaults on the the traditional underpinnings of faith, were a familiar feature of the 19th century intellectual landscape. Great emphasis was being laid on the scientific method and scientific objectivity in all studies was a pressing cry. It has been said that “scientific laws took the place of what had hitherto been called divine laws”.³ It is in this ‘scientific’ atmosphere that Geiger was nurtured, and this scientific bent of mind is very much in evidence in all that Geiger accomplished.

Criss-crossing through the intellectual manifestations of this period was the discovery of the Orient. Although some Europeans had arrived in the East for ‘Christians and spices’,⁴ others discovered much more that was valuable. In Geiger’s own words, “it is not only jewels, rare spices and fine-woods that we received from India but also spiritual treasures. India has given to the West more than she received from it”.⁵

The discovery of India by Europe began with the translation into English of Kalidasa’s *Sakunthalā* by Sir William Jones in 1789. This was re-translated into German in 1791 causing great excitement in poetic circles. A greater sensation was caused by the discovery of the close relationship of Sanskrit to European languages leading to the birth of comparative philology, and the feeling that somewhere back in hoary antiquity Asians and Europeans had enjoyed a common culture. To some the romantic search for the original home of the Europeans had begun, and the magic key to this was comparative philology. Sentiments such as “Greece and India are indeed the two opposite poles

3. Johannes H. Voight—*Max Muller*, Calcutta 1967, p. 13.

4. Ed. E. G. Ravenstein—*A Journal of the first voyage of Vasco da Gama, 1497—1499*, (London, Hakluyt Society, 1898,) pp. 48-49.

5. Heinz Bechert, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

in the historical development of the Aryan man"⁶ and "the Indians are our nearest intellectual relatives"⁷, were widely expressed. A common ancestor was postulated for the Indo-Germanic race, thus creating the 'Aryan myth'. More than anyone else it was the French writer Count Joseph Arthur Gobineau who was responsible for the theory of racial purity and the superiority of the Aryan race. Gobineau's "Essay on the Inequality of Human Races" published in 1833 had a greater impact on Germany than on France. The Aryan-Semitic dichotomy and the assertion of the superiority of the Aryans proved to be a very explosive idea in the hands of Hitler and the Fascists—but that's another story.

Profiting by the political relationship with India, the first pioneers of Indology were British officials who were motivated by administrative exigencies, missionary enterprise as well as a genuine interest in Indian Culture. The rest of Europe however did not lag far behind and soon Indology with its attendant discipline, comparative philology, came to have adherents throughout Europe. With their entry into the arena of Indian studies one can almost sense a spirit of competition. Writing in 1819, Wilhelm von Schlegel, the first Professor of Indology in Germany, stresses the fact that considerations of political utility were entirely outside the scope of German scholars. He says, "should the English claim a monopoly of Indian literature? that would be too late! Let them keep their cinnamon and cloves; these spiritual treasures are the common property of the educated world"⁸. Almost a century later a British Treasury Committee reporting in 1909 bemoans the situation regarding Oriental scholarship in England. "London with all its commercial and political interests" it says "has devoted less attention to the study of the Orient than Germany without the same imperial interests". It is with a sense of shame that the Committee reports the fact that the cities of Paris, Berlin, Vienna and St. Petersburg were far ahead of London in this branch of learning.⁹

Therefore by the time Wilhelm Geiger appeared on the academic scene, Germany was vibrant with a new intellectual outlook and was already in the vanguard of Oriental learning and scholarship. German Indology was born with the publication of "On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians" by Frederick Von Schlegel in 1808. Also a pioneer, Franz Bopp launched the discipline of comparative philology, soon a favourite domain of German scholar-

6. Max Muller—*A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature*, 1859, p. 8.

7. Max Muller—*India, What Can it teach us?*, (Longmans, 1883), p. 15.

8. Ludwig Alsdorf—"Indian Studies in Germany", *Indian Studies Abroad*, Published by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Poona 1963, p. 21.

