RELIGIOUS bodies have always depended for their existence on the charity and the benevolence of their patrons, and the history of Buddhism in Ceylon is no exception to the rule. The Mahavamsa records how king Vaṭṭagāmani (143-17 B.C.) allotted lands to the Kupikkala Vihāra of thera Mahātissa, 'recording it upon a Ketaka-lent.' But the large number of stone inscriptions, that contain similar records of grants to the Sangha, date much earlier. These inscriptions broadly fall into three classes—slab, rock and pillar inscriptions—and form by far the largest body of evidence, except the chronicles, for the study of religious endowment in Ancient Ceylon. Though 'as a rule royal donations were recorded on copper plates, or might be on silver and gold plates,' yet such records are comparatively rare. King Kirti Nīśānka Malla (1187-1196 A.D.) claims to have introduced into the island the copper plate grants. The Palkumbara Sannasa of Sri Mat Siri Saṅgabo Sri Bhuvanaika and the Oruvala Sannasa are examples of such copper plate grants, while a gold plate grant, belonging to the reign of King Vasabha (127-171 A.D.) has been recently discovered at Vallipuram, which however S. Paranavitāna, believes was not a document meant for public information.

It is difficult to confine within precise geographic boundaries the distribution of these stone inscriptions. But it may be generally said that they chiefly abound in the present dry zone of Ceylon within the North Central, North Western, Southern and Uva Provinces,—the inscriptions being found in large numbers close to the ancient capitals of Anurādhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kurunegala; while in the Hill Country and in the Jaffna Peninsula occur very rarely.

Pandanus Odoratissimus, Mv. Ch. XXXIII, 50.
The Epigraphical Summary of 17th October, 1933 mentions 700 such inscriptions.
Journal of Science, Sec. G., Vol. II.
A few slab inscriptions are also met with.
Geiger, Litteratur und Sprache der Singhalesen, pp. 24-25; Mv. Ch. XXVII,
Two general features are common to most of these stone inscriptions. Firstly, the inscriptions prior to the 12th century, A.D., are undated from a calculable era such as the Saka era, or the Nirvāṇa of the Buddha.10 But the majority of them, especially of the 10th and 11th centuries, bear the name of the King11 or are dated from the regnal years of the ruling monarch.12 In spite of the painstaking work of eminent scholars in recent times, the chronological arrangement of these inscriptions for purposes of historical study is difficult and the arrangement in most cases is arbitrary.13 But, one fact remains clear: none of the inscriptions so far discovered date before the 3rd century, B.C. Further, the art of writing itself came to Ceylon in the 3rd century, B.C. Hence there is a general possibility of these records following a conventional classicalism, and thus making the veracity of the details they record doubly important in their portrayal of contemporary conditions.

Hitherto, these inscriptions have been studied mainly for the light they throw on the philological development of the Sinhalese language, or on the nature of its ancient script, or for the examination of the political history of the monarchy, or for the history of ancient Ceylon, transforming it from a self-denying sect of the Buddhist Sangha, into a priesthood where signs of decadence have begun to appear.14 A deeper historical significance attaches, however, to these long and elaborate catalogues of grants to the Sangha; viz., the evidence they show of the varying character of the form of religious grants to temples or lying-in-homes, and the nature of the political institutions of ancient Ceylon.15 A deeper historical significance attaches however to these long and elaborate catalogues of grants to the Sangha, with the introduction of Buddhism to Ceylon,14 and hence in an age when writing itself was unknown, the keeping of records would not be a possible task.

Secondly, as the largest number of these inscriptions are records of religious endowments,15 their text generally follows a few stereo-typed patterns. Hence there is a general possibility of these records following a convention of classicism, and thus making the veracity of the details they record doubly important in their portrayal of contemporary conditions.

The inscriptions of Parakrama Bahu I, and onwards, are undated from the Nirvāṇa of Buddha and in a few instances from the Saka era — Müller, Ancient Inscriptions of Ceylon, p. 6.

1. E.g., 'Hail! Prosperity!' on the tenth day of the waxing moon of Māsī, in the twelfth year of His Majesty Siri Sangabo. — E.Z., Vol. III, No. 5.

2. Having to depend on palaeographic evidence and coincidence of names, Müller, ibid., p. 44.


5. A cave inscription reads 'Paramuka Visadeva lene agatu anagala dhammasagasa.' (The cave of the Chief Visadeva is given to the Sangha of the four quarters present and absent).

6. Ancient Land Tenure and Revenue in Ceylon' by H. W. Codrington, freely to these inscriptions in his study of the Tenurial systems of Ancient Ceylon.
latter occurring about the 9th century, A.D., says Hocart) built so as to form protected or enclosed rooms under the shelter of the rocks. These caves were either owned jointly by families, e.g., the 23 caves at Vessagiriya, the caves of Rījīgala, which the "Son of Mahamata Badabata, his eminence Bāhika, his eminence Puṣagata, his eminence Mita and his eminence Tikka" had developed into the great village Arika; or individually, as such reference in inscriptions to ownership as--"the cave of Tikatta, son of the brahman Sumana"; "the cave of the lay devotee Cīrā, wife of Parumaka Pula, daughter of Parumaka Samahita"; "the cave of Utiya, son of village Tissa"; "the cave of Warakapi the villager"; "the cave of the merchant Tisa"; "the cave of the physician Tisa"; "the cave of village headman Abhaya"; "the cave of Chief Abhaya"; "cave of Kānatisa, the minister of the Great King Gami-pita" and "the cave of Amirada, the treasurer of the village headman Kandana"--all show. But it is not clear what value was attached to the possession of these caves whether they were used as ordinary dwelling houses by the people or not.