9. Report of the Treasury Committee on the Organisation of Oriental Studies in London, 1909, pp. 1-31. Also see Appendix I of the Report.

ship. Among the more distinguished German Indologists was Max Muller who gained immortality by the publication of the *Rg Veda* between 1849 and 1874. One of the earliest achievements of German Indology was the publication of the St. Petersburg Dictionary by Bothlingk and Roth between 1852 and 1875. It consists of seven volumes, running into 9,500 pages—no mean achievement for two men in 23 years! The dictionary takes its name from the fact that its printing expenses were met by the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia being the most liberal patron of Oriental studies during this period. By the middle of the 19th century Sanskrit studies were safely anchored in all leading Universities in Germany and chairs of Indology were established in practically all of them. This may be a salutary thought in terms of recent experience in our own Universities, and may be I should address the Chair¹⁰ at this point to make a special plea for many good centres for Sanskrit and Pali studies in the seats of higher learning, emulating Germany of the 19th century, and not just the one centre of excellence that was advocated not so long ago. These may be luxuries, but in the Universities we should have a category of 'essential luxuries'.

Geiger was brought up on a diet of classical languages from the time he was at school, where he studied Greek and Latin, graduating into classical philology at University. From classical philology to comparative philology with its base in Sanskrit, was but an easy and natural step, especially in view of the intellectual climate which prevailed at the time. Geiger was now firmly launched on his future career in Oriental Scholarship. At first his attention was focussed on Sanskrit but soon he turned to Old Iranian, choosing to follow a trail that was blazed by his tutor, Frederick Von Spiegel. Geiger's doctoral dissertation submitted in 1877 and some of his early publications were on Iranology but he abandoned it before long only to return to it during the very last years of his career. This was not done due to any disenchantment with the subject but it was more a concession to his need for hard cash. Iranology simply did not pay. He took up Sanskrit once again although it has been said that Indology was no 'gold mine', but here the situation was not as bleak. The results of his research in this field were soon made known to the educated world and in 1891 he reaped the first fruits of his labour when he was made Professor of Indo-European Philology at Erlangen, his former University, succeeding his teacher Frederick Von Spiegel. 'The cultural and historical significance of Indian antiquities',¹¹ was the subject of his inaugural lecture when he was elected Vice-Chancellor of the University for the year 1901-1902, and provides ample testimony to his sustained interest in Indian Studies.

10. The Chairman at this meeting was Professor K. M. de Silva, a member of the newly appointed University Grants Commission.
11. *Rede beim Antritt des Protectorats der Kgl. Bayerischen Friedrich-Alexanders-Universität Erlangen am 4 Nov. L 901, Erlangen 1901.*

Although Sanskrit occupied the most eminent place in the field of comparative philology, other early Indian languages such as Pali were considered integral to this discipline. From the early years of the 19th century European scholars began investigations into the Pali language and its literature. Eugene Burnouf and Christian Lassen published a treatise on Pali Grammar and Literature in 1826 and "The Catalogue of Pali Manuscripts" published by Niels Ludvig Westergaard with the assistance of Frederick Von Spiegel could be considered a landmark. In this, notice was taken of almost all the Pali Canonical texts and Commentaries, the more important later Pali texts and even some classical Sinhala texts. Geiger's introduction to Pali was perhaps through his teacher Spiegel but it was Ernst Kuhn, Professor of Indian Philology at the University of Munich, a close associate of Geiger, who made him realize the pressing need for the study of Pali and Sinhala for the future development of Indology. Kuhn himself worked over a wide spectrum of studies, Pali being his special area of interest. He was also a pioneer in the study of Sinhala. The association with Kuhn which began around 1884 acted as a kind of catalyst in the life of Geiger and perhaps the die was cast when in 1892 a Sri Lankan scholar D. M. de Z. Wickremasinghe who was later to gain great eminence as an epigraphist, came to Erlangen to study under Geiger. This visit, no doubt, heightened Geiger's intellectual curiosity regarding Sinhala and Sri Lanka, a curiosity which brought him to the island three years later in 1895, partly funded by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.

Geiger was already familiar with the Sinhala language and its literature and had some knowledge of the Pali works produced in Sri Lanka, more particularly the early Chronicles, having met Hermann Oldenberg, the editor and translator of the *Dipavamsa* in Berlin in 1877.¹² Speaking to the "Ceylon Independent" on his arrival in Sri Lanka Geiger says that the purpose of his visit was to study Sinhala for scientific purposes, in order to see if the language came under the Aryan category, because in Europe there was controversy on this point. He also says that he wanted to be a kind of medium between the scholars of Europe and Sri Lanka.¹³ Judging from Geiger's activities in Sri Lanka during this visit and two subsequent visits in 1925 and 1931 respectively, this last reason seems to have been the foremost motivating factor compelling him towards a close personal link with the island. It is very likely that Wickremasinghe had acquainted him with the intellectual climate which prevailed in Sri Lanka at the time and Geiger would have realized how imperative it was to forge links with scholars in Sri Lanka, if Sri Lanka was going to be his area

12. Heinz Bechert, op. cit., p. 10.

13. *Ceylon Independent* 16th December 1895.

of interest. Max Muller has often been accused of becoming an expert on India without ever having visited that country. Geiger stands exonerated on this score.

Geiger's interest in Sri Lanka came at an opportune moment. During his first two visits to the island in 1895 and 1925 respectively, Geiger walked into the thick of the Buddhist revivalist movement which arose as a challenge to British colonial policy and Christian missionary activity. Buddhist monks such as the Venerable Migettuwatte Gunananda and the Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala, laymen such as Anagarika Dharmapala, Piyadasa Sirisena and Walisinghe Harischandra were in the forefront of this movement which was pledged to the defense and preservation of the island's culture. The arrival of Colonel Olcott in 1880 and the beginning of the Buddhist Theosophical movement gave local leaders a much needed boost. These patriots succeeded in winning certain concessions such as demominational schools for the Buddhists and Hindus and the inclusion of Sinhala, Pali and Tamil as subjects for the Cambridge and London examinations. But more importantly a sense of pride in the national heritage was created by the open debates and speeches emanating from public platforms.¹⁴ Geiger's writings show that his sympathies were on the side of the nationalists.

The attempts made by British administrators and Christian missionaries to suppress and belittle traditional values and the sharp reaction which followed was productive in other directions. On the one hand it led to a certain amount of soul searching on the part of the Buddhists and on the other it resulted in a positive effort to revive traditional Buddhist education and learning. While the Buddhist-Christian controversy was raging on the one side, a factional debate arose among the various Buddhist Sects on the other. The validity of the higher ordination as performed in some temples and the correctness of temple boundaries—*sīmās* as they were called, became burning issues. Learned monks began delving into the texts to meet opposing camps in open debate, thereby generating a great deal of intellectual activity. Some leading monks went to Siam and Burma in search of the pure ordination and this again led to a great deal of fruitful exchange. It was during this period that many Burmese and Cambodian Buddhist manuscripts reached the island. The need to edit these and other numerous manuscripts available in temple libraries was recognised and together with this came the realization that there was a dearth of personnel equipped to undertake this task. It was largely to meet this need

14. Ed. K. M. de Silva—University of Ceylon, *History of Ceylon*, Vol. III, Colombo 1973, p. 165 ff.
H. A. J. Hulugalle—"The National Movement and its influence on Education" *Education in Ceylon, Centenary Volumes* (Colombo 1969), Vol. II, p. 483 ff.

that the two *Pirivenas Vidyodaya* and *Vidyalankara* were established in 1873 and 1875 respectively. A large number of Pali texts were edited and printed giving traditional learning a new impetus.¹⁵

Sri Lanka and her nationalists were not the only beneficiaries of all this activity. Many European Orientalists maintained close contact with the leading monks of Sri Lanka and profited greatly by their traditional learning. It is strange irony that Colebrooke in 1832 dismissed this system of education with a single sentence—"The education afforded by the native priesthood in their temples and colleges scarcely merits notice".¹⁶ Among the early European Orientalists interested in Sri Lanka, the British with their close political ties had a head start. Some of them like Rhys Davids, R. C. Childers and Robert Chalmers served as administrators in Sri Lanka and maintained constant touch with the local Buddhist scholars. They freely acknowledge the debt they owed to monks such as the venerable Yātrāmulle Dhammārāma and the Venerable Waskaduwe Sri Subhūti only to mention two names. It may be of interest to note that the famous Russian Buddhist scholar Minayev visited Sri Lanka in 1884 to consult with Sinhala monks.¹⁷ Geiger followed in the wake of these Orientalists and was amply rewarded with friendship, help and instruction at the hands of local scholars.