Whether these caves were the property of nobles only—in which case they could not be used as dwelling houses—of the common people as was also doubtful. The leading evidence in understanding this seems to be connected with the exact significance in the use of the title "Parumaka"—a word that is freely found in these cave inscriptions. Etymologically the word means "eminence," or chief. Hence its appropriate use should be by "persons of importance"; though inscriptive evidence is quite clear that it was also used by men of lesser importance as village headmen, as well as by women.

The above evidence also leaves little doubt that "there was an owner in caves quite apart from the land they stood in—for we sometimes get a number of caves crowded together where it can scarcely be supposed that the boundary of the land coincided with the partitions of the caves." Interesting though this question is it need not be pursued further, not only because the available evidence is insufficient, but also because the use of these caves for secular purposes would have lost its value, as the society advanced, and that certainly at an early stage in Ceylon's history.

The early ascetics—precursors of Mahinda (?) as well as his followers—living a life of self-denial, as Vanavāsikas, sought habitations for themselves in lonely retreats, 'far from the madding crowd,' and the gift of these caves in quite handy for them. But these cave endowments went pari passu with another type of religious endowment, which came into existence when Buddhism became the state religion of the country, following the conversion of King Devanampiya Tissa by the apostle Mahinda in 250 B.C. By this situation, the Buddhist brotherhood became one of the four traditional limbs that formed the ancient Aryan state, as symbolically suggested in the Purusa Sūtra of the Rgveda. The spate of conversions that followed the conversion of the king led the king to request Mahinda to accept the site of the pleasant Mahamegha park, neither too far nor too near the city as their new abode, and in emulation of King Bimbisāra of Rājagriha he built the Mahā Vihāra there as the first centre of Buddhist life and activity in the country, and thus, like his contemporary Asoka of Magadha, Devanampiya Tissa dragged Buddhism from the convents into the city. Henceforth the majority of Buddhist monks became "Gāmāntasenaśanāvāsikas" and in the lavish habitations provided for them by the kings and maintained by the royal treasury, the Saṅgha came into close contact with the people of the country at large.

Thus the gifts of these cave dwellings and the monasteries were really parallel movements. The one was the grant of the ordinary people, the other of the kings. The one was attached to the villages, the other to the capital city. It was a healthy and inexpensive way of bearing up mutually the cost of this new institution that was regarded as essential to their living the good life. At the same time the gift of these rock caves would appear to indicate the one hand a rudimentary economic organisation, and on the other a close adherence by the priesthood to the rules of the Vinaya. Which

23. Hocart believes that the walling of these caves was begun when they had passed into the hands of the monks, for he says that it is a rule of the Vinaya that a monk should sleep with doors shut lest his person should happen to be exposed during sleep. C.J.Sc., Sec. G., Vol. I, p. 58.
28. Sanskrit—Pramākha, Pali—Pamukko or Pāmokkhā, Sinhalese—Pāmokkhā.
29. See above list and Parker, A.C., p. 440.
32. That some knowledge of the Buddha and his teachings were known to the people prior to the time of Devanampiya Tissa seems a reasonable contention—vide Sekera, History of Pali Literature in Ceylon, p. 17. In such a case itinerant Buddhist monks would certainly have come to Ceylon by the usual land routes. The Royal Mission of the two great chroniclers. Rgveda, 10th Mandala.
33. Mv. Chs. XIV and XV.
35. Monks who dwelt in monasteries close to the villages and towns.
37. Mv. Ch. XV, 17.
38. That friendship is a very great asset, and that the king and his ministers are the chief protectors of the Buddha.
of these two circumstances was more powerful in determining the character of the gifts cannot be determined without further evidence.

The contemporaneous grant of urban monastic dwellings is evidence that the priesthood was beginning to abandon its conventure retreats to share increasingly the urban life of the cities. This does not necessarily imply a deliberate seeking on the part of the priesthood for the luxuries of a worldly life—for Mahinda declines explicitly the first of such gifts by Devānampiya Tissa. It seems more indicative of the desire on the part of kings to use the 'power of the Church' to inculcate greater religious devotion in their subjects or enhance the strength of their own rule.

The immediate result of this new relationship thus established between the Saṅgha on the one hand and the king and laity on the other was that in the case of the former it led to a numerical increase in the Order of the Saṅgha, who were becoming more and more useful socially, and in the case of the latter it was not only the growth of a greater desire for more munificent acts of piety, but also a growing desire for more colourful forms of worship.

The second class of religious endowments, was to reflect these changing conditions of the times.

(To be continued in the next issue).

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40. At Mihintale monastery alone, in Bhātikhābhaya's time (38 A.D.-67 A.D.) the number of monks residing there was assessed at 1,000, while Fa-Hsien (5th century, A.D.) estimated it at 2,000. E.Z., Vol. I, pp. 81-82.