Geiger makes ungrudging acknowledgement of all the assistance he got from the local men of letters, often with great modesty.¹⁸ However he seems to have been firmly convinced of the superiority of the European scientific method over traditional scholarship although he was conscious of the advantages of having so much knowledge stored away in one's memory in the traditional system. Commenting on an edition of the *Pūjāvāliya* he says, "a critical edition done according to European methods..... would be of great use".¹⁹ In his assessment of the two scholar monks the Venerable Sri Sumangala and the Venerable Sri Subhūti he says that the scholarship of the former was of the traditional variety whereas the latter's methods are close to the scientific methods of Europe.²⁰ This attitude is brought out even more forcefully, though unconsciously in his letters to Sri Lankan Scholars. Addressing Subhūti Thera, Geiger writes '*Waskaduwe vihare vasantassa Subhūti mahātherassa William Geiger nāma pandito namaṃ karati*.' Willigam Geiger, the learned man bows to the Mahathera Subhuti who lives in the Waskaduwe temple'.²¹ The same

15. A. P. Buddhadatta—*Samipātītaye Buddhācāryayo*, (Colombo, 1950).

16. Ed. G. C. Mendis—*The Colebrooke Cameron Papers*, (Oxford, 1956), p. 74.

17. A. P. Buddhadatta—op. cit., p. 137.

18. Heinz Bechert, op. cit., pp. 135-136.

19. W. Geiger—*The Dīpavaṃsa and Mahāvāṃsa*, p. 88.

20. Heinz Bechert, op. cit., p. 52.

21. Ibid. p. 80.

format occurs in letters to Buddhadatta Thera where he reserves the epithet 'panditha' for himself and Buddhadatta who offered many improvements to his editions of the *Mahāvamsa* and *Cūlavamsa* which Geiger duly acknowledges remains 'Āyasmato Buddhadatta Thero'.²² This in fact reflects the great sense of confidence Geiger had in his own abilities to which his scholarly writings bear ample testimony.

Geiger's earliest writings on Sri Lanka relate to the Sinhala language and this continued to be a major area of his research.²³ It can safely be said that it was Geiger who laid the foundations for the scientific study of Sinhala. His work in this field is still treated with great respect. These studies led him on to investigate the language of the *Vāddas*, and the *Roḍiya* community in Sri Lanka and also the Maldivian language. The results of these investigations have been published in the form of books and articles²⁴ and are still considered authoritative sources of information by scholars. In fact a more recent expert on the *Vādda* language, Sugathapala de Silva, has dedicated his book²⁵ on this subject to the memory of Geiger and this needs no comment. It was in recognition of Geiger's expertise on the Sinhala language that he was invited to direct the Sinhala Dictionary Project in 1931. Geiger spent about six months in Sri Lanka, laying down the guidelines for this work, and the first fascicle appeared in 1935. This project is still under way and may be I should not dwell on it.

Geiger is best remembered in Sri Lanka as the editor and translator of the *Mahāvamsa*²⁶ and its continuation the *Çūlavamsa*.²⁷ This is the greatest service he rendered to Sri Lankan History. It would seem that the incentive for this came from the fact that another German scholar, Hermann Oldenberg had by 1839 edited and translated the *Dīpavamsa*, the earliest known Pali chronicle, and also the *Samantapāsādikā*,²⁸ a text which had a very close bearing on the history of Buddhism and that of Sri Lanka. Oldenberg in his introduction to the *Dīpavamsa* had focussed attention on the whole question of the early historical tradition of the island and the position of the *Dīpavamsa* in relation to works such as the *Mahāvamsa*. Although Oldenberg had made a very worthwhile contribution, Geiger no doubt felt that there was ample scope

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22. Polwatte Buddhadatta—*Sri Buddhadatta Caritaya*, Colombo 1954, p. 147.
 23. ed. Labuhengoda Candaratana—*Geiger Samarava*, Colombo 1967, pp. 23-38.
 24. *Ibid.*
 25. *R. Kitzinger Munchen*, 1972.
 26. ed. W. Geiger, P.T.S. 1908; Transl. P.T.S. 1912.
 27. ed. W. Geiger, *Cūlavamsa* I, P.T.S. 1925; Transl. P.T.S. 1929.
ed. W. Geiger, *Cūlavamsa* II, P.T.S. 1927; Transl. P.T.S. 1930.
 28. ed. H. Oldenberg, *The Vinaya Pitaka* III, London 1881.

for a deeper investigation and even before he brought out his edition of the *Mahāvamsa*, he published a small treatise which forms a critical evaluation of the *Dīpavamsa* and *Mahāvamsa* with special reference to their sources.²⁹

Geiger was not the first in the field with regard to the edition of the *Mahāvamsa*. Two editions of this text had already been published, one by George Turnour in 1837 and the other by Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thera and Pandit Batuwantudawe in 1883. Neither of them seem to have conformed to the scientific specifications of Geiger and he felt the need for another edition. Geiger has been proved right for today it is his that is considered the standard text and not those published earlier and I am sure the situation will remain so in the foreseeable future. Geiger's task was no doubt facilitated by these earlier editions. He also had before him a number of peripheral texts relating to the history of Sri Lanka which had been edited both by foreign and local scholars. *The Mahāvamsa—Tikā* or the commentary to the *Mahāvamsa* edited by Batuwantudawe and Nānissara Thera in 1895, the Pali and Sinhala versions of the *Thūpavamsa* edited by Dhammaratana Thera by 1889, the *Mahābodhi-vamsa* edited by Strong in 1891 and a section of the *Rasavāhinī* edited in 1901 proved useful guides. The Pali *Mahāvamsa* published in 1908 was followed by a translation in 1912. This again was planned as an improvement on Turnour's translation. In his own translation Geiger says, "unprejudiced readers will admit, I hope, that my translation represents a progress philologically and historically compared with the older translations".³⁰ Geiger however does not pose as a final authority. In this introduction to the Pali *Mahāvamsa* he says, "I feel its defects more than anybody else".³¹ Both with regard to the *Mahāvamsa* and later the *Cūlavamsa*, the dearth of manuscripts is a constant complaint and some of the shortcomings in his texts are attributed to this.³² He was also conscious of his limitations as a European to penetrate the Eastern mind for he says "one meets again and again with objects, notices and terms which are unknown and unintelligible to a European".³³ Even regarding the *Cūlavamsa*, Geiger's task was to bring out an improved version, for this text too had already been edited by Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thera and Pandit Batuwantudawe.³⁴ Geiger's criticism of them was once again their ignorance of the scientific techniques of editing a text, although he admits that his own edition may not

29. W. Geiger—*The Dipavamsa and Mahāvamsa*, Colombo 1908.

30. ed. Heinz Bechert; W. Geiger—*The Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times*, (Wiesbaden, 1960) p. xxii.

31. P.T.S. London, 1908, p. LV.

32. ed. W. Geiger—*Cūlavamsa I*, p. xxxii.

33. ed. Heinz Bechert, W. Geiger, op. cit., p. xxii.

34. Colombo, 1877.

be perfect.³⁵ The subsequent criticism by Buddhadatta Thera³⁶ which Geiger readily acknowledged would prove this point. However that there is no pressing need for fresh editions of these texts bears repetition. Whatever the shortcomings, Geiger's editorial skills deserve the highest praise. The lengthy introductions relating to textual criticism and copious footnotes bear ample testimony to the labour involved and the meticulous care taken. For this all Sri Lankan historians are ever grateful.

Geiger was not satisfied with merely placing scientifically edited texts before an educated public. He felt much more involved with the material he was handling. In fact the sense of involvement seems to have preceded the actual editing of the texts. It would seem that Geiger's visit to Sri Lanka in 1895 made a profound impression on him. As a prelude to his edition of the *Mahāvamsa* we find him involved with some questions as the veracity of the Chronicle,³⁷ the origins of the Sinhala people and their language³⁸ and the authenticity of the Buddhist literature.³² These were not pure academic questions in the context of the times.

Geiger belongs to that group of European Indologists who displayed a great sensitivity towards Asian Culture and as far as Sri Lanka was concerned, his writings have a definite place in the political and cultural milieu of his time. Against Geiger there can be no charge of 'sterile objectivity'. Before Geiger there had been scepticism regarding the trustworthiness of the Chronicles in European circles. Otto Franke,⁴⁰ Kern⁴¹ and Vincent Smith⁴² appear among the sceptics while a spirited defence was put up by people like Rhys Davids⁴³ and H. C. Norman.⁴⁴ Geiger comes out solidly on the side of the defenders and by and large his convictions have stood the test of time. More recent research and archaeological discoveries brings to mind Geiger's oft quoted statement "not what is said but what is left unsaid is the besetting difficulty of Sinhalese history".⁴⁵ In contrast to his pupil, G. C. Mendis,⁴⁶ Geiger did not reject traditional tales completely as non-history. He says "If we bear in mind the tenacity

35. ed. W. Geiger—*Cūlavamsa I*, p. xxxii.

36. A. P. Buddhadatta—Corrections of Geiger's *Mahāvamsa* etc., Colombo 1956, Chapters 1 & 2.

37. W. Geiger—*Dīpavamsa* and *Mahāvamsa*, pp. 1-3.

38. *Gurupūjākaumudī*—Leipzig 1896, pp. 105-107.

39. Heinz Bechert—Geiger, p. 39; pp. 81-82.

40. Transl. W. Geiger—*Mahāvamsa* p. ii.

41. *Ibid.* pp. xii—xiii.

42. *Asoka, the Buddhist Emperor* Oxford 1920, p. 57.

43. *Buddhist India*, 1903, p. 274.

44. "A defence of the Chronicles of the Southern Buddhists", *JRAS*, 1908, p. 1 ff.

45. Transl. W. Geiger—*Cūlavamsa I*, p. v.

46. G. C. Mendis—*Problems of Ceylon History*. (Colombo, n.d.).

in the East of traditions connected with certain localities, we cannot merely ignore such traditions, but should try to discover the kernel of historical truth that they contain".⁴⁷ The use of myth and legend for purposes of history has since become a very sophisticated art. Whatever criticism he made of the Chronicles, he couched in the mildest of terms and one almost feels that Geiger was somewhat inhibited in his style by perhaps a desire not to endanger the position of the Buddhist revivalists. Having had occasion to point out a weak spot in the *Cūlavamsa*, Geiger hastens to add, "I must repeat here that not the least doubt is thrown on Dhammakitti's (the author's) good faith by such criticisms.⁴⁸ He obviously did not wish to tread on the sensitivities of the local intelligentsia and consequently did not have to face the kind of public scorn with which G. C. Mendis was greeted when he made his criticisms of the chronicles.⁴⁹ This in no way questions the sincerity of Geiger's convictions. He was undoubtedly an admirer of the chronicles of Sri Lanka. In his own words, "from the stand point of the history of literature, the Ceylonese chronicles deserve notice not only among Orientalists but in wider circles..... wherever the question of the epic is discussed, the *Dīpavamsa* and *Mahāvamsa* will always be invaluable analogies, not only for the Indian epic, but also for the epics of other nations".⁵⁰

By his researches into the chronicles, Geiger added an extra dimension to some of the issues raised by earlier scholars such as Turnour and Oldenberg. Some of the problems which concerned him were the age, authorship and sources of these texts. On the last point he laboured hard. His book "the *Dīpavamsa* and *Mahāvamsa*" contains a very meticulous and exhaustive analysis of the two texts with a careful juxtaposition of the contents of the *Dīpavamsa*, *Mahāvamsa* and the *Mahāvamsa Tikā* with a view to understanding their sources. Although Geiger once changed his stance regarding the sources of the *Mahāvamsa*,⁵¹ his ultimate conclusion was that the two early chronicles go back to a common source,⁵² a view which has still not been seriously refuted.

Not all Geiger's views regarding the Chronicles have gone unchallenged. His overall explanation for whatever ailed these texts seems too simplistic. To attribute the lack of certain information, the clumsy handling of a military campaign, the exaggerated praise reserved for a particular ruler to the "one

47. ed. Heinz Bechert; W. Geiger—*Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times*, p. 22.

48. Same as 45.

49. A. P. Buddhadatta—*Sri Buddhadatta Caritaya*, pp. 191-192.

50. W. Geiger—*Dīpavamsa and Mahāvamsa*, pp. 1-3.

51. ed. W. Geiger—*Cūlavamsa I*, p. 11.

52. ed. Heinz Bechert; W. Geiger—*The Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times*, p. 72.

sided mentality of Buddhist priests"⁵³ hardly carries conviction. Today some of us are looking at the Chronicles from a different standpoint. Surely there were many more imperatives for the growth of so vast and rich a historical literature as there is in Sri Lanka than the mere desire of Buddhist monks to chronicle the history of their faith! The ideological perspectives within the chronicles and the complexities of the attitude of their authors to current social and political issues do not seem to have concerned Geiger. A conceptual base is sadly lacking in Geiger's writings.

Geiger traverses the same road as most other Indologists of his time in representing the Indo-centric view of Sri Lankan History. To him "Sinhalese literature may be said to be a respectable offshoot of Indian literature"⁵⁴ and in his evaluation of the architectural achievements of the country he seems convinced that for the most part the architects came from India.⁵⁵ Although this position was pushed to extremes by G. C. Mendis who divided Sri Lankan history into North Indian and South Indian periods,⁵⁶ modern scholars are inclined to view the history of Sri Lanka from a different stance. Although one is fully conscious of the cultural debt Sri Lanka owes to India, historians today are looking more at the inner dynamism which shaped the history and culture of this island, and more importantly there is increasing belief that the cultural horizons of Sri Lanka extended far beyond the confines of India.

Geiger focussed attention on many historical insolubles which remain problematic up to date. His view of the brother to brother succession to the throne in ancient Sri Lanka,⁵⁷ though contested by M. B. Ariyapala⁵⁸ still has many adherents. Some of us have still to collect our thoughts on this issue. Much paper and ink has been spent on the vexed question of the chronology of Sri Lanka⁵⁹ and here neither Geiger nor the others have had the last word. The date and authorship of the *Mahāvamsa* also falls into this category of unsolved problems.

Geiger had no penchant for historical abstractions. Documentation was his forte. In his last big work "the Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times"⁶⁰ full play is given to this skill. Every scrap of information found in the chronicles ranging from such minor items as the use of the oil lamp to complex

53. Ibid. p. xxi.

54. Ibid. xxx p. 75.

55. Ibid. p. 92.

56. G. C. Mendis—*Early History of Ceylon* (Calcutta, 1932.)

57. Transl. W. Geiger—*Cūlavamsa I*, pp. xv-xxiv.

58. *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. 12, pp. 195-216.

59. Transl. W. Geiger—*Cūlavamsa II*, pp. i-vii.

60. ed. Heinz Bechert, W. Geiger. *The Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times*.

matters of statecraft, is noticed. In the interpretation of these facts, however, Geiger has sometimes been shown to have been erroneous. This of course is in the natural order of things. With the increasing volume of new archaeological data and with more sophisticated techniques of historical research, earlier beliefs can become out dated. Modern scholars will no doubt disagree with Geiger's periodisation of history where the ancient and medieval periods follow the pattern of the Chronicles.⁶¹ This has become a very complex subject around which there is much controversy. Geiger's views regarding the growth of cities,⁶² the absence of foreign commercial enterprise⁶³ and the implicit belief in a sluggish pace in social change have to be discarded. All this however leaves us with a lot of material which is still valid, interesting and provocative. In fact in his book on the Culture of Medieval Ceylon Geiger has collected a large quantity of historical data, ammunition which can produce a huge volley of research. In this work Geiger has perhaps written his own epitaph. Although people may have criticisms to make on his historical writings, he says, "they are written with studiousness and true interest. In the course of a long life I even more become a sincere friend of the wider Indian world and its people and an admirer of its fascinating history. Now I can say that it is my mental home, as it were, and my second fatherland".⁶⁴

61. ed. Heinz Bechert, W. Geiger—*ibid.* pp. xxii-xxiii.

62. *Ibid.* p. 49 ff.

63. *Ibid.* p. 105 ff.

64. *Ibid.* p. xxiii.